



**To:** Whatcom County Council

**From:** Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee

**Re:** Recommendations for Supporting the Expansion of Year-Round Shelter Capacity in Whatcom County (Resolution 2024-036)

**Date:** May 8, 2025

On July 23rd, 2024, the Whatcom County Council passed Resolution 2024-36, which declared a goal of functional zero unsheltered homelessness in Whatcom County within ten years, and expressed the Council's support for expansion of year-round shelter capacity.

The Resolution requested that the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee (WCHAC):

- Create a short-term subcommittee that sunsets December 31, 2025 to issue shelter recommendations
- Prepare a proposal for a severe weather shelter (completed September 2024)
- Prepare a proposal in consultation with the Executive to expand capacity for year-round shelter (included in this memo)
- Provide recommendations to the Comprehensive Plan specifically addressing homelessness and shelter capacity and related zoning and land use policies and regulations (completed March 2024)
- Review and provide input and direction on the county's upcoming Local 5-Year Homeless Housing Plan (in progress, expected completion December 2025)

The proposal included in this memo may inform the Comprehensive Plan and Local 5-Year Homeless Housing Plan, which the WCHAC will review and make recommendations on during 2025.

On August 8, 2024 the WCHAC met and created the Shelter Subcommittee. The Subcommittee has 13 positions, including representation from homeless service/shelter providers, people with lived experience, homeless outreach providers, the small cities of Whatcom County, the City of Bellingham, indigenous groups, homeless youth representatives, and first responders.

The WCHAC assigned the Subcommittee two tasks:

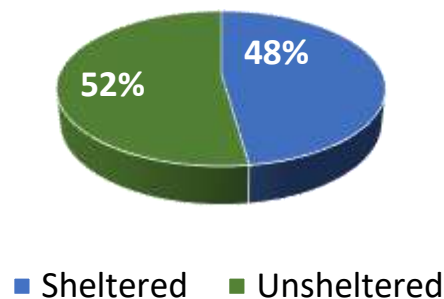
1. Deliver recommendations for a County-run severe weather shelter by September 30, 2024.
  - a. The Subcommittee completed this task and delivered it to WCHAC on September 23, 2024
  - b. The WCHAC held a special meeting on September 26, 2024 to discuss and approve the Subcommittee's recommendations
  - c. A Memo titled "Severe Weather and Winter-specific Shelter Update and Recommendations for a County-run Severe Weather Shelter (Resolution 2024-036), Supporting the Expansion of Year-Round Shelter Capacity in Whatcom County" was delivered to Council on September 30, 2024 (see attachment)

2. Deliver a proposal to reduce unsheltered homelessness and expand year-round emergency shelter, to be completed by December 31, 2025 (this memo).

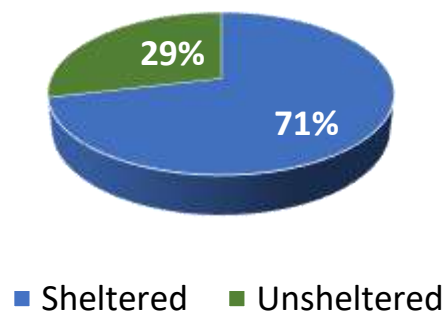
### Existing shelter resources and current state of homelessness

Whatcom County, like most counties in the State, has experienced an increase in the number of unsheltered people experiencing homelessness over time. Based on the surveys completed for the 2024 Whatcom County Point in Time Count, more than 600 people were experiencing homelessness and sheltered, and more than 240 people were without shelter. Point in Time Count data show that in Whatcom County, the percentage of people experiencing homelessness that are unsheltered is significantly less than the statewide rate. 2024 data was used for this comparison because statewide Point in Time Count results are not yet available for 2025.

WA State Individuals Experiencing Homelessness (2024)



Whatcom County Individuals Experiencing Homelessness (2024)



Agencies that provide year-round shelter beds include the Lighthouse Mission Ministries, DVSAS, Sun Community Service, YWCA, Northwest Youth Services, Road2Home, and HomesNOW!. Day use facilities are more limited, but include the Way Station, Northwest Youth

Services Ground Floor, and Recovery Café. Outreach programs include the Opportunity Council Homeless Outreach Team, Road 2 Home Ally, Northwest Youth Services, and Ferndale Community Services. This past winter season, the County, Ferndale Community Services, and Lighthouse Mission Ministries offered additional beds during severe weather events. There is also a variable amount of motel vouchers available through different agencies, some of which have been seasonally scaled up and down over the past few years.

Since this Resolution was adopted, Lighthouse Mission Ministries closed the shelter on Cornwall Ave., decreasing low barrier shelter capacity, but opened their new shelter, increasing overall capacity through their enhanced shelter program. Additionally, the YWCA opened a new 19-unit shelter for women and children with help from the City of Bellingham and the County.

