



Winter 2024-25 Severe Weather Shelter After Action Report

WHATCOM COUNTY HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

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Administrative Handling Instructions

The title of this document is: **Winter 2024-25 Severe Weather Shelter After Action Report.**

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Contents

Administrative Handling Instructions	1
Contents	2
Executive Summary	3
Operationalize a facility to serve as a SWS.....	6
Improvements Made for '24-'25:	9
Recruit, train, and schedule staff to safely operate the SWS.....	10
Strengths:.....	13
Areas for Improvement:	14
Improvements Made:	15
Activate the SWS based on established temperature and weather-based criteria	16
Strengths:.....	16
Improvements Made:	18
Communicate out SWS operational status 48-hours before activation	19
Strengths:.....	19
Areas for Improvement:	19
Improvements Made:	20
Ensure safety and wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and guests	21
Areas for Improvement:	22
Improvements Made:	23
SWS Project Expenses.....	24
Recommendations	26
Appendix A: Scope and Methodology.....	28
Appendix B: Acronym List	29

Executive Summary

Context and Purpose of this Report

The number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Whatcom County has steadily increased since 2018, while the number of organizations that provide overnight sheltering during winter months has significantly decreased. In response, Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) has taken a larger role in severe weather sheltering—through increased funding, logistical support, and coordination.

According to the 2024 Annual Report on Homelessness, unsheltered homelessness remains high and greatly exceeds the number of available shelter beds. For the winters of '23-'24 and '24-'25, WCHCS operated severe weather shelters in Bellingham, despite shelter operations not traditionally being a core function of the department. When the prior year's location was unavailable for the 2024–25 season, WCHCS collaborated with partners to secure a new site, revise operating plans, recruit and train staff and volunteers, and directly oversee shelter operations—effectively designing, building, and operating a shelter from the ground up for the second year in a row.

This after-action report reviews WCHCS's operation of a criteria-based severe weather shelter during the 2024–25 winter season. Covering planning efforts in August 2024 and covers the period of shelter activation from November 2024 to March 2025. During this period, three primary shelters—Ferndale Community Services, WCHCS, and Lighthouse Mission Ministries—provided severe weather shelter beds. Additional capacity came from motel stays, coordinated and primarily funded by WCHCS and operated by partners including Opportunity Council, YWCA, DVSAS, and Lydia Place, which focused on families with children who could not be served in other shelters. While motel stays prioritized families with minors, the facility-based shelter beds were available to individuals, couples, and adult-only families.

Seasonal Bed Inventory

- WCHCS SWS - 80 beds
- FCS SWS - 15 beds
- LMM SWS Surge - 20 beds
- Supported motel rooms for Families with Children - 50 rooms

Incident Overview

In July of 2024, WCHCS published a Request for Proposal ([RFP# 24-82](#)) seeking qualified shelter operators for the coming winter. YWCA applied for funds to operate a seasonal motel program to provide shelter for women with children and was awarded \$98,158 to provide services and supplies to the households using motels. To support the rental of motel rooms, another \$264,000 was inserted into an existing contract with Opportunity Council to directly pay the costs of renting up to 18 rooms simultaneously over the winter for YWCA clients. Other funds had previously been committed to the other participating partners.

In the fall of 2024, Whatcom County committed approximately \$450,000 to support severe weather shelter operations in Bellingham. Budget estimates suggested this would be enough funding to operate for approximately 30 nights. Another \$150k from the City of Bellingham was committed to be available if the county's budget of \$450,000 was fully spent. A further \$1,200,000 had been committed in support of the seasonal motel-based sheltering program operated by Opportunity Council, YWCA, DVSAS, and Lydia Place. WCHCS dedicated up to \$120,000 to Ferndale Community Services to operate a criteria-based SWS for up to 15 individuals per night in Ferndale.

Estimated seasonal costs for the county-operated shelter in Bellingham were developed as a combination of fixed costs, costs incurred with each activation period, and nightly operating costs. Based on these estimated costs, it was

expected that the combined county and City of Bellingham funds (\$600,000) would be enough to operate the shelter for approximately 40 nights over the winter of '24-'25. Ultimately, only county funds were used to operate the SWS as costs did not exceed \$450,000.

In October, when it became clear that no organizations would be operating a criteria-based SWS within the Bellingham city limits, WCHCS staff began searching for a suitable shelter location in Bellingham while simultaneously recruiting and hiring temporary staff and volunteers. Plans were quickly developed to operationalize a SWS.

WCHCS found a partner in Lutheran Community Services Northwest and we were invited to rent a space at their site on 925 N. Forest St for use as a Severe Weather Shelter.

Planning for the operations of the SWS were guided by the following five objectives:

1. When the weather forecast criteria are met, operationalize a facility to serve as a SWS from November 1st to March 15th
2. Recruit, train, and schedule staff to safely operate the SWS when activation criteria are met.
3. Activate the SWS based on established temperature and weather-based criteria.
4. Communicate SWS operational status to partner agencies and the public at least 48 hours before activation.
5. Ensure safety and wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and guests.

Staff began assessing daily weather forecasts beginning on November 1st with plans to operate the SWS as needed based on the recently updated [SWS Guiding Assumptions](#). The Guiding Assumptions were revised for the 2024-25 winter season by a subcommittee of the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee. Over the next four months, staff, volunteers, and community partners worked collaboratively to help the SWS safely shelter guests between 4pm and 9am on the coldest nights of the year. The majority of days the SWS was open were in January and February when the shelter was open for 24 nights over a stretch of 33 days.

The shelter used a low-barrier model, with no ID or other identifying documents required for entry. All guests were required to sign an agreement to abide by the shelter rules, and depending on the severity of the rule violation, they could be exited from the program for a day, month, or whole season.

Analysis of Objectives

The following table includes the SWS project objectives and performance ratings for each objective as determined by the evaluation team.

Following this page are sections detailing strengths and areas for improvement for each of the five objectives listed. Strengths are identified throughout this section with numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) and areas for improvement are indicated with letters (A, B, C, etc.).

Any areas for improvement from the winter 2023-24 season that were implemented in the winter 2024-25 season are noted under the *improvements made* section.

