

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010**



Minutes - Final

Tuesday, September 16, 2025

10 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD/PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD MEETING -
HYBRID MEETING (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 10:03 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call - Health Board

Present: 7 - Barry Buchanan, Tyler Byrd, Todd Donovan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Roll Call - PHAB

Amy Harley, Christine Espina, Guy Ochiogrosso, Joni Hensley, Madison Emry, Rachel McGarrity, Robyn Phillips-Madson, Sterling Chick, Jon Scanlon, Meg Lelonek

Announcements

Dr. Christine Espina announced that she is the new chair of the Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB), and Rachel McGarrity is the new vice chair.

Public Comment

The following individuals provided public comment.

- Natalie Chavez

Hearing no one else, Scanlon closed the public comment period.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2025-633](#) Update from the Health Director

Dr. Amy Harley, Co-Health Officer, provided an update on staffing at Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS).

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. [AB2025-634](#) Update from the Health Officers

Dr. Amy Harley, Co-Health Officer, shared a presentation on the Medicaid program (on file). She stated that health insurance provides a number of benefits, including enabling access to preventative and necessary care, which results in better health outcomes and lower mortality. Medicaid is a jointly funded federal-state partnership created in 1965 to provide health coverage for individuals receiving welfare. Over time, it was expanded to cover pregnant women, children, people with disabilities, and low-income adults. Today, it covers approximately 80 million people across the country and represents 1/6 of all United States health spending. Medicaid programs vary across states. Washington's Medicaid program, known as Apple Health,

covers 2 million people or 24 percent of Washington residents. It costs \$21 billion per year, with \$8 billion coming from the state and \$13 billion coming from federal funds.

Harley shared information about the impacts of the July 4, 2025 Budget Reconciliation Act (OBBBA), which cuts federal Medicaid funding by \$1 trillion over 10 years. Harley stated that 10-12 million people nationally, including 329,000 people in Washington, are expected to lose coverage. Provisions of the OBBBA also include increased eligibility checks, work requirements, decreased provider taxes paid to states, and increased client cost-sharing. Impacts may not be immediate but will roll out over time. Harley provided ideas for a local response, including preparing to assess local health system impacts, coordinating with providers and payers, etc.

Donovan asked for clarification about what county programs and services are funded by Medicaid.

Harley said it's a complex question, and it will be important to monitor the state's response.

Scanlon asked whether there is an inventory of federally-supported programs in the county.

Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive, said the inventory focuses on grant-funded programs as opposed to Medicaid-funded programs. She added that the county is particularly concerned about community impacts associated with reduced Medicaid funding.

Scanlon asked what WCHCS needs to assess local health system impacts.

Harley stated that there needs to be a discussion with Council and the community about what data is most meaningful and needed.

Scanlon said that it would be helpful to know the budget implications of this topic prior to the Council's larger budget deliberations.

Cathy Halka, Clerk of the Council, clarified that the next Health Board meeting is October 28.

Rachel McGarrity, PHAB, spoke about the misconception in the public that Medicaid and Apple Health are different programs. She added that creative solutions for housing and care giving may be needed to address future gaps created by changes to Medicaid.

Scanlon said that discussions and presentations are planned for future Health Board meetings to help the county learn about some of the local programs and initiatives currently available.

Espina stated that PHAB is working to assess and compile information about public health infrastructure and capacity.

Scanlon asked about community-driven programs provided in Kendall.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, provided information about mobile medical services in Kendall. She added that non-profit organizations are also struggling with funding, as they rely heavily on grants, and they may not be able to address all gaps in services.

Harley stated that supporting and expanding front-line connectors is important.

Scanlon said he is interested in learning how changes to Medicaid may impact the county's opioid response.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. [AB2025-630](#) Presentation by Whatcom County Health and Community Services and community members regarding efforts to address blighted properties and related health impacts in Columbia Valley

The following individuals shared a presentation on environmental health work in Columbia Valley:

- Sue Sullivan, WCHCS Environmental Health Manager
- Jennifer Hayden, WCHCS Environmental Health Supervisor
- Hayli Hruza, WCHCS Environmental Health Supervisor

Sullivan provided an overview of environmental health, describing it as a facet of public health that focuses on the relationship that humans have with the natural and built environment. She stated that the work of the WCHCS environmental health division is rooted in disease and injury prevention.

Sullivan shared information about the Columbia Valley. In 2023, the estimated population of the area was 3,577. It is one of 10 Whatcom County urban growth areas (UGA), but its proximity to basic services is not ideal with many individuals and families feeling the need to combine trips to the grocery store, doctor appointments, etc. Roughly 15 percent of people living in the east county are living below the poverty level.

Sullivan stated that responses to complaints and concerns in Columbia Valley focus primarily on vectors (rodent infestation), exposure to sewage, and hazardous materials and waste release.

Hruza provided an overview of Whatcom County's on-site sewage program. In Columbia Valley, there are roughly 1,500 septic systems. Since 2020, there have been approximately 128 reports of community concerns related to properties in Columbia Valley. When a complaint is received, staff visit the site, assess and correct health threats, and follow up as needed.

Hruza also shared strategies for reducing public health barriers, including homeowner evaluations of on-site sewage systems, rebates for evaluations and pumping, complaint follow-up, trainings, and allowance of portable holding tanks, port-a-potties, and temporary tanks.

Elenbaas asked what recourse would be for a property which does not have on-site septic. He asked how many of the 128 complaints were "squatters."

Hruza said she could not provide a percentage, but she has been to some of those sites.

Scanlon asked what happens when Hruza's staff reach the end of their jurisdictional authority.

Hruza stated that she and her staff work with the individual to identify their next steps and contacts.

