

# **Child And Family Well-Being Task Force**

**September 2024 Report**

## Land Acknowledgement

We would like to begin this report by acknowledging that we work on the ancestral homelands of Indigenous Peoples who have lived in the Salish Sea basin and the North Cascades watershed from time immemorial, in particular, the Lhaq'temish people who we recognize today to be the Lummi Nation, the Nooksack Tribe, and Semiahmoo.

May we be mindful of the inherent owners of this land, our children, who are our future. Our future stewards of the land and advocates for the generation to come. May that truth guide our work and efforts to improve the well-being of all families and children, native and non-native, living in this beautiful county.

This land acknowledgment is not meant to be a substitute for authentic relationship-building and understanding. It is meant to introduce us to one way we can show respect and honor for the sacrifices and leadership of the first people of this land.

## Task Force Membership

- **Christina Jackson**, Task Force Co-Chair & Generations Forward
- **Vesla Tonnessen**, Task Force Co-Chair
- **Ray Deck III**, Task Force Co-Chair
- **Colton Kaltenfeldt**, Task Force Co-Chair
- **Jason Oldham**, Generations Forward
- **Karla Anderson**, Whatcom Early Learning Alliance
- **Beverly Porter**, Whatcom Taking Action
- **Kristi Dominguez**, Ferndale School District Superintendent
- **Chelsea Johnson**, Whatcom County Health Department
- **Sterling Chick**, Public Health Advisory Board
- **Jon Scanlon**, Whatcom County Council
- **Kayla Schott-Bresler**, Whatcom County Executive Representative
- **Samya Lutz**, City of Bellingham
- **Gregory Hansen**, Small Cities Partnership
- **Sativa Robertson**, Nooksack Tribe
- **Jamie Desmul**, Community Member
- **Jennifer Wright**, Community Member
- **Anne Granberg**, Community Member
- **Allison Bishop**, Community Member
- **Monika Mahal**, Community Member
- **Katherine Orłowski**, Community Member
- **Pamela Jons**, Community Member
- **Tilda Doughty**, Community Member
- **Samantha Cruz-Mendoza**, Community Member
- **Megan Juenemann**, Community Member
- **Lyn Salazar**, Community Member
- **Sallye Quinn**, Community Member

## Introduction

The Child & Family Well-Being Task Force is pleased to present this annual report in response to the requirements set forth in Ordinance 2020-079. This report details the major highlights of our non-Healthy Children's Fund-related work since [our last report in September 2023](#).

While much of our work this past year has been dedicated to ensuring a successful and equitable execution of the Healthy Children's Fund, we've had the opportunity to contribute our knowledge and recommendations to various projects. We have also undertaken a restructuring of our governance structures to fulfill our mission of continually reviewing Whatcom County's governmental impacts on children and families. We are grateful for the Council's support and look forward to another year of partnership.

## Comprehensive Plan Recommendations

Earlier this year, the Task Force responded to the Council's request for feedback on the County's 2025 Comprehensive Plan. We were initially asked to consider changes to *Chapter 7 - Economics* and *Chapter 12 - Climate Change and Resiliency* but found it appropriate to provide feedback on *Chapter 3 - Housing* and *Chapter 10 - Environment* because we recognize that affordable housing and environmental issues play an important and intersecting role in the wellbeing of families in our community. We are still awaiting Chapter 12's release and intend to provide feedback when available.

### Recommendations Concerning Chapter 7 - Economics

Integrate affordable childcare availability into Goal 7-C or the insertion of a new goal specifically focused on workforce participation, such as Goal 7-X: *"The backbone of every vibrant economy is a healthy and productive workforce, which demands high-quality schools, abundant housing, and access to high-quality, affordable childcare."*

Building on the above recommendation — and in alignment with Goal 7-D, which aims to minimize regulation hindering growth — we recommend recognizing the shortage of affordable childcare as an economic risk that justifies special treatment for childcare providers by including, but not limiting to, the following policy suggestions:

- Hiring or training a childcare business Subject Matter Expert (SME) within the planning department to handle all childcare-related permitting.
- Waiving all permitting fees for childcare businesses.
- Prioritizing childcare-related permits to the front of each respective queue as allowed by State law.

- Supporting center-based and home-based childcare providers in acquiring and maintaining licenses necessary to provide quality care for children.
- Allocate resources to identify and remedy geographic inconsistencies in Whatcom County's childcare codes and revise code requirements that place an exceptional burden on new childcare supply development, especially those that make it prohibitively difficult for formal home-based care.