Summary of Objectives

Objective #	Objectives	Performed without Challenges (P)	Performed with Some Challenges (S)	Performed with Major Challenges (M)	Unable to be Performed (U)
1	Operationalize a facility to serve as a SWS from 11/01/24 through 3/15/25.		S		
2	Recruit, train, and schedule staff to safely operate the SWS when activation criteria are met.			M	
3	Activate the SWS based on established temperature and weather-based criteria.			M	
4	Communicate SWS operational status to partner agencies and the public at least 48 hours before activation.		S		
5	Ensure safety and wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and guests.			M	

Performed without Challenges (P): The targets and critical tasks associated with the objective were completed and did not negatively impact the performance of other activities. Performance of this activity did not contribute to additional health and/or safety risks for the public or for staff and volunteers, and it was conducted in accordance with applicable plans, policies, procedures, regulations, and laws.

Performed with Some Challenges (S): The targets and critical tasks associated with the objective were completed and did not negatively impact the performance of other activities. Performance of this activity did not contribute to additional health and/or safety risks for the public or for staff and volunteers, and it was conducted in accordance with applicable plans, policies, procedures, regulations, and laws. However, opportunities to enhance effectiveness and/or efficiency were identified.

Performed with Major Challenges (M): The targets and critical tasks associated with the objective were completed but some or all of the following were observed: demonstrated performance had a negative impact on the performance of other activities; contributed to additional health and/or safety risks for the public or for staff and volunteers; and/or was not conducted in accordance with applicable plans, policies, procedures, regulations, and laws.

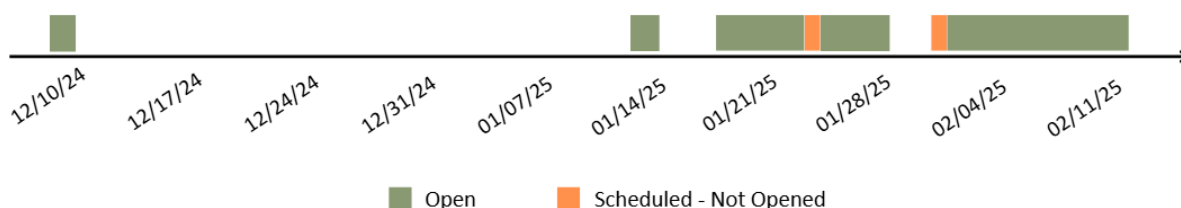
Unable to be Performed (U): The targets and critical tasks associated with the objective were not performed.

Operationalize a facility to serve as a SWS

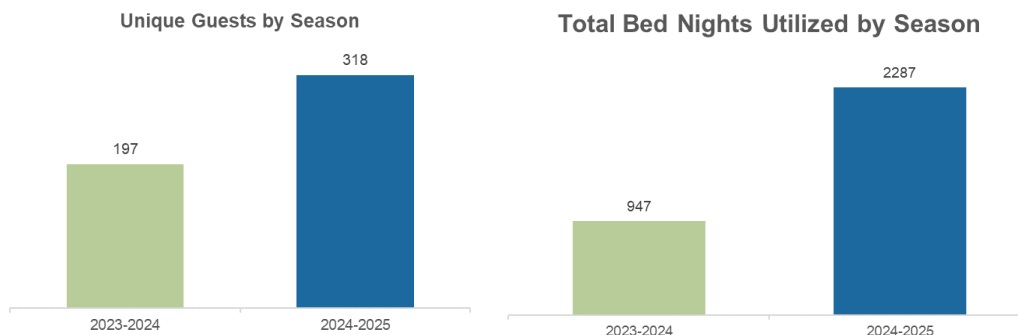
The building used for the WCHCS SWS 2023-2024 was demolished in the summer of 2024. Additionally, several other SWS and winter shelter options were explored but determined to be inappropriate due to a variety of factors, including landlord reluctance, inadequate facilities, and community opposition.

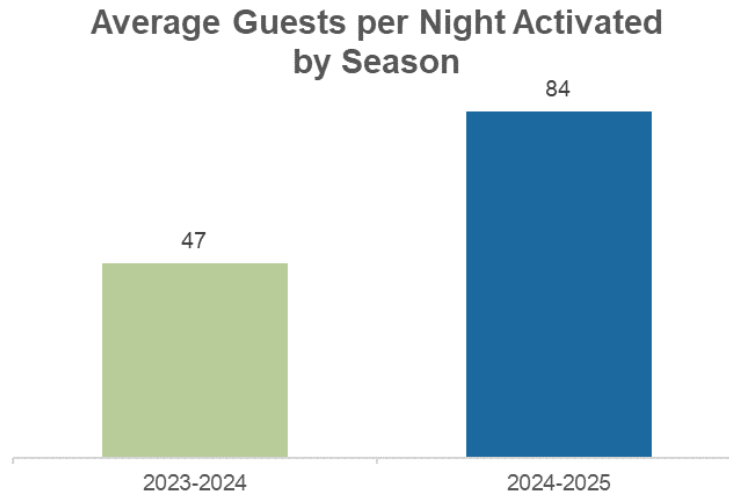
In August of 2024, WCHCS staff met with Lutheran Community Services NW and began discussions about renting a large space they owned to use for the SWS. A [lease contract](#) was finalized and submitted to County Council on November 6th with a retroactive start date of November 1. By mid-November, the SWS site was fully set up and ready for operations, approximately two weeks behind schedule, but before weather conditions would have triggered a shelter activation.

Winter 2024-2025 Shelter Operation Timeline



The SWS operated for 26 nights between November 2024 and March 2025. 318 unique guests utilized the SWS for one or more nights, and the total number of bed nights utilized over all activations was 2,287. There was an average of 84 guests per night of operations. In comparison to the 2023-2024 WCHCS SWS, there was a 60% increase in the number of households served and more than twice as many bed nights provided.