Scanlon asked how people can file a complaint or get assistance.

Hruza said that the public is welcome to make complaints and find information about rebates on the County website.

Hayden provided an overview of the county's solid waste enforcement. In Columbia Valley, there are currently 31 open complaints. Many complaints are tied to hoarding, poverty, and speculative accumulation. When responding to complaints, they focus on mitigating public health threats such as hazardous waste. Currently, the program sponsors an Adopt-A-Block program in Columbia Valley, which provides ongoing dumpster placement and disposal at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center. In 2021 and 2023, they sponsored tire recycling events at the Cedarville Drop Box Facility, which were popular with the community. In 2022, they conducted an assessment on improving solid waste management.

However, not enough survey responses were received. Low income and transportation barriers were some of the barriers identified by the few individuals who responded to the survey. Hayden also shared information about the availability of a solid waste voucher.

Sullivan concluded staff's presentation by highlighting collaboration with partners to provide services such as DIY air cleaner distribution. She emphasized that WCHCS is committed to the Columbia Valley.

Following staff's presentation, community members shared their experiences with blighted properties and environmental health concerns in Columbia Valley. The following people spoke:

- Kristina Michele Martens
- Ivy Little
- Rochelle Hollowell

Martens spoke about the health equity zone at Mount Baker School District. She also highlighted Habitat for Humanity's Build Community Day cleanup, an upcoming event on October 4. She asked the county to contribute four dumpsters for use at the event.

Little spoke about her work on blighted properties and the environmental health concerns she has encountered in these spaces.

Hollowell spoke about efforts to clean up blighted properties in east Whatcom County, stating that problems have worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. She recommended that County Council pass laws allowing the county to foreclose on blighted properties and requested that the county establish a special task force to focus on east Whatcom County.

Scanlon asked for information about the informal group working on issues in east Whatcom County.

Hollowell said that she and a group of five or six others are working to help people who want to clean up their properties, and they are trying to raise awareness about enforcement problems.

Stremmler asked for more information about the request for dumpsters on October 4.

Martens clarified that the event in October was organized with Habitat for Humanity. RE Sources will be participating as well, and the community has

requested support.

Schott-Bresler stated that they are working to determine whether solid waste funding can be provided and identify what can be accommodated within the budget.

Stremmer asked whether the Department of Ecology is aware of the stated environmental health concerns.

Hayden stated that Department of Ecology sometimes receives complaints directly, and they generally route those complaints to local jurisdictions. They will occasionally respond if there are water quality issues or if businesses have hazardous waste management issues.

Galloway asked whether the Executive's Office needs anything from Council in regard to the October 4 event.

Schott-Bresler stated that a motion from Council is not necessary in this case.

McGarrahy said there are two separate pieces to the discussion, as some people want help tackling clean up and some do not want help. She stated that any potential solution should not contribute to homelessness.

Scanlon said he is supportive of creating a task force. He said he believes it should include Councilmembers Buchanan and Byrd.

Byrd stated that he has done a lot of work on this topic over the years and tried to form a task force in 2021 and 2022. He said he has an almost-completed ordinance which could be brought forward soon.

Scanlon noted that Little also has information to contribute to the formation of a task force. He said the task force could be convened for a limited time and could help encourage communication and collaboration across departments.

Byrd said his draft ordinance was related to Columbia Valley, but he thinks it might be a good idea to broaden the scope to the entire county. He said that he does not believe the task force should have a sunset date but it could hold meetings on an as-needed basis depending on demand.

Elenbaas said alcoholism and mental health should be part of this conversation, as blighted properties can be the result of an untreated mental

health issue. He stated that he hopes any solution put forward considers the mental health aspect of this problem, as there cannot be a long-term solution without treating underlying substance use or mental health issues.

Scanlon said the discussion about the task force will be continued at the next meeting.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Discussion

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

Scanlon provided an update on the workgroup's study of potential changes to Health Board membership. Scanlon reported that, since the last Health Board meeting, he briefed Nooksack Tribal Council and the small cities on the proposal to expand Health Board membership. He provided an overview of feedback received and noted that he also has a meeting scheduled with Chairman Hillaire of the Lummi Indian Business Council.

Hensley thanked the community for their feedback and asked that communications from the public regarding Health Board membership be forwarded to PHAB members.

McGarrity shared that they have received 38 letters supporting re-structuring the Health Board and three letters recommending keeping the current structure.

Scanlon stated that work on code language and discussions regarding PHAB's role are continuing.

Stremmer asked for more information about how individuals would be nominated to the expanded Health Board.

Scanlon stated that other counties leave appointment authority to the Council. Council would make appointments for city, county, and community representation and would confirm appointments by tribes.

Stremmer asked why the process would be different for tribes than other groups.

Scanlon stated that state law governs that process. He added that a similar approach might be used for small cities appointments.

Galloway thanked Scanlon and workgroup members for their efforts. She said many of her questions have been answered. She said she still has concerns about delegation of legislative authority over Title 22.

Scanlon said research on that topic is ongoing.

Elenbaas stated that he shares the same concerns as Councilmember Galloway. He added that another of his concerns is related to the distrust regarding public health in the county and across the nation. He stated that he believes much of the distrust is political in nature. Elenbaas said that the Health Board can regain trust from the community if it is not viewed as a partisan body.

McGarrity said the workgroup has recently had interesting discussions on this topic. She said a lot of the feedback from the public has been about repairing public trust, and this is a priority for the workgroup.

Scanlon stated that he agrees about depoliticizing the Health Board and that was part of the legislature's intent in broadening membership.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:07 p.m.

The County Council approved these minutes on October 7, 2025.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand

SIGNED COPY ON FILE

