



Department Report

July, 2025

Equity – Collaboration – Compassion – Transparency – Innovation - Service

Leadership:

Health Director

- All County departments are working on their mid-biennial adjustments. In June, Departments were asked to submit cost reduction scenarios (one high and one low) to absorb expected 2026 cost increases. HCS proposed a strategy of leaving vacant positions vacant as long as possible, deleting certain vacant positions where the work can be shifted or absorbed differently, and shifting staff into grant-funded positions. These staffing strategies result in the department meeting both reduction scenarios (-\$831,000 and -\$1,355,000). The department began this strategy even before it was asked to make these reductions. For the first six months of 2025, over \$800,000 in savings has been realized due to significant vacancies including the Department Director and Finance Manager positions, among others.
- The department went through a minor restructuring in early July. Staff moved from Community Health & Human Services (CHHS) into Communicable Disease & Epidemiology (CD&E). Other staff moved from CHHS into Community & Organizational Development (COD). Lastly, others are moving from CHHS into what we are now referring to as the Office of the Director.
 - These shifts happened because in CHHS, there are very large budgets that require a lot of oversight and contracting, therefore the work in that division can look a little different from the work elsewhere. Because we aren't able to get an Assistant Manager in the division due to budget constraints, we decided it would be good to reassess what staff do and see if they might also be a good fit in other divisions. We identified that some staff who are working on health care access could mutually benefit those programs the CD&E division and the close access that division has to the Co-Health Officers. The staff member who moved into COD focuses primarily on community development, partners with the staff in that division already, and will be instrumental in the next CHA/CHIP iteration. And the three staff who moved into the Office of the Director are going to be supporting system-wide / organizational-level policies, procedures and structures to bring clarity and support to the whole department.
- On the surface it might seem that Community Health is being rejected as an important part of our department. I would like to express that even though some community health staff have moved to other divisions, we're still committed to



improving population health through prevention, equity, collaboration, and community engagement. I'm hopeful that by spreading this expertise into other divisions, that the principles and practices of community health can support and influence the work done in those divisions. I believe strongly in interdisciplinary work teams. Just as diverse community collaboratives produce richer results, so do interdisciplinary teams. I'm hopeful that the work of the divisions takes a broader view by including community health / primary prevention-focused staff.

Health Officer: A measles response update will be presented, in person, at the joint meeting.

Communicable Disease and Epidemiology (CD&E):

- **Refugee Health Navigation & Immunization Support:** Since May 2025, our team has provided over 140 refugee clients with health system navigation, green card immunization education, and support. Referrals continue to grow through trusted partnerships with resettlement agencies and community word-of-mouth.
- **Immunization Services:** Delivered 18 clinical offerings across community, homebound, transitional housing, and in-office settings, administering over 180 vaccines. Rapidly launched an MMR-specific vaccine clinic in response to increased community concern about measles.
- **Communicable Disease & Measles Outbreak Response:** In June 2025, our Communicable Disease team led the coordinated county-wide response to a confirmed measles case. Working closely with the Health Officers, PIO, community healthcare providers, and the Division of Emergency Management, the team conducted rapid case investigation, issued public exposure notifications, facilitated post-exposure prophylaxis, and launched targeted vaccination efforts to prevent further spread.
- **Tuberculosis (TB) Program:** Currently managing an active TB case involving complex coordination with partners. Completed our second LTBI provider education training, participated in a TB clinical intensive, and are actively rebuilding partnerships to enhance community awareness and response—despite ongoing medication access challenges.
- **Safety & Support Program (SSP):** Provided naloxone and training to over 50 individuals at Bellingham Pride and began monthly outreach at Blaine Food Bank. Collaborated with Lummi Nation at the WA Harm Reduction Summit and deployed 8 naloxone boxes in the community. One current challenge is ensuring clients have access to SSP services at the Waystation, where the current setup limits open access during service hours.
- **STI Testing Services:** Launched a weekly walk-in STI clinic in March 2025, serving over 40 clients with comprehensive testing for HIV, syphilis, hepatitis C, chlamydia, and gonorrhea.

Community and Organizational Development (COD):

- Launched Quality Council, which promotes, supports, and sustains a culture of quality within WCHCS. QI Council will guide the implementation of quality improvement projects and initiatives and ensure alignment with the HCS Strategic Plan. The QI Lead obtained LEAN Six-Sigma Green Belt certification, and 10 members obtained Yellow Belt certification- these trainings focus on improving business processes, reducing waste, and increasing efficiency. The team will start QI project and improving departmental practices and procedures this summer.
- Implemented a new project management software- Monday.com, including training, system templates, and standards of practice. This tool allows project staff to collaborate, track progress, automate processes, and stay organized within one project dashboard. Launched the new system with Healthy Children's Fund, Environmental Health, QI Council, and COD division central service projects and requests.
- In collaboration with the Department of Emergency Management, the newly formed HCS Incident Management Team participated in a tabletop exercise simulating a Measles outbreak. This was a very helpful way to identify training needs, come up with plans, and discuss risk mitigation. It also was very timely coming about a month prior to our first case of Measles in Whatcom County.
- The current funding landscape has been extremely challenging for staffing and planning purposes. The division currently has vacancies of Epidemiology & Assessment Supervisor, Evaluator, and Policy Specialist that are on hold until funding is stabilized.