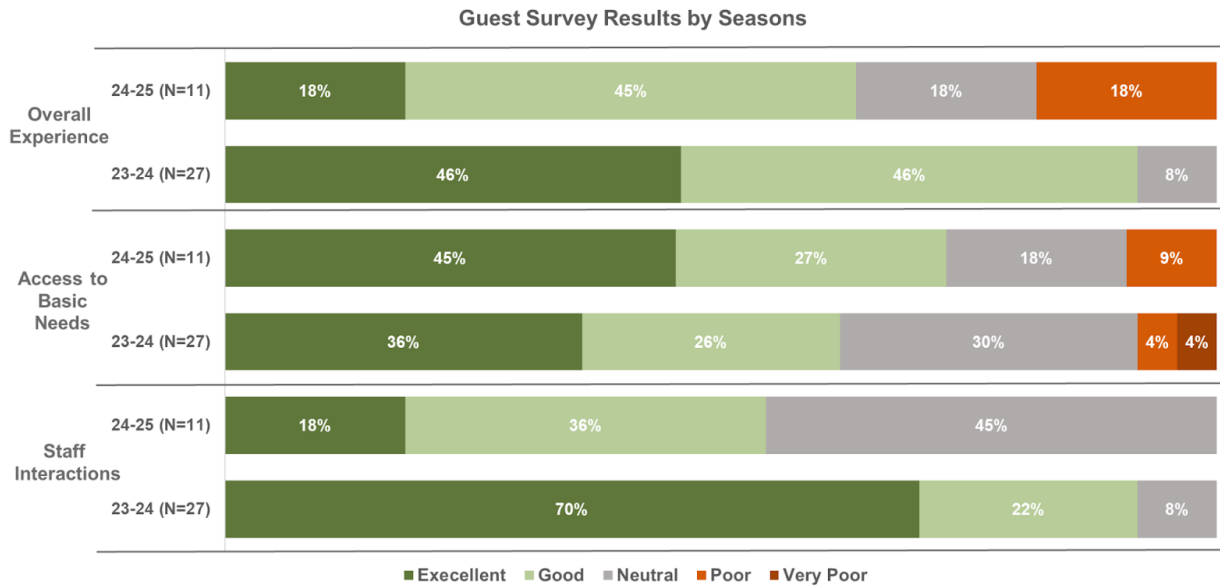




Despite the season's El Niño winter, which typically brings cooler temperatures, Whatcom County experienced milder weather compared to the previous year. Although the temperature threshold for activating the SWS was raised from 28°F to 32°F, the shelter was only open six more nights than the 20 it had been open in 2023–2024.

Strengths:

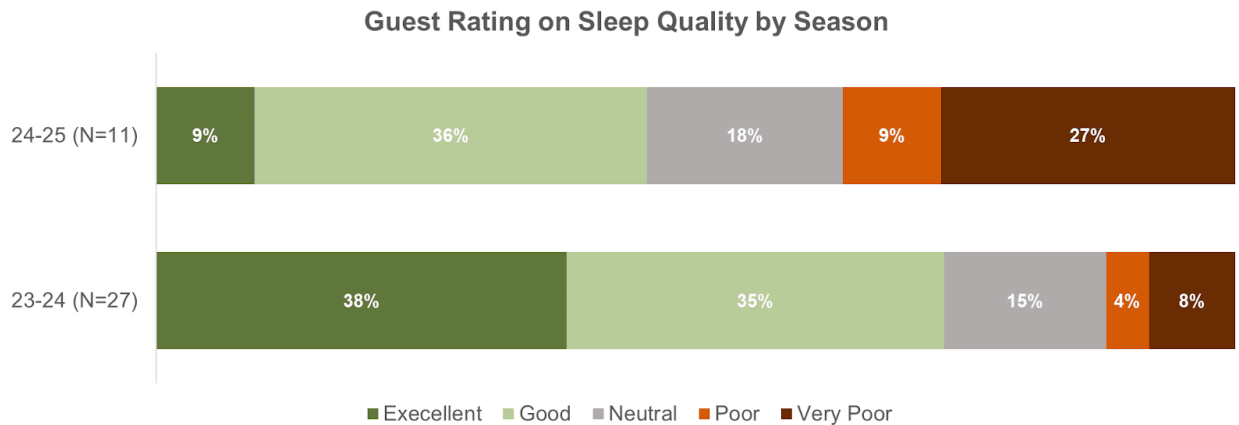
1. The facility utilized for the SWS during the 2024–2025 season represented a significant upgrade, offering more space, indoor restrooms, and a kitchen area that enabled hot meal service. Dinners often included bread, fruit, and hot soup, some of which was provided through a partnership with the Sustainable Connections Food Recovery Program. This initiative collects surplus food from the Bellingham School District, freezes it, and redistributes it to community organizations. Breakfast typically consisted of coffee, oatmeal, cereal, and fresh fruit.
2. The new shelter facility enabled us to separate the sleeping quarters from the check in area. The sleeping quarters remained dark through the night and earplugs were provided to aid in sleep quality.
3. SWS staff made prolonged connections resulting in guest referrals to services such as detox, medical care, and coordination to scheduled appointments. Transportation was available through WCHCS's Response Systems Division staff, and the Alternative Response Team van provided 126 rides after the SWS closed for the day. Expanding on transportation service in future SWS operations will likely reduce the stress experienced by guests leaving the SWS on cold mornings.
4. Surveyed guests (n=11) reported overall positive experiences at the SWS, with access to basic needs receiving the highest ratings. This was a change from last year where the highest rating was staff interactions. Some contributing factors noted by guests were improvements made around food and bathroom access. As noted in the prior year, guests again appreciated the SWS being located on a Whatcom Transit Authority (WTA) bus route.



5. Donated clothing, food, and bedding from generous community members were vital resources for guests. WCHCS staff leaned heavily on donated items to offer clean and dry clothes to those that arrived cold and wet. This reduced our cost to purchase items for this purpose.

Areas for Improvement:

- A. The facility wasn't identified until late August. The short timeframe of approximately two months from entering discussions with the LCSNW to fully executing the lease and completing all required building code modifications prior to our target start date of November 1st was not achieved. Fortunately, weather patterns kept this from becoming a significant problem. The missed target serves as a reminder that searching for a new space every year is an extensive process that creates instability and uncertainty in preparing an SWS.
- B. Surveyed guests (n=11) reported that their sleep quality was worse in this season's SWS than previous years. Guests noted that the increased number of guests (from an average of 45 to an average of 84) in the shelter made it challenging to sleep among more people who were at times sick, coughing, snoring, or active through the night. Despite efforts to maximize the utilization of space, resting quarters had 3-4 ft between most cots. These tight quarters allowed a great number of people to be sheltered, but made restful sleep difficult.



- C. Guests noted that lack of daytime options was challenging. The SWS location required them to walk across town to access daytime services provided at other locations, often in very cold weather. Some neighbors of the shelter expressed concerns and frustration with the presence of individuals experiencing homelessness in residential and commercial areas and litter left behind on sidewalks.

