

Whatcom County Council as the Health Board

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



Minutes - Draft Minutes

Tuesday, October 28, 2025

10 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**JOINT HEALTH BOARD / PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY BOARD (PHAB)
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 10:05 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

Present: Jon Scanlon, Chris Kobdich, Christine Espina, Joni Hensley, Leah Wainman, Robyn Phillips-Madson, Shannon Boustead, Shu-Ling Zhao, Sterling Chick, Lara Welker, Guy Occhiogrosso, Madison Emry, Meg Lelonik

Absent: Amy Harley, Ashley Thomasson, Edna Revey, Kendra Cristelli, Rachel McGarrity

PHAB members present: Joni Hensley, Shu-Ling Zhao, Madison Emry, Leah Wainman, Sterling Chick, Robyn Phillips-Madison, Christine Espina, Lara Welker, Shannon Boustead, Guy Occhiogrosso, Jon Scanlon, and Meg Lelonek

Announcements**Public Comment**

There were no public comments.

Special Presentation

1. [AB2025-734](#) Update from the Health Director

Charlene Ramont, Assistant Director of Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS), announced that Champ Thomaskutty started his new position as the department's director.

Champ Thomaskutty, Director of WCHCS, introduced himself and expressed his excitement for his position and the work ahead.

Ramont presented a report (on file) regarding the department's work, highlighting the recent hire of a new financial services manager, changes to vaccine policy at the federal level, budget adjustments, and improvements to technology and data infrastructure to support key programs. She stated that the Healthy Children's Fund 2025-2026 Implementation Plan will soon be coming to Council for final decisions, and the county's Homeless Housing Plan for 2026-2030 is open for public comment on the website. The county

also put out an RFP for severe weather shelter operation in Bellingham but did not receive any responses, so the county will be managing the shelter once again this winter. She concluded by highlighting Mental Health Court's 10 year anniversary.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

2. [AB2025-736](#) Update from the Public Health Advisory Board Chair and Vice Chair

Christine Espina, Chair of the Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) spoke about the board's annual retreat on October 17 and offered a high-level overview of the group's work and accomplishments over the past year.

Galloway asked whether PHAB has any topic-specific priorities for the upcoming year.

Espina stated that PHAB has identified the vital conditions for health as framing their work moving forward. At the center of the vital conditions' framework is building civic muscle and belonging. They also want to be intentional about recruiting members who touch on all parts of the vital conditions' framework.

Scanlon added that another priority is the community health assessment and improvement plan.

Stremmler asked for clarification regarding PHAB's vote to endorse the change of the Health Board's structure.

Espina said the vote was unanimous by members present but would clarify the exact number.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

3. [AB2025-735](#) Update from the Health Officers on the Opioid Response Plan

Dr. Meg Lelonek, Co-Health Officer, presented an opioid update (on file). She said that she would be sharing her time with Kari Holley, who would provide an update on opioid settlement funds.

Lelonek provided an overview of the data landscape, highlighting local, state, and national trends. She shared a map depicting the percent change in drug overdose deaths in the United States from April 2024 to April 2025, indicating that there has been a larger decrease in deaths on the East Coast than the West Coast. Nationally, there has been a 25% average decrease in deaths. In Washington state, the average decrease is 7.5%. However, Whatcom County numbers are closer to the national average. Lelonek shared a graph of deaths per month in Whatcom County, which peaked in

2024. Most (80%) of the deaths are related to fentanyl. EMS data shows that Whatcom County is still having about 80 EMS responses per month for suspected overdose. The Emergency Department (ED) is staying around 60 visits for suspected overdose per month.

She also provided a snapshot of local programs supporting opioid use disorder prevention and response, including medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD), work with the ED to initiate buprenorphine for hospitalized patients, the street medicine team, outreach efforts, and the overdose response pilot program.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, asked about upstream efforts to prevent opioid use disorder.

Kari Holley, Opioid Prevention Specialist for Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS), said there are multiple coalitions in the community working on prevention.

Leah Wainman, PHAB, asked about funding for the street medicine team and how the county is negotiating federal cuts to Medicaid.

Malora Christensen, Response Systems Manager for WCHCS, stated that the street medicine team is funded by the behavioral health sales tax and a substance abuse block grant.

