



What is SWISS?

We are a regional partnership of elected councilmembers, commissioners, and executives from Snohomish County, Whatcom County, Island County, Skagit County, and San Juan County. Our mission is to identify and collaboratively advance shared regional priorities that will improve the quality of life in our region's communities.

OUR PRIORITIES

Regional Awareness And Collaboration



To achieve enduring and meaningful outcomes for our counties, it is critical for SWISS counties to share information and knowledge, engage with regional partners, and collaboratively pursue opportunities that address our shared priorities.

Behavioral Healthcare

The Problem

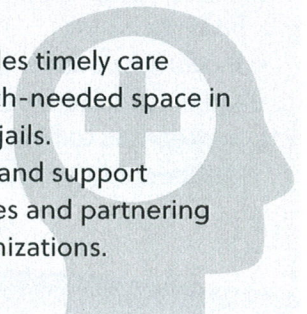
SWISS county residents do not have consistent and easily accessible quality behavioral healthcare services that achieve lasting outcomes, particularly for crisis stabilization, substance use disorder support, long-term care, and youth-focused care. We aim to address the challenges that are creating this issue:

- Insufficient funding to build, operate, and maintain care facilities.
- Limited qualified treatment professionals due to funding and complications with insurance and Medicaid.
- Inability to quickly identify an individual's behavioral health needs in a crisis situation.
- Lack of long-term, ongoing care, housing, or supervised living for patients who are transitioning out of care or with ongoing needs.

The Goal

SWISS communities have access to an accountable regional behavioral health care system that creates a humane and meaningful continuum of care from a patient's initial moment of need to a long-term, safe solution. This can be accomplished through:

- Stable, equitable funding.
- Systems that support timely access and sharing of a patient's behavioral healthcare history.
- Bed capacity that enables timely care without occupying much-needed space in other facilities, such as jails.
- Ongoing engagement and support between SWISS counties and partnering behavioral health organizations.



Broadband

The Problem

Large portions of our region, especially rural and small communities, lack reasonable access to affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband services. This essential utility would provide an equitable pathway to quality education, physical and behavioral health care, employment opportunities, economic growth, agricultural productivity, social connections, and other vital services which protect, inform, and empower residents in these communities. We aim to address the challenges that are creating this issue:

- Inequitable investments made in rural and small communities.
- Middle-mile and final-mile investments left to communities.
- Fragmented approach to deployment.
- Broadband availability assessment maps inaccurately portray the needs of small and rural communities.
- Policies preventing infrastructure development.

The Goal

SWISS Counties have equitable, affordable access to quality, reliable, high-speed broadband internet, especially in underserved and unserved areas. This can be accomplished through:

- Small and rural community investment incentives.
- Coordinated broadband planning efforts.
- Local authority that meets the needs of the region.

Multimodal transportation

The Problem

SWISS counties lack multimodal transportation options that are reliable, affordable, resilient, and environmentally sound. The lack of options impacts people's ability to work and commute, seek healthcare, engage in tourism and recreation, access healthy foods, engage in the regional economy, transport goods and supplies, and do so in an environmentally sustainable manner. We aim to address the challenges that are creating this issue:

- Ferry maintenance costs, vulnerability, and policies limiting variety.
- Inconsistent and unreliable funding.
- Lack of alternative fuel options.
- Susceptible to floods, earthquakes, and other disasters or transportation interruptions.

The Goal

Residents in our region have access to suitable, dependable, and timely transportation and mobility options which enable them to access work, recreation, healthcare, and other critical services. This can be accomplished through:

- Advocating for new, reliable funding with a unified voice.
- A more diverse and durable ferry fleet.
- Robust public transportation and interconnection system.



Legislative Actions Counties Support

Counties are regional governments providing many services residents cannot access from any other entity. The following policies will assist counties in delivering critical services, protecting public health and the environment, and supporting vibrant local communities.



