
WHATCOM COUNTY COVID-19 REVIEW

COUNTY COUNCIL PRESENTATION | APRIL 26, 2022

AGENDA

1. Introductions
2. Project Purpose and Process
3. Context
4. Observations
5. Next Steps

MEETING OBJECTIVES

- Provide an update on project status and share initial findings
- Hear Council feedback and questions on initial findings

PROJECT PURPOSE AND PROCESS

Project Purpose

Reflect on the County's response to the public emergency, evaluate the systems in place to respond to the event, and identify opportunities to improve and be even better prepared for the next global emergency.

Work Completed to Date

- Reviewed incident documentation, existing plans, county code, meeting notes
- Conducted 24 interviews with Whatcom County staff and outside partners

Next Steps

- Complete document review and targeted additional interviews
- Develop recommendations and draft report
- Present draft report to Council **June 21** and final report **July 26**

GLOBAL CONTEXT

- Responding to COVID-19 was **a challenge in every community**.
- Scope and scale of the response was **unprecedented**.
- Uncommon to have **Public Health thrust into a lead role** in an emergency.
- The response was challenged by **concurrent events** (extreme weather, social unrest).

KEY LOCAL CONTEXT

- Many key elected and appointed players were **new in their roles**.
- County Council members serve as **Health Board members**.
- **Public Health** is a County department.
- **Emergency Management** is a division in the Sheriff's Office.
- Unique considerations such as the **international border** and a previous focus on **oil spill response and general natural hazards**.

OBSERVATIONS: AREAS OF SUCCESS

- Whatcom County's response had a positive effect on **health outcomes**. The County had the 7th lowest mortality rate of 39 counties in Washington.
- The County organization was able to **adapt quickly to hybrid work**.
- Use of **volunteers, donations process**, and **distribution of PPE** were all noted as successes.
- Whatcom Community Foundation **Resilience Fund** established in advance.
- County and cities maintained **good working relationships**.

OBSERVATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Four themes:

- Clarity of roles, responsibilities, and authorities.
- Information sharing.
- Training and exercises.
- Consistent support for the response effort.

CLARITY OF ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND AUTHORITIES

- Roles, responsibilities, and authorities were not clearly defined and did not feel clear to participants.
- Some participants went outside of their roles (as established by code or pre-event plans).

Expectation	Reality
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Agency with subject matter expertise leads response effort.• Positions at policy level do not get involved in operations.• Agencies align around a common mission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lead agency changed early in the response; it was unclear who was in charge.• Individuals at the policy level wanted to assist in operational matters.• Agencies had different missions, dual response efforts.

INFORMATION SHARING

- Lack of pre-event pandemic planning, policies, and training led to confusion and disagreement over information sharing.
- Methods and means of internal coordination and communication were not consistent.
- Unclear expectations around information sharing and maintaining situational awareness with policy-makers.
- Public health and unified command public information functions operated largely separately.
- Information was shared outside of normal channels.

TRAINING AND EXERCISES

- Key participants did not have sufficient training on emergency response or Incident Command System (ICS), including Unified Command.
- Using ICS effectively requires planning and training at all levels and commitment from departments.
- EOC procedures may be lacking.

CONSISTENT SUPPORT FOR THE RESPONSE EFFORT

- Rotating incident commanders created confusion and resulted in inconsistent decision-making process.
- Lack of consistent support from County departments, over-reliance on volunteers and outside partners.
- Limited capacity led to burnout and attrition of Whatcom Unified Command staff and volunteers.

NEXT STEPS

- Complete document review and targeted additional interviews.
- Develop recommendations and draft report.
- Draft report to be presented in June.



Questions or Feedback?