Lelonek said that negotiating federal changes is a larger conversation and that they are monitoring the situation carefully.

Stremmler asked whether the county tracks the relationship between efforts like the street medicine team and the detox center.

Lelonek stated that they have a close relationship with the detox center, and the data team looks at ED data. There is no publicly available dashboard, but they are monitoring the numbers.

Christensen added that they have a Crisis System Oversight Committee that looks at monthly numbers of crisis referrals and where they are coming from.

Lelonek provided information about Naloxone distribution and training. WCHCS has distributed 2,490 doses of Naloxone in designated boxes throughout the community and 2,990 distributed through the Safety and Support Program (SSP).

Elenbaas asked whether Naloxone has a shelf life.

Lelonek stated that naloxone has an expiration date approximately 2 years after manufacture, but studies have shown that it is still effective up to 20 years later.

Holley shared a presentation (on file) regarding Washington State's opioid settlements and spend plan. Washington recovered \$1.1 billion from manufacturers, distributors, and pharmacies. During the 2023 legislative session, the Legislature created an account to ensure that the state share of the recoveries from the litigation are appropriately directed towards addressing the epidemic. Funds are split 50/50 with cities and counties. Tribal communities receive separate funds. Holley stated that, over 18 years, \$518 million will be distributed to the state. Local governments will determine how to spend their share of settlement funds, and the Legislature will determine how the state share is allocated in communities around the state. In the 2023 legislative session, the Legislature allocated \$64.1 million from the opioid payments.

In terms of local settlement allocations, Holley stated that Whatcom County will receive 1.3%, while Bellingham will receive 0.90%, Ferndale will receive 0.06%, and Lynden will receive 0.08%. Blaine, Everson, Nooksack, and Sumas are below the 10,000-population threshold to receive funds. Whatcom County will receive \$5.8 million over 18 years, or approximately \$350,000 to \$450,000 each year.

Holley stated that the county is bound by the One Washington memorandum of understanding (MOU), which is an agreement between the various municipalities of the state regarding the allocation of settlement funds. A Regional Opioid Abatement Council has also established a number of strategies and allowable services.

Holley provided an overview of short- and long-term planning efforts, as well as the 2025 spend plan, which is influenced by priorities from the Opioid Task Force, Fentanyl Operations Plan, and All Hands Whatcom. She said that WCHCS requested \$200,000 in expenditure authority from the County Council in July 2025 to provide opioid prevention and mitigation strategies in accordance with Opioid Settlement funding, including lock bags, supported employment services, public education and marketing, and more.

Donovan asked if funding not spent in 2025 would be populated in 2026.

Holley said that those funds would be used for prevention strategies in 2026. She outlined other strategies and spending priorities for 2026.

Wainman asked if the funding is available only to WCHCS.

Holley said that the funds are shared across relevant departments.

Ann Beck, WCHCS Manager, shared additional information about the collaboration between departments. She emphasized that the spending of settlement funds has to be done through a public process.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

4. [AB2025-693](#) Presentation on locally-led health initiatives

Scanlon introduced a series of presentations from the following community members leading local public health initiatives:

- Dr. Gabriel Durbin, Whatcom Mobile Medicine
- Bob Anderson, Lummi Island Health and Wellness
- Beth Ruth, Skagit County Public Hospital District #304
- Kristina Michele Martens, East Whatcom County Health Equity Zone

Scanlon asked presenters to address the following questions:

- What is the problem you are trying to address, or what are the gaps you are trying to fill?
- What were some options you considered for addressing the problem? Why did you choose the solution you did?
- What challenges did you face?
- What do you want others to know?

Whatcom Mobile Medicine - 1:00:56

Dr. Gabriel Durbin shared that Whatcom Mobile Medicine started in 2023 with the mission to provide basic primary care services in the rural spaces in Whatcom County, with a specific focus on the East County. In the past year, the organization has been seeing patients on the first and third Mondays in the afternoon of every month at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRRC) in Kendall. Whatcom Mobile Medicine offers free and low-cost care to uninsured or underinsured patients by way of a sliding scale option, and they accept a variety of insurance providers. When they are not physically present at the EWRRRC, they offer follow up care by telemedicine, telephone, or their patient portal. They are working to expand

services and increase availability. Durbin stated that healthcare resources have been lacking in East Whatcom County, and part of his work is building trust. He said he hopes his organization can be a part of efforts to create solutions that are rooted in community.