Improvements Made for '24-'25:

- For the '23-'24 season, only one indoor restroom was available for guests and staff. In '24-'25, there were five indoor restroom stalls and a staff-only restroom.
- Hot nutritious food was available in '24-'25, replacing the hot-water activated meals (cup of noodles and other dehydrated foods) used the prior year. Over 4,570 meals were served in the 26 days the SWS was open in '24-'25.
- Partition barriers were added to create a level of privacy and separation between population groups. The room was sectioned into 5 areas – ADA accessible, male identifying, female identifying, 18-24 age group, and family (adults only) units.
- Volunteer doctors and nurses donated time to serve shelter guests. In addition to services performed by RSD staff, the volunteer medical team provided basic wound care, medication refills, and consultation on medical concerns. 85 appointments for medical or wound care support were completed on site at the SWS by the volunteer medical outreach team.
- Food and supplies handling logistics were simplified. In '24-'25, food orders were placed online and safely delivered directly to the site with support from the host agency (LCSNW). This greatly reduced staff time in stocking pantries and supplies at the SWS.
- Hours of operation were extended with the shelter opening an hour earlier and remaining open an hour later (4pm to 9am for the '24-'25 season). This gave more time for guests to rest and for daytime temperatures to rise before morning discharge.

Recruit, train, and schedule staff to safely operate the SWS

Creating a safe, inclusive, and welcoming shelter environment requires staff and volunteers not only to understand the lived experiences of guests, but also receive comprehensive training to respond to a variety of behaviors and situations. This includes instruction in trauma-informed care, recognizing and responding to behavioral and substance use disorders, de-escalation techniques, and essential emergency response skills such as first aid, CPR, and naloxone administration. To ensure this standard, WCHCS implemented a training program for both paid and volunteer staff who would work onsite at the SWS.

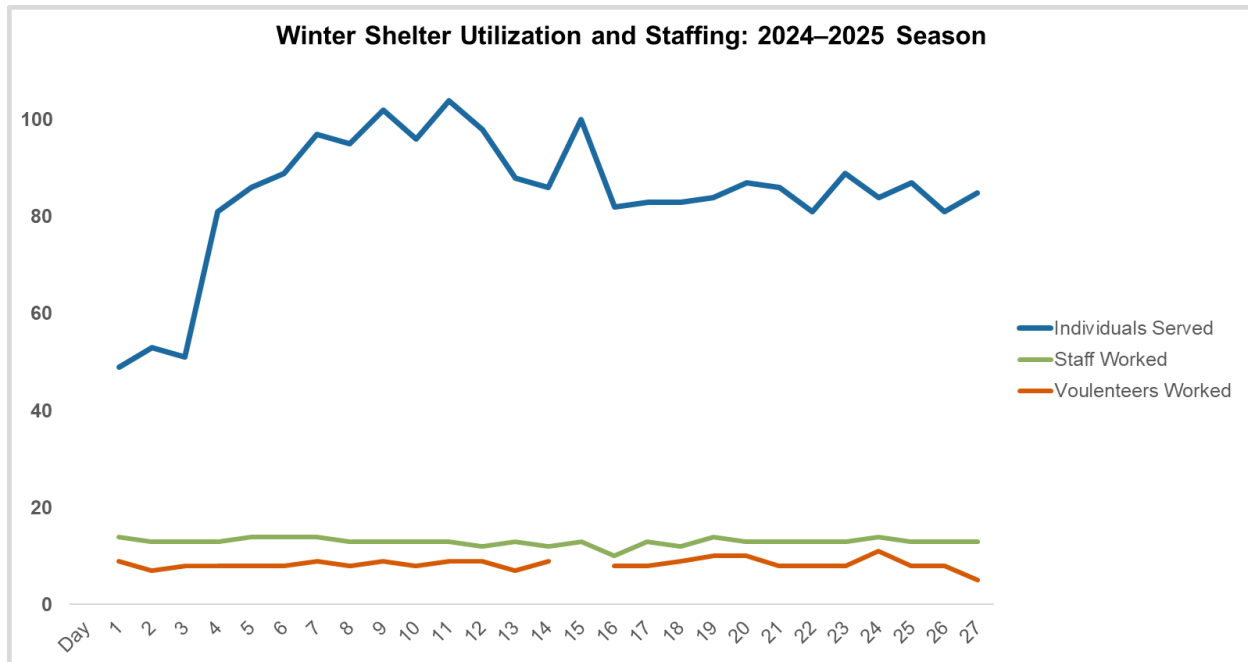
Recruitment of volunteers began in the fall and used a partnership with the Volunteer Center at Opportunity Council to market the volunteer opportunity. Throughout the season, the Volunteer Center staff aided filling shifts in the evening (from 5pm – 9pm) and morning (6:30am – 9:30am) to support opening and closing the shelter.

With support from the county's Human Resources Department, WCHCS staff reviewed applications, coordinated interviews, conducted reference checks, and selected, trained, and scheduled staff for the SWS season. Additional WCHCS staff, such as the communications team and clerical team, also reprioritized existing workloads to support communication and logistical support needs of the SWS. The payroll processing team created 20 new timesheets and added review and processing of those timesheets to their routine duties for the winter.

WCHCS full time employees (FTEs) were invited to complete the SWS training regimen and sign up for shifts on an as-needed/if available basis in the event that not enough temporary staff and volunteers were available.

Among these WCHCS staff, a corps of six selected "shift-lead" staff took responsibility to act as supervisors during all 54 SWS shifts (two per night). Five of the six shift leads were staff working in RSD and reduced their normal caseloads in order to perform critical duties at the shelter. The other shift lead was from WCHCS's housing program and worked with a reduced administrative capacity over the winter.

In total, eighty-eight individuals (43 volunteers, 20 temporary staff, and 25 WCHCS full-time staff) worked one or more shifts during the twenty-six nights the SWS was open. WCHCS staff worked hundreds of hours, including nights and weekends, supporting the selection, onboarding, training, logistical, communication, and operational needs of the SWS throughout the season.