Building on policy suggestions for Goal 7-C, we urge the Council to name family access to behavioral and mental health support as another area of infrastructure consideration. Specific policy suggestions include but are not limited to:

- Investing resources to develop a landscape assessment of the system for connecting families to behavioral health support, as previously recommended in our [April 2023 Phase III report](#).
- Investing resources to develop a county-wide, easily accessible resource information system for children and families. The Whatcom Resource Information Collaborative (WRIC) is already undertaking similar work.
- Investing in peer support programming that elevates positive childhood experiences (PCEs). [Research suggests](#) that receiving mental health support from peers is acceptable and effective for adolescents while also being quite cost-effective. Participation in mentorship programs may also be more acceptable and accessible for many families who have low rates of participation in clinical mental health treatment for children and adolescents.

We urge the Council to recognize that the rising cost of groceries disproportionately impacts low-income households and that chronic food insecurity is a threat to our local economy. We further urge the Council to prioritize policy that bolsters infrastructure to fight food insecurity by including, but not limiting to, the following policy suggestions:

- Amend Goal 7L to include food insecurity or create a separate goal to specifically mention the economic impacts of food insecurity in our community.
- Adequately fund the Whatcom County Food Bank Network to meet the dramatic increase in food insecure individuals in the county, as recommended in [Goal 4.3 of Whatcom County's 2023 Food System Plan](#).
- Streamline permitting and encourage the development of grocery stores in areas deemed food deserts. According to the Food System Plan, Whatcom County has three census tracts that are considered food deserts, comprising over 24,000 residents.
- Encourage the development of food sources that accept WIC and SNAP, especially in the Foothills area in East County.

## Recommendations Concerning Chapter 3 - Housing

The Task Force urges the Council to consider integrating the following policies into Goals 3D and 3G in an effort to increase family-accessible housing and reduce regulatory hurdles that

restrict housing development. The Task Force makes these recommendations understanding the important role that our local municipal governments play in planning developments within Urban Growth Areas (UGA) and encourages the Council to coordinate with these local governments to the maximum extent possible to ensure similar provisions are included in their comprehensive plans.

- Establishing a 4-plex right anywhere within the UGA, [as recently done in the city of Spokane](#).
- Establishing .3 acres as the highest minimum lot size within the UGA where allowed by state law.
- Eliminate setback requirements, which enable more diverse housing types such as row houses.
- Eliminate parking minimums within the UGA and a quarter mile of a WTA stop or an arterial with a bike lane, [as several cities, including Olympia, have recently done](#).
- Establish and maintain a library of pre-approved plans for accessory dwelling units, small lot homes, and townhomes to fast-track any project based on them.
- Identify and actively work to remove regulations and neighborhood covenants that prohibit group homes, childcare centers, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing in all residential areas.

Task Force requests that the County Council add the following policy goals within Goal 3F:

- Incentivize the integration of child care centers into multi-family housing developments utilizing federal tax credits and help create a pool of community partners who can help develop these services.
- Create incentives that support programs to increase home-ownership rates for low and middle-income families. These programs include but are not limited to shared-equity options such as land trusts, co-operatives, and other cottage-style and multifamily ownership opportunities.

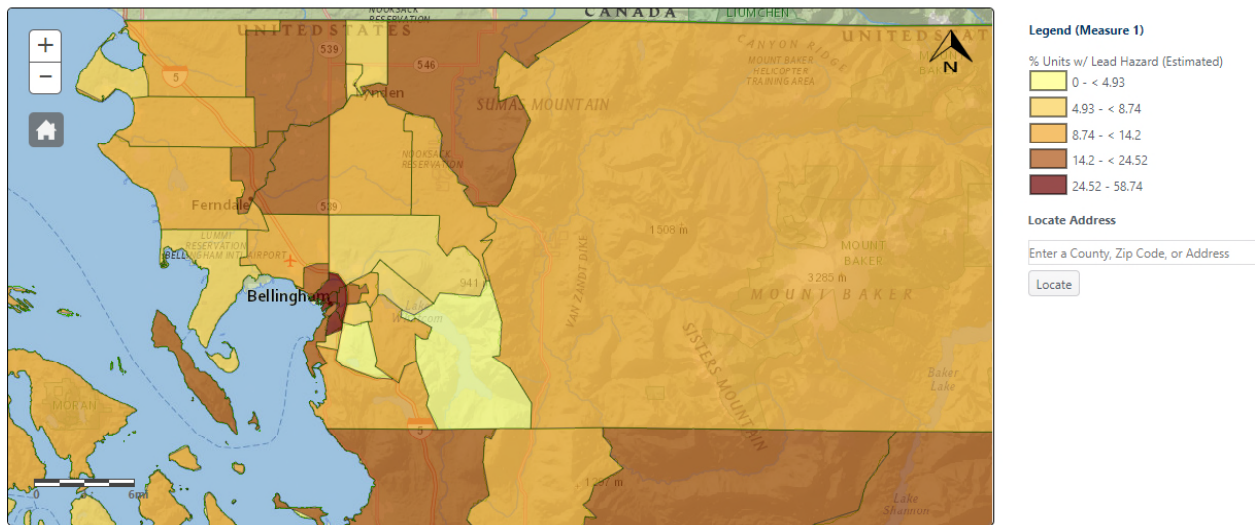
## Recommendations Concerning Chapter 10 - Environment

This being the first time that our comprehensive plan will include a chapter on environment, the county has the opportunity to set its scope. The Task Force hopes that, in addition to the expected climate change and conservation interests, this chapter includes planning around issues of environmental health such as air quality, water quality, and the presence of toxins in our built environment—particularly lead exposure.