Donovan asked about the relationship between community trust and capacity.

Durbin said he believes building trust takes time and can be accomplished through consistency.

Joni Hensley, PHAB, asked about the organization's mobility needs.

Durbin said that the organization is aiming to keep things simple, but adding a van for transportation of medical equipment and supplies is something they are considering.

Leah Wainman, PHAB, said she is excited to see a provider at the EWRRC, and she appreciates the organization's emphasis on building trust.

Lummi Island Health and Wellness - 1:12:47

Bob Anderson provided information about Lummi Island Health and Wellness, which he said provides a model of community engagement for improving health and wellness that may have application in other parts of the county. Lummi Island Health and Wellness is a nonprofit community initiative started by a group of island healthcare professionals who recognized problems with healthcare on the island, where the average age is 62. The group partnered with PeaceHealth to develop an in-depth survey of community health and wellness needs. Lummi Island Health and Wellness developed a strategic plan based on the needs identified in the community surveys and opened its doors in 2025. The organization's mission is to create a system of health and wellness resources that helps Lummi Island residents of all ages be more resilient in coping with life's changes and challenges. Priorities include improving access to healthcare through development of telehealth capabilities, supporting aging in place through home safety programs, facilitating in-home care, training islanders as health advocates for one another, implementing preventative health and wellness services. Anderson stated they've experienced some successes in this first year, and they are looking to continue to engage with partners so they can keep growing.

Buchanan stated he would love to see this program or something similar brought to Point Roberts, which is also somewhat geographically isolated.

Anderson said they would welcome the opportunity to connect with Point Roberts.

Wainman asked how other communities could build the same sense of community that Lummi Island Health and Wellness has been able to create.

Anderson said leadership is key, so it's important to find a champion for the community.

Skagit County Public Hospital District #304 - 1:32:49

Beth Ruth shared information about United General District #304, whose legal name is Skagit County Public Hospital District #304, which is located in Sedro-Woolley. Ruth stated that there are over 57 public hospital districts in Washington state, and nearly half of all hospitals in Washington are public hospital districts. She went on to provide background information on public hospital districts, which were enabled by the state legislature in 1945. Public hospital districts are formed by public vote. They are managed by an elected board of district commissioners. As a junior taxing district, they have statutorily limited access to property tax dollars, but Ruth said these are generally a small portion of total revenue. Ruth provided information about how District #304 has evolved over time and expanded services and programs.

Wainman asked how collaboration works between the hospital district and community-based organizations, governmental, and public health organizations.

Ruth stated that collaboration is at the core of their business model and they are working in partnership with a number of organizations in service of the community.

Donovan asked about the number of districts in Skagit County and their scale of operations.

Ruth stated there are three districts, each of which have their own models.

East Whatcom County Health Equity Zone - 1:44:41

Kristina Michele Martens presented on the Mount Baker School District Health Equity Zone, which is one of three such zones in Washington State. She stated the goal of the initiative is to empower community to speak up for themselves. She highlighted the community advisory board, which has 11 members from all over the East County area who meet once a month.

The board has spent the last five meetings building a health equity zone metric, which will be used to evaluate ideas that are moving through the community priorities pipeline. They have also developed a project proposal application, which community members can use to submit their ideas.

Lara Welker, PHAB, asked if there was any tension between the community-based nature of the initiative and the state Department of Health (DOH).

Martens said that DOH has been understanding that each health equity zone will look and operate differently.

Elenbaas asked about the minimum age of 14 to vote and participate in project selection.

Martens said DOH wants youth to be involved and engaged in the process.

Elenbaas said he still has concerns about the minimum age.

Dr. Shannon Boustead clarified that in the state of Washington, people who are age 14 and above can make health decisions on their own without parental involvement.

Scanlon thanked the presenters for their time.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 12:04 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Jon Scanlon, Health Board Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Jenna Gernand