Equal Access to Justice

“Given the existing low level of state funding and the increased costs identified to date, the State should increase the funding levels to cities and counties for public defense.”

– HOUSE JUDICIARY WORKGROUP ON MISDEMEANOR PUBLIC DEFENSE COSTS IN WASHINGTON STATE, 2014

Current Funding Structure:

- Washington counties pay over 96% of the cost of trial court public defense (\$174.7M /year)
- This is an unbalanced approach to funding our justice system
- Washington State is one of the lowest contributors nationally to public defense (40 out of 50)
- Nationally, 23 states fully fund public defense, and another 8 states fund more than 50%

The absence of state revenue, for such an obvious state mandate delegated to counties, leaves counties with no other option than to cut from other public health and safety services provided to our shared communities.

Counties support increased state funding for trial court public defense.

Growing Requirements:

- The Legislature and the Supreme Court have required counties to adopt new caseload standards for public defenders
- Costs to maintain staffing level consistent with the new standards have skyrocketed
- Caseload standards are likely to be reduced even further, resulting in even greater costs



Taking on the Behavioral Health Crisis

Counties are on the front lines of Washington’s behavioral health crisis. Our state has a shortage of mental health providers and a high demand for treatment. Counties need help to deliver what is needed most by some of our most vulnerable residents.

Actions counties support:

- Timely mental health evaluations, restorations, and treatment.
- Workforce investments and support.
- Investments in facilities, including operational funding.
- Authorize the CMS-approved 90-day Medicaid re-entry waiver for individuals leaving prison, jail, or juvenile detention facility.
- Affordable housing and support for released individuals.

WSAC POLICY CONTACTS

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Legislative Actions Counties Support



County Revenue Enhancement & Flexibility

Counties are the least financially diverse government system in the state, heavily dependent on property tax that is limited in annual growth to 1%, well below recent inflation. Other revenue sources, like penalty assessments, interest, and sales taxes, have been reduced through legislative action without replacements.

Counties support policies to increase and diversify county revenues and local flexibility in resource utilization. Statewide policies to eliminate or exempt fees and taxes should not impact local revenues.



Investments in Fish Passage Barrier Removal

Adequate resources are needed to remove over 8,000 locally-owned fish barriers across the state.

Counties need financial assistance to advance the state's goals for salmon recovery by replacing fish barriers.



Housing

Nearly every community needs more housing units now.

Counties support state investment in infrastructure that supports housing development and resources to assist local government in streamlining permitting systems and processes.



Broadband

Digital equity remains an issue for many county residents and an impediment to growth for many communities.

Counties need funding to support local project planning, business development services, and stakeholder and partner engagement for broadband.



Study to Assess Septage Treatment Capacity

Understanding existing treatment capacity and future needs is critical for infrastructure planning that supports housing and prevents environmental and resource contamination.

Counties support one-time funding to study septage treatment capacity.



Public Records Act Reforms

Counties are advocates for open government and transparency. Still, too many tax-payer resources are wasted responding to public records requests intended to harass, intimidate, and extract financial penalties from local governments.

Counties support working with stakeholders to reduce abusive public records requests and litigation.



Additional Corrections Officer Training Classes

More training is needed for county jail corrections officers than the current class offerings can support, and wait times can be up to a year, creating recruitment and retention challenges.

Counties support adding two additional Corrections Officer Academy classes in FY 24 and four additional classes in FY 25, ongoing.



Fully Fund All New County Responsibilities

The Legislature often passes policy that shifts, increases, or creates new costs for counties without providing new revenue. Unfunded and underfunded policy isn't effective or sustainable.

Counties support state action assuring adequate resources for all new requirements resulting from legislation.



October 16, 2023

Governor Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504

Honorable Governor Inslee:

Washington's counties look forward to working together as your administration proposes its supplemental 2023-2025 budgets. We made substantial progress last year in addressing many critical needs. As a major service provider for our shared constituents with significant responsibilities for implementing and enforcing the laws passed by the legislature and rules imposed by cabinet agencies, counties also struggle with insufficient resources in many critical areas. Improving county revenue through increased state revenue sharing, increased diversity in resource types, and enhanced authority are among our most specific priorities.