Temporary Staff

When the RFP for shelter operators closed in October 2024 without applicants to operate a low-barrier shelter for adults, WCHCS staff launched a recruitment effort to build operational capacity. Recruitment for the SWS ended in December of 2024. The individuals selected demonstrated during their interviews an ability to effectively engage with the population expected to utilize the SWS. One of the most critical qualities we prioritized was the capacity to remain calm and composed in crisis situations. Social service work, and especially work with people experiencing homelessness, was preferred but not required. As a result of the recruitment efforts:

- 54 individuals applied to work at the SWS
- 23 temp staff were offered a position
- 21 completed the training regimen
- 20 worked one or more shifts at the SWS

Whatcom County Staff

The pool of individuals we were able to hire did not include individuals with advanced skills and experience working with populations impacted by behavioral health disabilities, and with an estimated 5-6 staff needed for each of the shifts in an operating night, it was projected that additional staff would be needed to keep the SWS operating for an extended activation period of more than a few days.

WCHCS first reached out to internal staff to assess willingness to complete the training required to work at the SWS. Staff were informed that participation required prior approval from their direct supervisor, and that they would be expected to flex their schedules to accommodate this additional responsibility, aiming to limit overtime. A mix of WCHCS staff with varying levels of experience chose to undergo training and join the shelter team.

Whatcom County staff were designated as a last-resort option for filling open SWS shifts due to conflicts with other job duties and generally higher rates of pay, especially when charged as overtime or during weekends. However, over the course of the season, temporary staff faced mounting challenges such as illness, scheduling conflicts, and burnout from working multiple consecutive shifts that were required during prolonged activation periods. As a result,

WCHCS staff were called upon to fill a greater number of shifts than originally anticipated, which resulted in higher-than-average staffing costs and greater conflict with other non-shelter work duties.

A total of 25 WCHCS staff worked one or more shifts at the SWS, including the six who served as designated shift leads. Those shift leads worked more than fifty combined shifts, and also met regularly to improve coordination and consistency in operations, and to make adjustments over the course of the season. Staff from multiple divisions—including Health and Community Services, Environmental Health, Communicable Disease and Epidemiology, and Response Systems— increasingly contributed to coverage at the SWS over the course of the season.

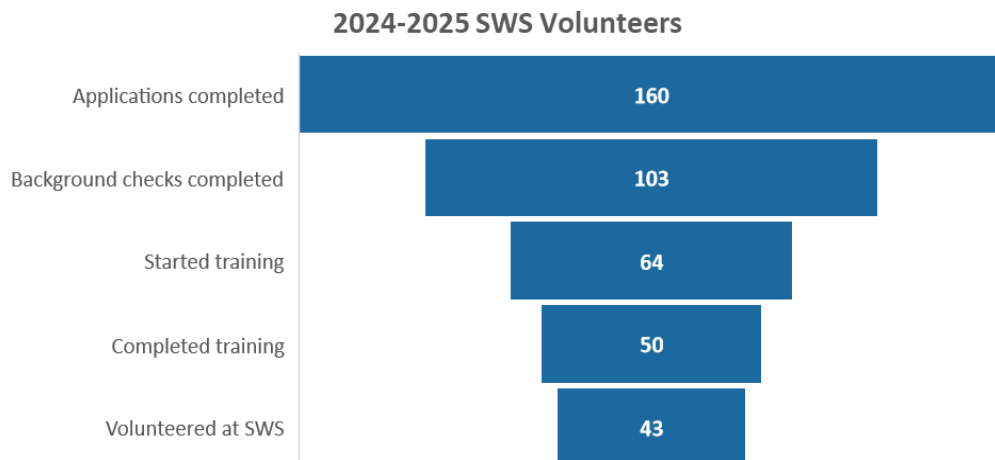
Of the 25 WCHCS staff that worked full shifts at the SWS, 12 were Response Systems staff who brought extensive experience of working with the population that was accessing the SWS. These staff shifted their primary work in GRACE, ART and LEAD to provide staffing at the SWS. Additional RSD staff would assist with transportation and supporting guests in leaving the SWS in the morning beyond those that took overnight shifts.

Response Systems staff are well-suited for SWS work as they are familiar to many of the unsheltered guests, have experience with de-escalation and resource navigation, and are generally prepared to be working with the population. But support for the shelter had a negative impact on this division's core functions, and ongoing reliance on Response Systems staff for shelter operations is not a sustainable way to operate the shelter. Due to the change in duties, Response Systems programs were disrupted by paused program referrals and the need to reduce other daily operations and work hours during weeks when the SWS was activated.

Volunteers

In November 2024, WCHCS entered into a contract with Opportunity Council's Volunteer Center to assist with the onboarding and management of volunteers for the SWS.

- 160 completed the volunteer application
- 103 completed background checks and onboarding paperwork
- 64 started required trainings
- 50 completed training package
- 43 completed 1 or more shifts at the SWS



Training

All paid staff (both seasonal temp workers and regular WCHCS employees) were required to complete over 21 hours of training prior to being scheduled for shifts at the SWS. Staff from various county departments—including EMS, Finance, Human Resources, and Health and Community Services (HCS)—contributed countless hours to support the onboarding and training process.

Volunteers were required to complete 13 hours of training before participating in SWS operations. The Opportunity Council's Volunteer Center facilitated volunteer screening and onboarding (as well as scheduling) through a contract with WCHCS at a cost of approximately \$8,000.

Training Curriculum

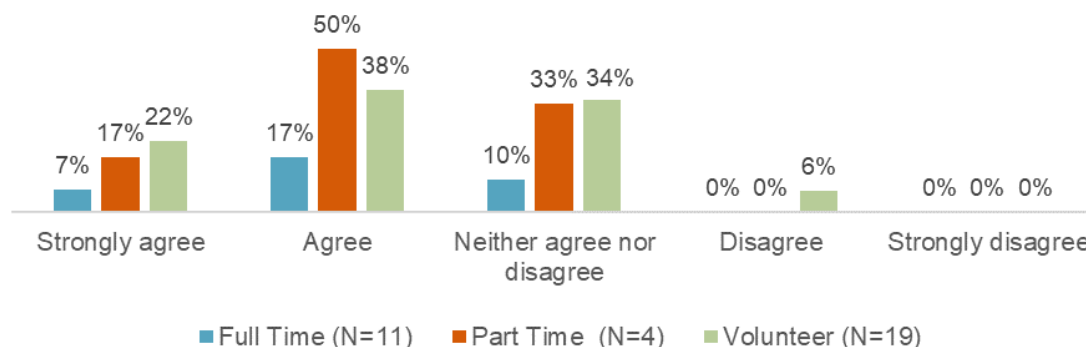
- CPR/First Aid/Overdose Reversal - (8 hours, paid staff only)
 - Provided by EMS staff Steve Cohen in-person with additional online components
- Crisis Prevention and De-escalation - (8 hours)
 - Provided by WCHCS staff Michaela Mandala in-person with additional online components
- Respond Whatcom (introduction to local behavioral health resources) - (4 hours)
 - Self-paced online resource created by WCHCS staff
- Policies, procedures, and site walkthrough - (1 hour)
 - Provided by SWS shift leads

A handful of returning staff and volunteers from the previous year were only required to complete a site walkthrough as part of their training.