For a more thorough description of the current state of homelessness in Whatcom County and a plan to reduce homelessness over the next 5 years, please see the Local Plan to End Homelessness, which is being developed by Whatcom County Health and Community Services in conjunction with the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee.

Even with these existing resources, there is not enough shelter for everyone that is unsheltered. We want to underscore the primary importance of maintaining the existing shelter resources in the community, in addition to considering additional resources. This memo provides several options that the County might use to provide more shelter for people experiencing homelessness.

### **Proposal for addressing unsheltered homelessness and expanding year-round emergency shelter in Whatcom County**

The resolution requested a number of items to be included in the proposal, including consideration of different types of shelters, different populations, and a budget impact. The proposal considers:

- Supported and secured emergency rest areas and the following shelter types: tiny houses, micro shelters, and congregate shelter.
- Single adults, families with children, unaccompanied minors, young adults (18-24), seniors, people fleeing domestic violence, people with severe mental illness, people with substance use disorder, and veterans.
- Budget impacts, including estimated start-up and operating costs for each shelter, and funding considerations. Note: the operating cost estimates are for building and maintaining the site, and do not include case management and supportive services.

The proposal is organized by type of shelter, with the least cost and fastest deployment option listed first, followed by the more expensive, longer-term recommendations.

We recommend that the County improve its shelter network by investing in supported and secured emergency rest areas and shelter solutions such as tiny house village(s), micro shelter(s), and congregate shelter concurrently. Supported and secured emergency rest areas and shelters should be:

- distributed throughout the county, including the City of Bellingham, the small cities, and unincorporated Whatcom County
- multi-use, inclusive, and adaptable to fill current and future needs, such as severe weather sheltering, day use, and emergency overnight.

### **Funding and Resource Considerations**

Expansion of year-round emergency shelter in Whatcom County will require both start-up capital costs and ongoing operational funding. These costs are highly variable based on the project design, number of guests served, and population(s) served.

There are funding sources appropriate for initial capital costs that are currently managed by Whatcom County Health and Community Services. Funds made available for land acquisition and capital projects for shelter will reduce capacity to financially support development of affordable housing, unless new funding is made available.

There is currently no designated funding set aside for the ongoing operations for these recommendations, and diverting funding from existing housing and homeless service programs could destabilize current efforts. Emergency shelter is essential for survival, and must be balanced with ongoing investment in permanent solutions. New funding for ongoing operations will be needed, with potential sources including local taxes, philanthropic donations, or state budget allocations. Each of the below options are scalable and can be implemented in tandem with the others based on available and secured resources.

Given the strain on the current local homeless housing system, it is important for the County to invest in expanding the network of emergency shelter providers. This expansion includes building relationships with identified groups both locally and in nearby communities, and providing technical and financial assistance to help new organizations emerge and effectively operate these shelters.

### **Option 1: Supported and secured emergency rest areas to reduce dispersed homelessness and initiate service delivery**

**Definition:** A designated plot of land offering a safe and secure area for camping and/or parking. Restrooms, utilities, solid waste disposal, and other very basic needs may be provided on-site. The operational costs below describe staff and security costs for overnight operations.

**Goals/Benefits:** Begin improving health and wellbeing of neighbors experiencing homelessness, reduce exposure to theft and violence, improve individual, environmental, and community health, build trust with service providers that can be leveraged to meaningful service connections (light-touch case management to address unmet medical, social, and economic needs), help people feel safe and secure so they can focus on their next step toward housing stability, help service providers locate people when they are prioritized for housing program openings.

**Considerations:** On-site security may be necessary to create space between service provision and enforcement; strong oversight will be required to ensure that the provided space does not duplicate the activities and behaviors seen within encampments; minimum services needed include garbage and solid waste disposal, hygiene facilities including portable toilets and/or bathroom facility, clean water, electricity

### **Examples:**

Location Details	Appropriate Populations	Capacity	Staff Needs	Estimated Start-up Cost	Estimated Annual Operational Cost
Fenced parking lot or open area - unidentified	High Barrier (background checks, substance free)	30 people	1 FTE day only with full-time security	\$1-2M	\$300k

Fenced parking lot or open area - unidentified	Medium Barrier (substance free)	30 people	1.5 FTE with full-time security		\$450k
Fenced parking lot or open area - unidentified	Low Barrier	30 people	3 FTE with full-time security		\$600k

### **Option 2: Tiny House Village(s) – Shelter Model**

**Definition:** A planned community of small, individual housing units designed to provide temporary shelter, transitional, and in some cases permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness. Permanent dwellings require access to water in-unit versus shelter or transitional housing which do not.

**Goals/Benefits:** Adding to goals listed in above option, increased stability, increased access to individualized services (case management, supportive services), increased sense of belonging, improving health with separation from elements, greater consistency in community immersion, greater sense of home.