It should be no surprise that counties again request additional funding support to counties in your budget to ensure equitable public defense services. We have requested this funding and advocated for state support for several years. Counties cannot continue to fund this alone. We ask the state to live up to its commitment to the constitutional right to effective legal representation and address the inevitable systemic inequities in a system funded by disparately situated counties.

We have also reviewed the various state agency decision packages and ask that you support the following:

- Commerce's request to move resources from FY24 to FY25 to modernize local permit systems (\$3 million).
- Restoring funding for WDFW's forest health and fuel reduction strategy (\$2 million).
- Funding for two additional Corrections Officers Academy classes in FY24 and four in FY25 and ongoing as requested by the CJTC (\$2.5 million).
- Authorizing the expenditure of federal and state funding for 90-day pre-release for Medicaid and CHIP juvenile enrollees as requested by the HCA (\$121 million).
- Funding to cover the budget gap for medication for the treatment of opioid use disorder in jails (MOUD) program as requested by HCA (\$7.4 million).
- Funding to study the long-term effectiveness of the Recovery Navigator and Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion programs as requested by HCA (\$141,000).
- Funding for rate increases for individual-supported employment, group-supported employment, and community inclusion services as requested by DDA. (\$47.6 million).
- Funding for the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) program for the full months of service for early intervention services as requested by DCYF. (\$4.2 million).

- The County Road Administration Board requests to restore the Rural Arterial Trust Account balance and amend the funding source identified in the 23-25 transportation budget for the Federal Fund Facilitators Program (\$4.4 million).
- Establish a public and tribal nation cooperative to provide planning expertise from a neutral entity, supporting the development of public broadband network investments for unserved and underserved locations as requested by Commerce (\$4 million).
- Commerce's request to implement the federal NTIA BEAD Internet for All program (\$245.6 million).
- Funding in the Capital Budget for the Salmon Recovery Funding Board Grant Program projects as requested by the Recreation and Conservation Office (\$20 million).

The following items were not included in the state agency requests, but we ask that you include them in your budget:

- Funding to conduct a one-time study of community septage treatment capacity to support population growth (\$250,000).
- Support for rule updates for the State Board of Health regarding school environmental health programs.
- Additional state-shared revenue in the Transportation Budget for the preservation and maintenance of the local transportation system.
- Extension of the new WSDOT Federal Fund Exchange Pilot Program in the Transportation Budget beyond a year.
- Full funding for the Brian Abbot Fish Barrier Removal Board projects listed in the State Capital Budget (estimated additional \$30 million this biennium).

Additional information about our support for the items listed in this letter is enclosed.

Thank you for being so supportive of Washington's counties. We have appreciated the relationship with you and your agencies during your terms in office. Please contact me if you have any questions or need further information.

Respectfully,



Eric Johnson, Executive Director

Enclosure

Cc: David Schumacher, Director, Office of Financial Management
 Jamila Thomas, Chief of Staff
 Senator June Robinson, Chair, Ways & Means
 Senator Lynda Wilson, Ranking Member, Ways & Means
 Representative Timm Ormsby, Chair, Appropriations
 Representative Chris Corry, Ranking Member, Appropriations

Commerce's Request to shift funding to FY25 for permit system modernization grants

\$3 million was appropriated for FY24 to support a grant program created by SB 5290 to assist local governments in digitizing their permitting systems. By utilizing modern technology, local governments can increase the efficiency of processing permits and enhance services and communication with applicants. This strategy is included as part of a broad approach to improve project permitting overall to assist in the construction of housing and other projects.