Strengths:

1. WCHCS staff were instrumental in facilitating both the online behavioral health training and the hybrid de-escalation training that all staff and volunteers completed prior to being scheduled for SWS shifts. Additionally, the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Division facilitated first aid/CPR/Naloxone training. In our surveying of part time staff, most respondents agreed that the behavioral health, de-escalation, and CPR/first aid trainings were effective.

Training & Preparation

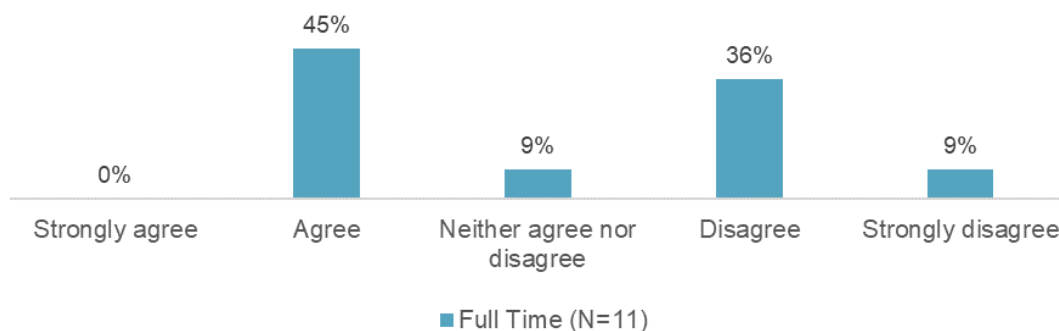


2. Through surveying 34 volunteers, temp staff, and WCHCS staff all reported that they felt the experience working at the SWS was overwhelmingly positive. Multiple staff noted they felt proud of the work they did at the SWS.

Areas for Improvement:

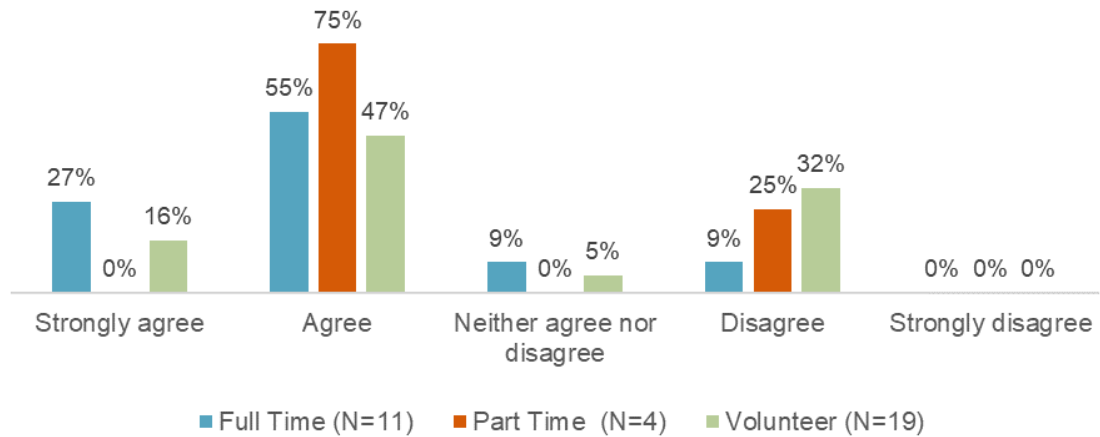
- A. Although training was viewed positively, there were requests to integrate practical or scenario-based training.
- B. Staff expressed that there is an extensive emotional challenge of asking guests to leave or turning away guests when the shelter reached capacity because there was nowhere else to go, despite life-threatening weather conditions. Calls for daytime options were consistent from guests, staff, and community members.
- C. All SWS staff were scheduled for 10-hour shifts; however, WCHCS staff often found it difficult to commit to these extended hours after working regular shifts with their day jobs. As a result, there were requests to divide shifts into shorter "rush hour" segments to provide coverage during check-ins and discharges without requiring a full 10-hour commitment. While this approach presented significant scheduling challenges, it was at times the only viable option to ensure adequate staffing and keep the site operational.
- D. Leads were expected to alter their regular schedules and spend a quarter of their work week dedicated to SWS prep and operations. Realistically, when the SWS was operating, leads shifted over half their work time to focus on the SWS. Lead staff regularly were working 50-60 hours weekly in an attempt to balance their regular job duties on top of the SWS work. As a result, this often meant overtime costs were incurred and/or regular work duties were delayed. Other staff working at WCHCS also experienced being pulled from their primary duties, with Response Systems Division, Housing Program, and Communications being most significantly impacted.

Level of Agreement That Winter Shelter Significantly Affected Existing Workload



- E. Although shift leads made efforts to maintain cross-shift communication through weekly meetings and ongoing updates, the demands of overnight shifts combined with daytime responsibilities made sustained and centralized communication difficult as schedules quickly lost regularity in response to inconsistent weather-based shelter operations. Feedback from temporary staff and volunteers highlighted inconsistent messaging related to SWS rules and policies being updated without alignment across shift leads. In some cases, this contributed to confusion and frustration among staff, volunteers, and guests.

Shift Expectations



- F. During the season, there were two days when temperatures were projected to be at or below 32 degrees and the shelter was unable to open due to unfilled shifts. While extensive efforts were made to open the shelter on those days, WCHCS was unable to secure staffing with adequate notice and could not confidently operate safely without a full roster of staff. Both instances occurred following long, continuous stretches during which the SWS had remained open for extended periods. At the time, several staff members had contracted illness or had already worked multiple consecutive shifts, which contributed to the inability to provide appropriate coverage.
- G. Training a large number of staff and volunteers requires significant time and resources, especially given the training standards needed to support the low-barrier population served at the SWS. A strong training foundation is critical for ensuring safety and effectiveness. However, because the training duties fell upon the same WCHCS staff that were responsible for operations, there could be no training conducted mid-season when direct operation support was most needed. Future operations should have additional staff to divide responsibilities, support program sustainability and adaptability, and decrease reliance on specific individuals.

