

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010**



Committee Minutes - Draft Minutes

Tuesday, December 2, 2025

10 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD/PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD MEETING -
HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 12:00 P.M.(PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE
REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR
CALL 360.778.5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremmler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Health Board Chair Jon Scanlon called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call - Health Board

Present: 6 - Barry Buchanan, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Absent: 1 - Tyler Byrd

Roll Call - PHAB

PHAB members present: Alan Lifson, Joni Hensley Shu-Ling Zhao, Leah Wainman, Sterling Chick, Robyn Phillips-Madson, Rachel McGarrity, Christine Espina, Shannon Boustead, Ashley Thomasson, Guy Ochiogrosso, Chris Kobdish, Kendra Cristelli, Jon Scanlon, Amy Harley, and Meg Lelonek

Announcements**Public Comment**

The following people spoke:

Jen (Khalesi) Peterson
Marvin Mickley
Lance Calloway
Natalie Chavez

Hearing no one else, Scanlon closed the Public Comment period.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2025-840](#) Update from the Public Health Advisory Board Chair

Dr. Christine Espina, Chair of PHAB, highlighted the group's accomplishments, including the Community Health Assessment and the Community Health Plan.

Rachel McGarrity, Vice Chair of PHAB, provided an overview of the group's efforts to understand the intent of state law expanding health board membership and make recommendations for moving forward.

Espina added that PHAB provided feedback on Whatcom County Health and Community Services' (WCHCS) budget.

McGarrity welcomed new PHAB member Alan Lifson and encouraged others interested in joining the board to apply by the January 6, 2026 deadline.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. [AB2025-841](#) Update from the Health Director

Champ Thomaskutty, Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) Director, provided an update on new staff in the department. He stated that WCHCS launched the overnight severe weather shelter over the weekend, and it was close to capacity on Sunday night. He went on to provide an overview of other WCHCS efforts, including work in infectious disease control, replacement of data systems, approval of the Five-Year Homelessness Plan and the Healthy Children's Fund Implementation Plan, success of the Veterans' Program and Youth and Cannabis and Commercial Tobacco Program, and steps toward improving community engagement around environmental health services.

Leah Wainman, PHAB, said PHAB would be willing to support the environmental health program with the collection of qualitative data if needed. She asked if there are plans to start billing for behavioral health certification.

Thomaskutty said they are trying to determine the best path forward.

Donovan asked about the trigger for opening of the severe weather shelter and whether doing so earlier in the year strains the budget or limits how long the shelter can operate in the future.

Ann Beck, WCHCS, said that the temperature threshold is 32 degrees for four hours or more, but holiday scheduling is another consideration. Last week's open is not the earliest opening date historically, and it will not impact the budget or ability to open the shelter in the future.

Shannon Boustead, PHAB, thanked the team for their work on the severe weather shelter.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. [AB2025-842](#) Update from the Health Officers

Meg Lelonek, Co-Health Officer, provided an update on respiratory viruses. She said the current flu season is shaping up to look a little different than previous seasons, and there is a new flu variant this year called H3N2. She said the other big topic in the news has been about avian influenza and

detailed some of the outreach the department has been doing to raise awareness.

Rachel McGarrity, PHAB, asked about preventative practices for avian flu.

Lelonek said that preventing bird flock exposure to migratory birds is important, as is using protective personal equipment when handling.

Alan Lifson, PHAB, said that pandemic preparedness is important to be thinking about.

Scanlon asked how PHAB and the Health Board can provide support.

Lelonek said they want to encourage people to get their vaccines and know the symptoms of illness and when to stay home to avoid getting others sick.

Leah Wainman, PHAB, asked for information about backyard flocks for sharing with her networks.

Lelonek said that information was released by Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) last week.

Dr. Amy Harley, WCHCS, and Ann Lund, WCHCS, shared a presentation on tuberculosis (TB) in Whatcom County.

Harley stated that TB remains one of the world's deadliest bacterial infections despite being preventable and curable since the 1950s. TB persistence is exacerbated by systems that leave people unsupported. In Washington state, TB control is a core public health obligation carried out at the local level. Harley outlined the county's legal requirements in regard to TB. She stated that TB is transmitted through air droplets when an infected person coughs, speaks, or breathes, and anyone can be infected, though higher exposures happen in crowded or high-incidence settings. TB has a unique ability to remain dormant in the body for months or even years before causing illness. Symptoms include cough, fever, and weight loss. Treatment for active TB is complex, requiring multiple antibiotics and months care. Successful treatment requires comprehensive, person-centered care. Prevention reduces the need for an intensive care process.

Lund provided an overview of global TB rates. She stated that TB is the world's top killer, with 1.5 million deaths recorded each year. Lund said that the United States has one of the lowest TB rates in the world, but rates have

increased since 2020. Washington State is experiencing the same trend. However, over the last five years, Whatcom County has been consistently below the state and national TB rate.

Harley stated that the county treats active TB, but they also work on latent TB, as an estimated 2,300-7,000 county residents are infected with the TB bacteria. Of those infected, roughly five to ten percent progress to active disease.

Lund concluded the presentation by sharing a story from a patient.

McGarrity asked why the country and state are experiencing an increase in TB rates recently. She also acknowledged that today is World AIDS Day.

Harley stated that the investment in public health infrastructure is not on the rise, which might detract from the ability to manage increased rates.

Donovan asked about what happens when someone does not want to be isolated for TB.