Community Health and Human Services (CH&HS):

- The Healthy Children's Fund is actively moving through the Implementation Plan drafting process. We are currently in the feedback and refinement phase, which includes a 90-minute Council work session scheduled for July 29th. This session is a key opportunity for Councilmembers to engage with the draft, provide input, and shape the path forward. Following Council's refinements, there will be a final opportunity for community-wide feedback before the plan is finalized. Also, the [Healthy Children's Fund website](#) has been updated and is a great resource to see what is going on. You'll now find a detailed table listing each completed HCF contract, the funded organization, a summary of the project and a link to the full contract for more information.
- There have been some staffing updates in Community Health and Human Services as well. After a 6 month absence, we now have a Nurse Family Partnership Supervisor. Sheri Wiess has joined the team and has jumped right

in. The NFP team is currently working to support at least 52 first time moms throughout the county, and we are so excited to see what is to come. We have also seen transition with staff moving to other areas in Health and Community Services to continue their community health reach to the larger division. Sandra Perez, our LatinX Outreach Coordinator and Aly Robinson, who has focused on health care access throughout Whatcom County, are now expanding the work of the CD&E division with their focused efforts of serving many of the most underserved community members with access to health care and other basic needs. Amy Rydel has moved to the COD division under the Partnerships & Strategy program to apply her skillsets in health planning, facilitation, and community engagement to department-wide initiatives and projects. Eric Chambers has moved to the Office of the Director to support the standardization of our contracting processes and potential grant writing opportunities in the future.

- The Homeless Housing team has been busy developing the next 5-year plan to address homelessness, which is due at the end of the year. Public engagement began in January and has continued through June. Public workshops were held in Bellingham and Lynden and community members had a chance to come provide input on what strategies we should focus on over the next 5 years. On July 8th, staff had a work session with County Council to get their feedback and they continue to refine all of the feedback now during the writing process of the plan. In the next few months the team will be sharing the plan for public comment and the plan is on track to return to Council on 11/18/25 for a final vote. To learn more about the plan you can visit the most recent Council meeting [here](#).
- The Whatcom County Veterans Program recently earned a national achievement award from NACo, the National Association of Counties. The award honors the innovative, effective county government programs that strengthen services in the community, by adding a second Veteran Services Officer and co-locating them at the Bellingham Vet Center to reach more veterans seeking support.
- One of the disappointments we recently experienced was the lack of responses for winter shelter operations after we posted a RFP. Our team is once again gearing up to operate a severe weather shelter, and is starting to look at what projects and work will need to be set aside as we move into this operation. This is a good representation of the continued challenge in our community of service providers already being stretched thin as the needs grow.

Environmental Health (EH):

- EH has kicked off our summer multi-media wildfire smoke and heat campaign. Ads can be seen in our local movie theaters, on WTA buses and social media. This campaign is in concert with DIY air cleaner distribution and events with community partners. Check out our resources at mysmokeplan.org and myheatplan.org.
- The [Coordinated Water System Plan](#) draft is out for public comment until August 6. The public hearing is scheduled for August 6 with the anticipated approval of the plan to be by December 31, 2025.

- The County has taken over full operations of the Disposal of Toxics facility starting July 1. The operations were previously contracted out and as a result of this transition, we've included 3 more full-time employees who work at the facility. Having more oversight and control of operations will assist with enhancing employee recruitment and retention, and proper strategic planning for the longevity of the infrastructure and program.
- Recent system-wide FPHS cuts are impacting EH in the areas of homelessness and water system planning. The division continues to evaluate how best to continue critical services with reduced funding.

Response Systems (RS):

- Following months of uncertainty over future funding for the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion/Let Everyone Advance with Dignity (LEAD), Whatcom County has secured ongoing funding for the criminal legal diversion program. Whatcom County LEAD will continue to employ 8 Behavioral Health Specialists and be able to serve 120-140 individuals at any one time. For the remainder of 2025, Whatcom County LEAD will be focusing on expanding arrest diversion with law enforcement and pre-charging diversion with the Prosecuting Attorney's office.
- Mental Health Court is preparing to celebrate the 10 Year Anniversary of the therapeutic court that operates in County District Court and Bellingham Municipal Court. Events are being planned for October 2025.
- Response Systems division (RSD) is proud to be operating an Overdose Prevention and Response (ODPR) pilot program. This pilot program serves individuals throughout Whatcom County that are at risk of overdose, prioritizing those not currently connected to ongoing services and/or those who have recently survived an overdose. The program goals include reducing overdoses, connecting people to services that work for them and improving the local recovery continuum of care.
- The Alternative Response Team (ART) continues to support 911 dispatch and the Bellingham Police Department (BPD) by responding to low-acuity, non-criminal calls when appropriate. ART is one of two Alternative Response programs currently operating in WA state. Through continued support by the Washington state legislature, City of Bellingham and the North Sound Behavioral Health Administrative Services Organization the ART program will be fully funded moving forward. The team hopes to continue developing and expanding the critical role of the Community Connector position embedded at 911.
- Response Systems leadership is working closely with the Whatcom County Sheriff's office and County Executive's office to support the Justice Project Implementation plan. Our team is specifically focused on the behavioral health needs of individuals moving through the legal system.