Improvements Made:

- The addition of a larger supervisory structure by adding the shift leads created more stability for onsite staff who reported that they felt that the leadership structure was clear and reliable for staffing challenging situations and responding to crises.
- Addition of staff break areas and bathrooms added comfort and safety.

Activate the SWS based on established temperature and weather-based criteria

Operating an SWS based on forecasted weather conditions necessitates a decision to operate be made with sufficient advance notice to allow time to schedule staff and volunteers, confirm services with contracted agencies (such as security), inform partner agencies (such as homeless outreach groups and first responders), and notify the public and potential guests of which night(s) the SWS will be open. The goal for this winter was to continue to announce activations with at least 48 hours of advance notice.

The SWS Guiding Assumptions were reviewed and revised for the 2024-25 winter season, with a warmer threshold temperature, which moved opening conditions from at or below 28°F in the prior year to at or below 32°F over the winter of 2024-25. This had consistently been suggested as an improvement to SWS operations, but had to be weighed against the increased operational costs and other challenges associated with a raising of threshold.

WCHCS staff continued to experience the challenge of shifting weather forecasts use to make and communicate decisions about shelter activations.

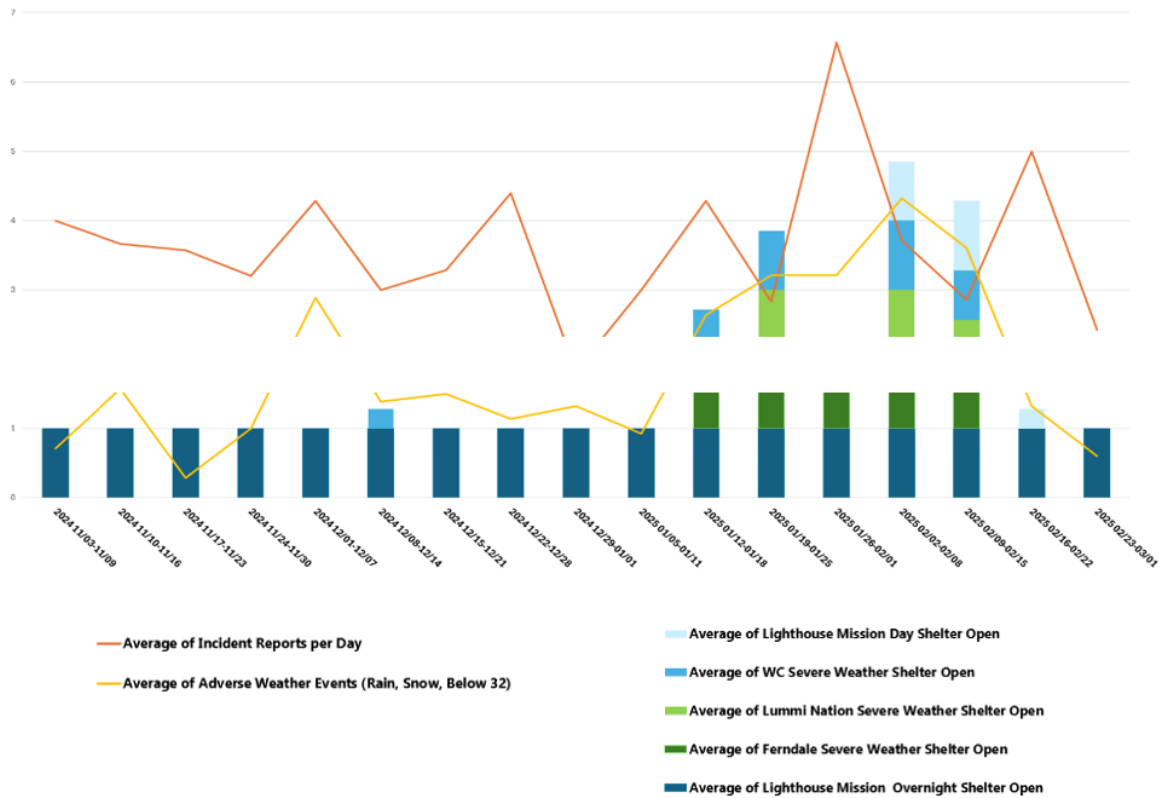
Strengths:

1. Effective coordination among WCHCS teams ensured that all divisions remained informed and engaged in weather monitoring and shelter activation procedures. Regular weekly meetings during non-activation periods were supplemented by short daily briefings during activations and promoted consistent communication and operational alignment across all divisions.

Areas for Improvement:

- A. Scheduling under this model is extremely challenging as the staff hired to work at the SWS are on-call and usually cannot plan their shifts more than a few days in advance. Both volunteers and paid staff prefer advanced notice of scheduled SWS shifts. Inconsistent operational schedules create uncertainty and confusion for guests.
- B. Part of the SWS assumptions and staffing model assumes that activations will be short bursts and rarely exceed a few days of continuous operations. However, weather patterns over the winter of 24-25 led to an average activation period of greater than five nights (including a stretch of twelve consecutive nights), which strained staffing and operations under the current model.
- C. On nights when the SWS was closed, the Bellingham Public Library branch saw heavier usage, and crisis incidents increased or decreased in correlation with SWS availability. The below chart, provided by library staff, demonstrates spikes in the number of incidents reported during weeks with fewer nights of SWS operations.