Restoring funding to WDFW's forest health and fuel reduction strategy

Unhealthy forests with excessive fuel loads on publicly owned lands threaten public health and safety and undermine our state's climate goals. The need for resources to address this issue statewide far exceeds this request. Without continued, steady investment, we will not effectively address the ecological health of these important landscapes while simultaneously reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

Additional Corrections Officers Academy (COA) classes

Pursuant to state statute, corrections officers must complete the required 10-week academy within the first six months of employment unless otherwise extended or waived by the Criminal Justice Training Commission (CJTC). There are currently four classes offered annually by the CJTC, comprising 30 students per class. This means there is space for 120 individuals to go through the COA each year. As of July 12th, the CJTC received 158 COA applications in calendar year 2023. This is an increase of 36 percent over the previous year. The CJTC estimates it will receive 270 applications by the end of the year. The current wait time from registration submission to academy start is 10-12 months. Therefore, the current number of classes is insufficient to meet increased demand. WSAC strongly supports CJTC's request to fund two additional COA classes in FY 24 and four additional COA classes in FY 25 and thereafter to meet this increased demand. This is especially critical as county jails face correction officer recruitment and retention difficulties exacerbated by the inability to get officers through the COA program.

Authorize state expenditure for the CMS-approved 90-day Medicaid re-entry waiver

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has approved Washington state's 90-day Medicaid re-entry waiver for re-entry and limited healthcare services for individuals leaving a prison, jail, or youth correctional facility beginning 90 days pre-release. This will include case management, discharge planning, medication-assisted treatment, and other healthcare and care coordination services. The State must authorize the expenditure of federal and state funding for those newly approved 90 days. This is critical funding for county jails as so many individuals are in custody with complicating factors such as substance use disorders that are incredibly costly to counties. Funding this waiver will help defray those costs.

Medication for the treatment of opioid use disorder (MOUD) in jails

Access to health care while incarcerated is critical to reducing repeat offenses, decreasing the costs of relapse, treating mental health, and crisis care. Sadly, Medicaid benefits are suspended

during incarceration, regardless of a finding of guilt, and counties are required to provide care. HCA has requested funding to sustain the 19 programs currently offering MOUD and to expand it across all 58 county, city, regional, and tribal jails in the state during the two years that the previously mentioned 90-day waiver goes through an implementation process. WSAC strongly supports this request to provide funding for this two-year gap.

Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) study of the Recovery Navigator Program (RNP) and Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion Program (LEAD)

The “Blake” bill, E2SSB 5536 (2023), passed during a special session, instructs HCA to contract with WSIPP to study the long-term effectiveness of the RNP and LEAD programs, with reports due every five years. The first report is due in 2028. The bill also requires WSIPP to assess the status of statewide RNPs and the degree to which the implementation of these programs reflects fidelity to the core principles of the LEAD program as established by the LEAD National Support Bureau. However, the legislature failed to fund these mandates. WSAC supports the funding of WSIPP to conduct this study and assessments.

Fully fund rates for individual-supported employment and community inclusion

Counties are the contractual provider and monitor of funding for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities from the Department of Social and Health Services Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) for individual-supported employment and community inclusion services. Until 2023, the rates for these services had not significantly increased for ten years. In a report requested by the Legislature, DDA found that the rates paid to employment and day providers were inadequate to cover their costs or maintain the infrastructure required to achieve and support client outcomes. DDA also reported that the complexity of county-administered programs has significantly increased over the past 30 years. The funding provided in 2023 is not maintaining the provider capacity needed to support service demand. The 2023 funding increase represents 75 percent of the provider costs and 62 percent for community inclusion. Fully funding the study recommendations is necessary to cover the actual costs and maintain the infrastructure and capacity required to achieve and support client outcomes. We encourage you to include this rate increase in your final budget package.

Close the gap in funding for the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) program

DCYF and local ESIT provider agencies are limited under current law from counting eligible children for the full number of months they receive services. If this proposal is funded, it will result in increased service levels, including services in rural communities, to ensure that all eligible infants, toddlers, and their families receive high-quality, comprehensive services that meet their individual needs and increase their potential for school readiness and participation in home and community life. This funding is important for the children and families in our communities.