[According to the Washington Tracking Network \(WTN\)](#), a program of the State Department of Health which publishes environmental health data, children in Whatcom County are at particular risk of lead exposure due to the age of our housing stock and our relatively low lead exposure testing rate.

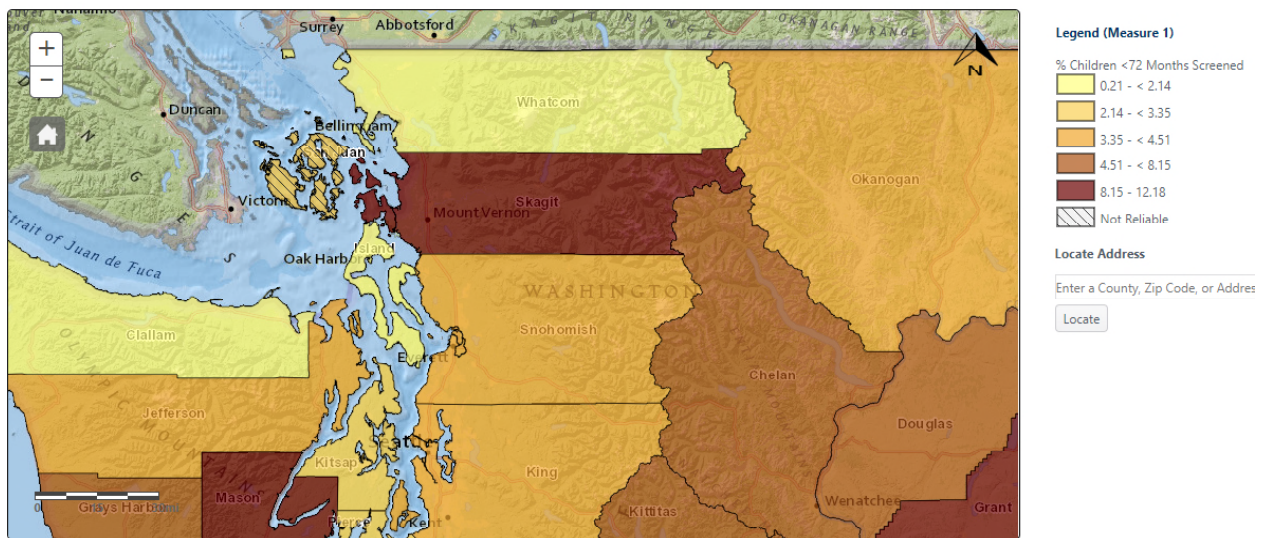
**Lead Risk from Housing**

Geography: Census Tract, Year: 2015-2019



**Testing Rates for Blood Lead Levels among Children <72 Months of Age**

Geography: County, Time Period: 2020



In other words, there is good reason to be concerned about the risk of lead exposure to children in our community. In recognition of this risk, we urge the County Council to include a goal to reduce the risk of early childhood lead exposure across Whatcom County. Specific policy objectives could include:

- Improve testing rates among children <72 months until Whatcom meets or exceeds the state-wide testing goal.
- Lower the threshold for a public health response to 3.5 µg/dL or less.

- Devote resources to proactive mitigation of all possible sources of lead exposure across the county, including plumbing in schools and childcare centers, paint and plumbing in privately owned residences (particularly rental properties), and topsoil in places where children and families commonly gather.

## **Developing Updated Governance Structures**

With the publication of our Phase III report in April 2023, the Task Force completed the final specifically defined deliverable as mandated in our creation ordinance. This allowed us to reflect on our work so far and adapt our work and governance structure to best fulfill our mission of continually reviewing Whatcom County's governmental impacts on children and families, as well as make specific recommendations for improvements for all departments. Some of this work is ongoing.

This work is echoed by the County as a Whole. In May 2023, Whatcom County Health and Community Services created an [Assessment of Advisory Groups](#) that specifically recommends the standardization of charters for WCHCS-convened advisory groups and for work to be done to help advisory groups better understand their essential duties. Our work is guided by the recommendations made in this report.

## **Establishment of New Subcommittees**

The primary structural change the Task Force has undertaken is the establishment of four subcommittees. At the conclusion of our Phase III Report, co-chairs developed and shared a survey with task force members to better understand how we should focus our work. These groups meet monthly, with the exception of the ad-hoc Rapid Response subcommittee.