#### **Considerations:**

To be created and constructed in partnership with people who are unhoused. Costs could be reduced with a peer-to-peer operated model, and also reduced with the utilization of recycled materials and more accommodating land use policy, ADA units to accommodate people with varying needs.

#### **Examples:**

Location Details	Appropriate Populations	Capacity	Staff Needs	Estimated Start-up Cost	Estimated Annual Operational Cost
Fenced parking lot or open area, large warehouse, other vacant building	Low needs: single adults, adult couples, veterans using the HomesNow! model.	30-40 units	0 FTE	\$1.5 million – 2.5M  Land: \$1 million Build: \$1.5 million	\$75k
Fenced parking lot or open area, large warehouse, other vacant building	Moderate needs: single adults, adult couples, veterans		5 FTE		\$700k
Fenced parking lot or open area, large warehouse, other vacant building	High needs: single adults, adult couples, veterans		8 FTE		\$1M
Fenced parking lot or open area, large warehouse, other vacant building	Young adult singles and couples only / Senior (55+) adult singles and couples only/ Veterans only		8 FTE		\$1M

### **Option 3: Low Barrier Overnight Congregate Shelter**

**Definition:** Provides temporary housing in a communal setting with minimal requirements for entry, focusing on immediate access and support for individuals experiencing homelessness.

**Goals/Benefits:** Adding to goals listed in above options, increased community building, increased stability leading to greater opportunities, increased access to individualized services (case management, externally-provided supportive services on site), simplified and economic service delivery and facility management, opportunity for different accommodation types and multi-purpose rooms, could create home-like setting to enhance dignity of shelter guests, space that can be multiuse with adequate staffing (overnight and daytime), scalable.

**Considerations:** Lack of privacy with some designs, separation between populations with different needs could be more difficult, high cost due to staffing/supervision needs, reliance on external community partnerships (i.e. behavioral health services provided on site, pathways to education and employment), zoning laws and neighborhood resistance dividing large groups (over 50) into different spaces, staff needs and cost estimates do not include daytime operations.

**Examples:**

Location Details	Appropriate Populations	Capacity	Staff Needs	Estimated Start-up Cost	Estimated Annual Operational Cost
Bellingham or small cities	Young Adults (18-24) or Adults Only (25 and older)	50 people	8 FTE	\$2-5M	\$1M
Bellingham or small cities	Adults Only (25 and older)	100 people	15 FTE	\$10-15M	\$2M
Bellingham or small cities	Adults Only (25 and older)	200 people	20-25 FTE	\$15-20M	\$3M

**Option 4: Micro/Subpopulation Shelter(s)**

**Definition:** A shelter focused on serving a specific subpopulation of people experiencing homelessness—such as veterans, families with children, unaccompanied youth, survivors of domestic violence, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, or individuals with substance use or mental health challenges—by providing tailored accommodations, resources, and support services. A good example is the recent development of the YWCA shelter on Lakeway.

**Goals/Benefits:** Adding to goals in above options, community building, increased stability, increased access to individualized services (case management, supportive services), dignity – shelter is a basic human need, space and services are tailored to the subpopulation being served, less of an institutional feeling

**Considerations:** Non-traditional buildings (old motels, houses, 4-plexes), small cities with the greatest need, subpopulations with the greatest need, expand programs that already exist, zoning laws



Examples:

Location Details	Appropriate Populations	Capacity	Staff Needs	Estimated Start-up Cost	Estimated Annual Operational Cost
Could be in Bellingham, but there is a great need for shelters in small cities; non-traditional set ups (repurposing existing buildings like motels, offices)	Families with children, large families, people fleeing domestic violence (DV), pregnant people, people with SUD or SMI, young adults, youth/minors	8-20 households	5-8 FTE	\$3-6M	\$1M
Existing large single-family home with 5+ bedrooms	Families, survivors of DV, adults with mental illness; young adults, youth/minors, adults recovering from SUD	5-8 households	3-6 FTE	\$2-3M	\$800k
Existing small apartment complex (4-8 units)	Families, survivors of DV, adults with mental illness; adults recovering from SUD	5-8 households	3-6 FTE	\$3-4M	\$800k

Budget numbers for all of these options are estimates only, and would need modification and refinement based on the specific shelter model. If additional funding is made available, more specific recommendations on these four shelter types can be developed that look at what is possible given the available budget. The current priority should be to ensure the community does not lose any ground with regard to the existing day and overnight shelters, and current funding for affordable housing, in the midst of potential State, County, and City budget cuts.

This memo signifies the conclusion of the Shelter Subcommittee's work to deliver recommendations on expanding year-round shelter in Whatcom County. We appreciate the opportunity to make this recommendation to the Council, and are happy to provide more information or answer questions from Councilmembers.

On April 7, 2025 the above recommendations were forwarded to the WCHAC and the WCHAC approved the recommendations on May 8, 2025.