



## Department Report

**October, 2025**

*Equity – Collaboration – Compassion – Transparency – Innovation - Service*

### Leadership:

#### Health Director

- Department participated in the September 3 County Open House
- Personnel Updates: Financial Services Manager, Greg Iturria, started with the department September 2. Department Director, Champ Thomaskutty, started yesterday, October 27.

#### Health Officer

- Monitoring vaccine policy, availability, and coverage, and sharing evidence-based best practices with the local healthcare community.
- Collaborating with partners to assess local healthcare access and to anticipate impacts of changes to Medicaid and the WA Health Benefit Exchange on our population.

### Financial Services:

- Mid-biennium budget adjustments were prepared and submitted to the County Executive in October. The proposed adjustments reduce the general fund contribution to the department by more than \$1 million per year. Reductions to achieve this net savings to the general fund include cutting vacant positions, reducing non-personnel operating expenditures, and maximizing the use of restricted revenue to support core department services.
- The business office is in the process of onboarding an Accounting Supervisor who is scheduled to start on November 10.

### Communicable Disease and Epidemiology (CD&E):

- **Honoring Ann Lund's Retirement:** After 19.5 years of dedicated service, we celebrate Ann Lund's retirement and the tremendous impact she has made in public health. Ann's pivotal leadership in the Tuberculosis (TB) Program has helped position Whatcom County as a statewide model for TB care and community support. Her expertise, compassion, and commitment have touched countless lives, and her legacy will continue to inspire our teams and community for years to come.



- **Tuberculosis (TB) Program:** The TB team continues to provide intensive case management for newly arrived individuals with medically complex TB conditions who face significant barriers to care. In partnership with Dr. Harley (Health Officer), the team has also delivered several Latent TB Infection (LTBI) trainings for local healthcare providers—strengthening prevention, early intervention, and community-wide TB response capacity.
- **Safety and Support Program (SSP):** The Safety and Support Program is expanding access to overdose prevention resources by partnering with supportive and transitional housing organizations to install Naloxone distribution boxes, ensuring 24/7 access to lifesaving medication. The team also organized and hosted the Overdose Awareness Day event at Bellingham City Hall, in collaboration with Lummi and Nooksack Tribal organizations. The event offered free Narcan kits, hands-on training, and public education, raising awareness and fostering community connection. In addition, the SSP team is collaborating with the University of Washington to conduct the annual SSP survey. This research provides essential, up-to-date insights that help SSP staff, policymakers, and service providers better understand the complex needs of the individuals we serve.
- **Refugee Health Navigation, Promotion & Immigration Support:** From January to August 2025, we supported 147 refugee clients with health system navigation, immunization education, and assistance with the I-693 form to support green card applications. Demand for these services continues to grow, thanks to strong partnerships with local refugee resettlement agencies and word-of-mouth referrals within client communities.
- **Immunization Program Highlights:** A pilot project with local schools is also underway, allowing students to receive vaccinations during school hours. This partnership supports record management and helps ensure families stay informed about recommended vaccines and community resources.
- **MPOX Vaccination Clinic:** In response to increased community concern and growing MPOX cases nationwide, we are hosting a MPOX-specific vaccine clinic on October 28. This clinic reflects our commitment to rapid, responsive public health action.

### Community and Organizational Development (COD):

- The Epidemiology & Assessment team is activating weekly updates for the [Respiratory Illness Dashboard](#) as we head into respiratory illness season.
- The Informatics team launched the Healthy Children's Fund Doula Project electronic data collection and referral system- this will allow HIPAA-secure automation of referrals and enable the program to have participant data and outcome data available electronically.
- The Informatics Team, along with our Quality Improvement Specialist, completed an audit of RSD data to improve client electronic medical records data entry and accuracy.

- Staff presented at WSALPHO's Fall Learning Symposium: Inclusive Approaches to Public Health Practices.
  - Danielle Humphreys (Equity Specialist) participated on a panel with other equity-focused LHJ staff called "Strategies for Advancing Equity in Local Public Health" and discussed how we are putting equity into practice.
  - Amy Rydel (Healthy Planning Specialist), Aly Robinson (Community Health Specialist), Danielle Humphreys (Equity Specialist), and Christine Espina (PHAB member) facilitated an interactive breakout session called "Centering Equity in Community Health Improvement: Strategies, Stories, and Shared Learning". They shared experiences with Community Health Improvement (CHI) in Whatcom County, and presented strategies and tools for keeping equity centered during the CHI process.
- COD is in the process of hiring a Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Resiliency (PHEPR) Specialist, and we hope to make an offer shortly. We have been without a PHEPR Specialist since May.
- Heather McGuinness (Partnerships & Strategy Supervisor) attended the first annual Northwest Preparedness & Resilience Conference, hosted by the University of Washington's Northwest Center for Evidence-Based Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (NWPHEPR) and the Center for Disaster Resilient Communities (CDRC). The event brought together public health practitioners from across Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Alaska to learn and share best practices related to emergency preparedness and response.
- Division staff moved into the expanded Unity building, a big thanks to Facilities and IT for getting the space ready!