Commerce's request for broadband planning expertise

Over the next five years, significant federal funding (1.2 billion) will be released to our state through the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment program. Intended to connect unserved and underserved communities with better access to the internet, this funding will often flow to project areas in communities represented by small and rural jurisdictions. Many local governments have indicated a lack of the staff expertise and capacity to manage or evaluate these grants and projects effectively. From network planning through construction and long-term operations, local decision-makers must have the tools and resources to evaluate proposals and project designs. They must know with confidence that proposals will benefit the maximum number of unserved and underserved residents in project areas, turning this once-in-a-generation opportunity into long-term reliable network assets. Please support the Department of Commerce's request to fund local broadband project planning, business development services, and stakeholder and partner engagement.

Septage Capacity Study and Assessment

Adequate capacity for septage treatment is critical for a community's well-being and the environment. The lack of capacity can result in illegal disposal and improper maintenance of on-site septic systems. This leads to poor water quality, downgraded shellfish beds, higher home disposal costs, and environmental contamination. Washington State must determine how much capacity it must treat and dispose of septage and ensure adequate infrastructure to support our population growth. We ask the Governor to include \$250,000 to conduct this one-time study, supporting this overlooked issue impacting water quality, housing costs, and development.

State Board of Health School Rule Proviso

Over the COVID-19 pandemic and with FPHS funding, local health jurisdictions have worked to strengthen their relationships with schools. Several local health jurisdictions have started school environmental health programs, and we need updated rules (Chater 246-366A WAC) to provide science-driven, uniform guidance and standards as more programs are started. An amended proviso similar to that from the 2023 Session (1140-PS AMH APP SMIL 007) will allow the State Board of Health to update the rules, targeting issues like air quality, laboratory and playground safety, drinking water, and ventilation.

Prioritize local transportation preservation and maintenance activities and programs

Counties believe the maintenance and preservation of our transportation system should be the foremost priority of transportation investments statewide. As owners of 50 percent of the transportation system, counties should receive a more equitable share of revenue designed to fund state-wide transportation needs. Please support additional state-shared revenue in the Transportation Budget for the preservation and maintenance of the local transportation system.

Local fish barrier removal projects

There are over 8,000 locally owned fish barriers, with an average cost of \$1.8 million to correct. With limited local resources available, your support to fully fund the Brian Abbot Fish Barrier Removal Board's (FBRB) project list in the Capital Budget is critical to progress on this issue. WSAC supports the FBRB's coordinated approach to identifying priority barriers, leveraging the benefits of other upstream and downstream fish passage investments, and efficiently advancing recovery. Completing all projects on the current list will restore access to another 250 miles of high-quality salmon habitat.

2024 LSC CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Session Begins – Monday, January 8 & Session Ends – Sunday, March 10

LSC Meeting – Thursday, January 4

12:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

Details: Lunch

Legislative Virtual Update – Friday, January 12

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

LSC Roundtable – Wednesday, January 17

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

LSC Meeting, Thursday, January 18

8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

Details: Coffee/Cont. Breakfast/Lunch

Legislative Virtual Update – Friday, January 26

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

LSC Reception – Wednesday, January 31

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Octapas Café – 610 Water Street SW – Olympia

LSC Meeting – Thursday, February 1

8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

Details: Coffee/Cont. Breakfast/Lunch

Legislative Virtual Update – February 9

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

LSC Roundtable – Wednesday, February 14

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

LSC Meeting – Thursday, February 15

8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

Details: Coffee/Cont. Breakfast/Lunch

Legislative Virtual Update – Friday, February 23

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

LSC Roundtable – Wednesday, February 28

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

LSC Meeting – Thursday, February 29

8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

WSAC Downstairs Conference Room

Details: Coffee/Cont. Breakfast/Lunch

Legislative Virtual Update – Friday, March 8

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.