### **Issues & Policy**

This subcommittee is responsible for conducting preliminary research on issues impacting children and families in the county and developing our understanding of these issues so that the whole task force can engage with them.

This group has engaged with topics such as childhood lead exposure, increasing the number of mental health therapists who accept Medicaid, and increasing the number of grocery stores that accept WIC in rural parts of Whatcom County. This work informed many of our recommendations for the County's 2025 Comprehensive Plan (see below).

### **Progress & Accountability**

This subcommittee aims to track the progress of items that have appeared on our agenda from past to current. This can include recommendations the Task Force has made to the Council, recommendations made by the Task Force to improve its own operations, and recommendations made by other advisory groups.

The Task Force believes that forming this group is important to fulfilling the Ordinance [2020-079](#)'s expectation that the Task Force develops recommendations to promote shared governmental and community accountability for child and family results. In particular, the ordinance asks us to identify mechanisms to track and share progress on key indicators aligned with desired results.

One of the first projects undertaken by this subcommittee was to create a centralized list of all recommendations made by the Task Force to the Council. In addition to highlighting specific recommendations, this document also tracks the County's progress toward each recommendation. Work on this document is ongoing, but we intend to provide the Council with a copy once it is available.

### **Rapid Response**

This group will gather when time-sensitive advocacy is needed. Work done by this sub-committee includes:

- The drafting of our 2025 Comprehensive Plan recommendations.
- A letter to the Council in support of Ordinance 2023-082, giving it the right to waive citizenship and/or qualified registered voter requirements when appointing participants to county advisory boards. This was a recommendation the Task Force had previously made to the Council in our [2022 Phase II Report](#) and [2023 Phase III Report](#).

### **Healthy Children Fund**

This subcommittee is tasked with helping the Task Force participate in and provide citizen oversight of the implementation of the Healthy Children's Fund. This is our most active group. Work done by this sub-committee include:

- Assisting the county in applying for and being approved for a [Stanford RAPID survey](#), which collects feedback from families and parents. While this research will primarily benefit Healthy Children's Fund administration, this work can help us identify needs that apply to all our work.
- We are working with our non-profit and early childhood learning industry partners to evaluate our County's RFP submittal process and propose changes we believe will make it more approachable for applicants.

### **Bylaws Update**

Section 2.106.070 of Ordinance 2020-079 gives the task force the authority to "adopt its own rules and procedures for the conduct of business."

Co-Chair Velsa Tonnelson is spearheading a drafting process to create our own governance documents for the task force to help refine how we work together to make decisions. This effort is in response to the task force's growth over the past two years and the influx of new members.



We are revisiting the task force's values as part of this work. These values will guide our decision-making, recommendations, and communication. The goal is to translate these values into principles for how we work.

### **A Note on Open Public Meeting Act Compliance**

In reviewing our current governance documents, the task force has run into some questions about the necessity of Open Public Meetings Act (OPMA) compliance as mandated in Ordinance 2020-079. It is a value of the task force to be open and transparent to the public. However, we have found that OPMA's strict guidelines do more to restrict the efficiency of the task force than may be necessary. This [legal opinion](#) by the Washington State Attorney General's Office states that advisory bodies (such as the task force) who do not have formal control over funding decisions are not required to use the strict constraints of OPMA.

If the OPMA compliance was removed, but our governance documents still outlined a transparent and publicly accessible meeting schedule, the task force believes that we would be able to move in a more responsive and efficient manner to the community and the Council's needs. This would allow us to use tools like Google Docs for more effective offline collaboration. This is essential in a community-based advisory body whose participants have limited time during business hours and many of whom have young children working with various schedules at home. We feel strongly that we can maintain the spirit of OPMA while still allowing for a modern work process.

## **General Recommendations To County Council**

- Advocate through whatever channels are available for the inclusion of our Comprehensive Plan Recommendations in the final draft. These recommendations constitute the majority of our current understanding of the needs facing children and families in our community.

## Summary

The Child & Family Well-Being Task Force is pleased with the work we've done this year. We hope that the recommendations we've provided to Council in response to the Comprehensive Plan will be strongly considered. It is our belief that if these recommendations are implemented and followed through, our County will be well on its way to ensuring that every child and family in our community has the tools and resources they need to succeed.

The Task Force has also undergone structural changes to enhance its effectiveness, including establishing new sub-committees focused on issues, progress tracking, and rapid response. These groups have played a crucial role in informing the Task Force's recommendations and ensuring accountability in implementing policies. We will continue adapting our governance structures to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of the Task Force's work while ensuring public transparency and engagement. Through these efforts, the Task Force continues to fulfill its mission of advocating for the well-being of children and families in the community.