Harley said they use all available means to help people through that process.

Donovan asked how latent TB is treated.

Harley said it can be treated by a four-month course of a single antibiotic.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, asked whether general practitioners providing immune therapy drugs may drive some of the upward trend.

Harley said that may be true, but it's part of most practice guidelines that TB screening is a required component of care prior to the initiation of those therapies.

Shannon Boustead, PHAB, asked if there is increased reluctance for screening amongst immigrant communities.

Lund said that immigrant communities are more familiar with TB and are therefore willing and ready to do whatever it takes to prevent and treat it.

Wainman thanked the health providers and others for engaging with immigrant and marginalized communities and maintaining trust.

Lund spoke about the Snohomish refugee screening process that was

recently halted.

Harley stated that the county works hard to collaborate with other organizations in the community that interface with immigrant populations and also educate and build capacity among primary care providers.

Scanlon asked how TB work is funded.

Charlene Ramont, WCHCS, stated that the county General Fund has historically funded this work, as it is minimally funded by the state. She said that Lund's workload will be distributed amongst other staff in the department when she retires, though she will stay on for a short time to support and help develop staff.

Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive, said that the General Fund has historically supported communicable disease prevention funding. However, there is a discussion about whether discretionary dollars received under foundational public health services should be applied towards statutory mandates like communicable disease services.

Scanlon asked whether there is a contingency plan in place if a pandemic were to occur.

Ramont said that WCHCS is mindful of surge capacity. Additional loss of licensed medical professionals would be difficult for the department.

Champ Thomaskutty, WCHCS Director, said that one of the biggest aspects of prevention in TB is the active management of cases. The county won't be able to respond or benefit from a federal response unless the county and its neighbors have a sound foundation.

Christine Espina, PHAB, stated that she wants to elevate the importance of investing in nurses.

Scanlon said there should be a discussion during the legislative session about what to do with state dollars. He thanked the presenters for their time, and asked what other presentations Health Board or PHAB would like to see in the future.

Shannon Boustead said he would like to see a presentation on bird flu.

Wainman asked for an update on WCHCS' data system work.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Committee Discussion

1. [AB2025-541](#) Discussion and update from the Joint Public Health Advisory Board/Health Board Structure Working Group

Scanlon provided an overview of new items in Agenda Bill File 2025-541, which include a letter from the Small City Caucus, feedback from the community, PHAB survey results, and a draft ordinance for discussion. Scanlon said that the work group has met with tribes, small cities, community members, and other stakeholders to discuss potential restructuring of the county health board. He clarified that the ordinance is not being voted on today.

Donovan acknowledged the time and effort that has gone into this project and commended Scanlon for attempting to respond to and incorporate feedback.

Shu-Ling Zhao, PHAB, acknowledged the work that has gone into this discussion and stated she sees restructuring as an amazing opportunity.

Rachel McGarrity, PHAB, said that she believes it is important to be responsible to those who attend meetings to provide public comment. She said that one of the comments today mentioned trust and accountability concerns regarding the proposed restructuring of the health board. McGarrity stated that all appointments to a new health board would be in the hands of the elected County Council, which would provide accountability.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, said she was surprised by the response of the small cities' mayors. She said she would like to hear from constituents of those cities about how they would feel if their representatives declined participation on a reconfigured health board.

Leah Wainman, PHAB, highlighted the survey responses about lack of trust in government.

Donovan said there are many good reasons to make this change, and he encouraged everyone to read the RCW on the health board and PHAB.

Scanlon presented the draft ordinance for discussion and provided an overview of edits. The ordinance is designed to go into effect six months following its adoption to allow for appointment of board members and establishment of bylaws. Scanlon outlined plans for membership on the restructured health board. He said that if the small cities do not want to participate, five county councilmembers could be appointed to the board

instead.

Wainman asked if the RCW specifically calls for city participation or if other elected positions are possible.

Scanlon said that the RCW refers to elected officials, but he has not seen another county include non-city or county elected officials. He said that another concern they heard from former councilmembers and stakeholders involved accountability. He said that adding alternating terms, term limits, and removal procedures ensures accountability. The draft ordinance notes that decisions will need to be made about PHAB's role and composition if the health board moves forward with restructuring. The draft incorporates state law and clarifies responsibilities of the County Council and Health Board. Scanlon encouraged everyone to read over the draft in preparation for future discussions.

Stremmer stated that he reached out to stakeholders regarding this issue and said he opposes moving forward without the cities on board.

Galloway stated that she previously had voiced concerns about the health board's legal authorities and would like to discuss further.

Kimberly Thulin, Prosecuting Attorney, stated that she would provide a memo detailing the differences between the County Council's authority and the Health Board's authority. Rulemaking authority of the Health Board would be constrained to public health matters such as managing communicable diseases and enforcing health codes.

Scanlon said that he recently had a good conversation with Snohomish County about how they approach their health board.

Stremmer stated that some of the rationale for the proposed restructuring can be addressed by making smaller changes to the current system.

Scanlon said that he presented to the Small Cities Caucus previously, and he was disappointed that there was no further dialogue about their concerns after that presentation. He said he hoped that the draft ordinance will alleviate their concerns. He added that it is not his intention to remove the cities from the table, and he thinks the best option is still to get those cities to the table. He thanked the group for the conversation, and thanked Councilmembers Byrd and Donovan for their work on the Board of Health.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:02 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand