



Memorandum

TO: WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCILMEMBERS

FROM: Erika Lautenbach, Whatcom County Health and Community Services Director

DATE: AUGUST 1, 2023

RE: BEHAVIORAL HEALTH FUND RESERVES

The Behavioral Health sales tax supports a range of services throughout Whatcom County, including prevention activities, jail and community-based intervention and treatment services, and housing/aftercare supports for individuals with continued behavioral health needs. The 2022 behavioral health fund annual report is included in this packet.

The sales tax reserves are expected to reach just over \$9M by the end of 2023, in part due to higher than expected overall sales tax revenues and in part because of COVID service restrictions and staffing shortages among behavioral health providers. In addition, funds were held in reserves for a to-be-determined capital project and for general operating reserves.

Data from surveys and other collection tools show that youth and adults suffer from a variety of behavioral health concerns including depression, anxiety, and substance use. Youth mental health is a priority from a public health perspective to avoid or mitigate continued suffering and poor health over the lifecourse. The magnitude of challenges associated with youth mental health in Whatcom County is supported in recent years by data from the Healthy Youth Survey, Community Health Assessment, and COVID Health Impact Assessment. As a result, Whatcom County Health and Community Services recommends a portion of the reserves fund services supporting children and youth.

To prepare a recommendation, Dr. Amy Harley, Erika Lautenbach, and Kayla Schott-Bresler from the Executive's office met with Superintendents and relevant staff from every school district to lay out the funding opportunity and its limitations, describe allowable uses, and intended impact for students, teachers, and families. Each school district submitted their requests for funding in proposals, and funded projects/staffing are included in the matrix included in this packet.



Erika Lautenbach also conferred with the Chuckanut Health Foundation (CHF), who has held learning and listening sessions with parents and teachers at school districts over the past year. CHF provided a high-level overview issues shared in the sessions and those themes were in close alignment with the proposals Superintendents submitted.

The matrix in the packet includes options for consideration, which include the following:

- Group A (blue) Systemwide/countywide assessments and supports – identified by all or most school district leadership when consulted
- Group B (green) School district-specific staffing and supports – requests directly from each school district based on need
- Group C (red) School district capital – requested by two school districts; more follow up is needed to determine funding level and appropriate additional funding sources

On July 10, the Public Health Advisory Board, Behavioral Health Advisory Committee, and the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force Behavioral Health Sub-Committee met to review the matrix of recommendations. Staff provided three options for consideration, which included:

1. Fund Group A, fund Group B for three years, follow up on capital projects and consult PHAB/BHAC with findings
2. Fund Group A, fund Group B for two years, follow up on capital projects and consult PHAB/BHAC with findings
3. Fund Group A, fund Group B for two years, follow up in one year following more information about Group A findings and future funding needs as well as PHAB/BHAC interest in funding year three of Group B requests, follow up on capital projects and consult PHAB/BHAC with findings

The Public Health Advisory Board voted to recommend option 1. The Behavioral Health Advisory Committee voted to recommend option 3. Both advisory bodies requested data, reporting, and outcomes. Included in the packet are two versions of projections for the behavioral health fund, which are associated with the two recommended options for Council review.

Whatcom County Health and Community Services requests Council approval of entering into Interlocal Agreements with school districts and seeks policy direction on number of years to fund services and whether to fund Group A, Group B, or both. Staff will follow up with Bellingham and Meridian School Districts on their capital projects and will provide additional detail for Council to determine funding allocation separately from this request.