### **Community Health and Human Services (CH&HS):**

- Feedback on the Healthy Children's Fund 2025-26 Implementation plan is open from 10/1-10/17. You can find more information on the [HCF webpage](#).
- The Healthy Children's Funding closed the Childcare Capital RFP and has been reviewing the nearly \$6 million in funding requests they received. The Childcare subsidy RFP closes on 10/21.
- Whatcom County's next Homeless Housing Plan for 2026-2030 has been released for public comment. This draft plan can be found [here](#).
- Hiring for the severe weather shelter is moving along! With nearly 30 positions being temporarily hired, the housing team is busy with interviews and training to prepare to take on this big lift.
- The Developmental Disabilities Program has an open RFP to build community capacity for individuals with developmental disabilities. The anticipated outcomes of this RFP include increasing the number of public sector and large employers hiring or providing youth internships to people with developmental disabilities in Whatcom County. Increasing the diversity and number of job candidates in the developmental disability

field. As well as building the capacity of the community to welcome and include people with developmental disabilities. The RFP will be open until 10/28/25.

- The Nurse Family Partnership supervisor stepped into her role in July, after nearly half a year without a supervisor. She has jumped right in and is happy to report some highlights from the program. The NFP team is currently serving 43 families and, in the past 12 months, has completed 761 home visits! 100% of the families being served have initiated breastfeeding last year, and smoking rates last year decreased from 9% at enrollment to 0% at 36 weeks of pregnancy!
- The Community Health & Human Services team has moved from their Civic Building location to the new building at 110 Unity. The team is settling in well and looks forward to stronger collaboration with colleagues in the same building!

### **Environmental Health (EH):**

- The Solid Waste and Food Teams supported Bellingham SeaFeast from Sept. 27-28. Bellingham SeaFeast 2025 makes history as Whatcom County's first festival to implement 100% reusable dishware. HCS awarded the Innovative Waste Reduction grant to a team of local partners to implement a full-scale reusable dishware system in the main food court. SeaFeast draws over 15,000 attendees annually. Festivals of that size often generate thousands of pounds of garbage, much of it from single-use to-go ware, which accounts for up to 70% of food service waste at public events.
- The resolution to adopt the updated Coordinated Water System Plan was passed by Council on September 23. The WA State Department of Health is now reviewing the plan, and we anticipate approval by December 31.
- The division has started its implementation of a new system called Enterprise Permitting and Licensing. This system will replace aging technology and streamline processes related to permitting, licensing, and complaint response. Our Go-Live date is expected towards the end of the 1st Quarter 2026.
- The On-site sewage team will be offering a free education course for the industry, educating on best practices and new tools for applying code requirements. A CEU will be granted after participation, and this will help industry professionals with their licensure requirements.
- The water recreation team is back up to pre-COVID inspection activity levels. In 2025, they have seen every seasonal facility.

### **Response Systems (RS):**

- Mental Health Court is celebrating its 10th Anniversary. Over the past decade, the program has enrolled 155 participants between the Bellingham Municipal Court and the Whatcom County District Court. We have witnessed inspiring transformations, celebrated graduates, and navigated the real challenges and barriers to recovery. The program is a testament to the compassion and collaboration that uplift our community and its members in their most challenging times.

- Hannah Fisk, Special Programs Manager, presented across multiple community meetings, highlighting the progress around developing a Behavioral Care Center (BCC), a key component of the Justice Project Implementation Plan. Hannah provided presentations to: County Council, Behavioral Health and Crisis Provider meeting, Incarceration, Prevention and Reduction Taskforce, Whatcom County Outreach provider meeting, and Whatcom Racial Equity Commission.
- Alternative Response Team (ART) is in the process of expanding staff by one position. We hope to have this position filled and fully onboarded by the beginning of 2026. This additional staff will allow ART to respond to additional 911 calls in the Bellingham area and support the efforts to work with additional law enforcement agencies in the County.
- Response Systems has started an internship/practicum program for the 2025/2026 calendar year. We have seven interns, three graduate students, and four undergrad students, placed in Mental Health Court, Alternative Response Team, and GRACE. We are especially excited to be hosting two students from the new Bachelor's of Social Work program at Whatcom Community College.
- Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion/Let Everyone Advance with Dignity (LEAD) celebrated their 5th Anniversary this September! We highlighted the work of this transformational program through some social media posts (see below).

### 5 YEARS OF LEAD

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion | Let Everyone Advance with Dignity

**“**

**Many LEAD clients struggle with addiction of one kind or another.** Often, we're the first ones to take clients to detox, help them apply for a recovery bed at a rehab facility, or help them find a clean and sober house after graduation from rehab.

**Greg Smith**  
LEAD Intensive Case Manager



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### 5 YEARS OF LEAD

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion | Let Everyone Advance with Dignity

**“**

Working for LEAD over the past five years has been an immense privilege—**witnessing the healing of individuals, families, and the community.** I've been deeply honored to be welcomed into such intimate and personal parts of people's lives.

**Mel Esquivel**  
LEAD Intensive Case Manager  
Five years with LEAD



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### 5 YEARS OF LEAD

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion | Let Everyone Advance with Dignity

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**Five years ago, a small group interested in bringing change to Whatcom County** brought in a program known as Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD). At that time, no one knew the LEAD program would develop into what it is today, nor did they realize how much effect it would have on our community.

**Chief Deputy Jason Gum**  
Whatcom County Sheriff's Office



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### 5 YEARS OF LEAD

Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion | Let Everyone Advance with Dignity

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**LEAD is an invaluable and critical service for our community.** At any given time, there are over 100 people receiving vital services with the help of intensive case managers.

**Chief Rebecca Mertzig**  
Bellingham Police Department



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