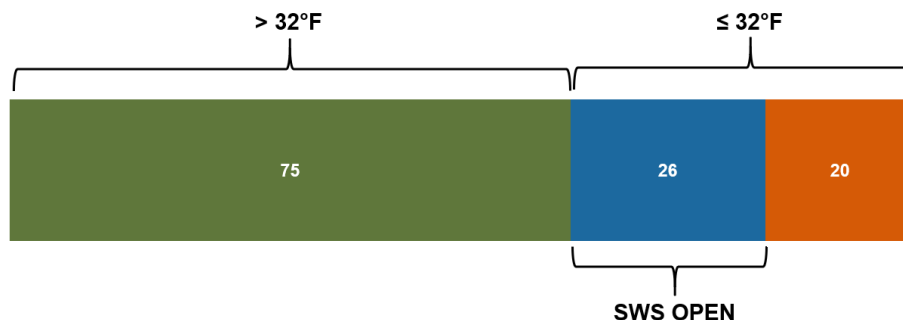
November 2024-February 2025 - BPL Incident Reports, Adverse Weather Events, and Shelter Availability*



*All data is shown as daily averages for the weekly periods displayed on the graph

- D. Forecasted temperatures can vary significantly from actual overnight conditions, creating two key challenges: (a) activation of services when temperatures remain above the threshold, and (b) failure to activate when forecasts suggest safe conditions but observed temperatures drop below the threshold. Between November 15, 2024, and March 15, 2025, using a model that forecasts up to 48 hours in advance, we attempted to activate services on 28 days. Of those, we had sufficient staff to activate on 26 days. However, a closer look at observed temperatures during the same period shows that there were actually 46 days when temperatures dropped below 32°F (shown below). This highlights the difficulty of relying on forecast models to accurately predict overnight lows and resulted in 20 “misses” when the shelter was not activated despite conditions that met opening criteria.

November 15 2024 - March 15 2025 Nightly Actual Overnight Low Temperature Counts



- E. The shelter's primary activation criteria were overnight temperatures, but more nuanced considerations could be lifesaving. Winter shelters are designed to prevent unnecessary morbidity and mortality from hypothermia—conditions influenced not just by temperature. As noted by stakeholders in the 2023-2024 AAR, “Rainy and windy at 34°F feels much worse than clear and dry at 28°F.”
- F. The shelter was open for a total of 17 hours with each operation (from 4pm-9am). Through surveying SWS guests, multiple individuals requested more programming like events or activities to fill the extra time. Suggestions included entertainment like a TV, music, and art supplies. These tools can also be helpful to keep individuals occupied, build community and reduce conflict. On Super Bowl Sunday, staff were able to set up a viewing, but providing entertainment was generally limited due to space constraints and staff being busy with other operating tasks.

Improvements Made:

- Increased the temperature threshold for activation from 28F to 32F which expanded sheltering during lethal weather conditions.

Communicate out SWS operational status 48-hours before activation

Communication is an inherent challenge when the shelter is only open based on temperature thresholds. It was not always clear to the general public and potential guests which night(s) the SWS would be open based on fluctuating temperature projections over the two to five days ahead of a given night. This challenge will continue as long as SWS opening is based on ever-shifting criteria like weather forecasts, and was further complicated toward the end of the season when securing the minimum number of staffs often came with little more than 48 hours of notice.

For the 2023-2024 SWS season, the Communications Team created a comprehensive email distribution list of partner agencies, first responders, and governments to send information about activations and related information pertaining to winter shelter. In 2024-2025, this concept was expanded to allow the public to subscribe for digital updates, and messages were sent via email and text, as well as being published on the County's winter shelter webpage. This new self-subscribe feature was promoted on social media throughout the winter season and helped tap into informal networks that shared information more broadly than in the previous year. Feedback was positive.

Other approaches to outreach, such as print materials and social media posts, were maintained from the previous winter.

Strengths:

1. Partner survey communications feedback was highly positive. Most respondents agreed that notifications about shelter openings were timely.
2. Coordination with community partners improved significantly this year. WCHCS convened and facilitated bi-weekly meetings with other winter shelter providers to discuss challenges and align services. When the SWS reached capacity and could not admit additional guests, coordination with Lighthouse Mission Ministries (LMM) supported WCHCS-provided transportation to LMM for shelter.
3. Partner agencies, City of Bellingham officials, Bellingham Police Department, EMS, and SWS staff were invited to tour the new SWS site prior to opening. This increased knowledge allowed partners to better communicate about the space to potential guests and coworkers.
4. WCHCS partnered with the Sustainable Connections Food Recovery Program to take excess food from the Bellingham School District for dinner service, reducing food costs and increasing food quality and variety.
5. The guests surveyed said they heard of shelter options primarily through word of mouth from service providers. Communication was accurate and worked well for their needs. This was also consistent with feedback from the previous winter's operations and with feedback about how unhoused people generally receive trusted information.

Areas for Improvement:

- A. Public discourse and feedback on the shelter increased during the winter. Staff were unable to respond to this feedback in a timely way because many WCHCS were occupied with working overnight shifts at the shelter, scheduling shifts, and overseeing donations and supply orders. Recommendation: Hire or dedicate another person to community outreach and feedback during the winter when other SWS staff are engaged full-time in operations.
- B. LMM reported that when the SWS was open, they saw a dip in the number of guests staying at their facility. This may be due to personal preferences and/or because the SWS opened earlier in the evening than LMM, so guests would attempt to get a bed at the SWS where they could remain sheltered for a longer period.

Improvements Made:

- Following consultation with partners in Fall 2024, the phone-based shelter hotline was discontinued for the 2024–2025 winter season. The hotline had presented several operational challenges in the previous year, including the fact that the phone number and its automated system were not owned by Whatcom County, requiring County staff to operate hardware managed by a third-party agency. No concerns or complaints were received regarding the discontinuation throughout the winter season. Notification of shelter openings transitioned to a text and email-based system, which received positive feedback during subsequent feedback sessions.
- Added SWS/winter shelter provider meeting hosted by WCHCS to coordinate efforts throughout the winter.

Ensure safety and wellbeing of staff, volunteers, and guests

Staff worked to maintain a careful balance between operating a low-barrier, inclusive, and trauma-informed facility—providing a warm, dry, and safe overnight space for unhoused individuals—and ensuring the overall safety and wellbeing of all guests, staff, and volunteers.

The staff-to-guest ratio was determined by staffing availability, with a minimum required ratio of 1 staff member per 15 guests to meet safety standards. Due to the high acuity of the population served at the SWS, a larger staff was needed to manage crisis response. With an average of 84 guests per night (and as many as 100 guests there non-consecutively), staff typically included six staff members per shift. Each shift (1st and 2nd) had a shift lead who was an WCHCS staff person with direct experience working with people with behavioral health disabilities. In addition, up to four volunteers regularly assisted with each meal service, providing dinner in the evening and breakfast in the morning. WCHCS contracted for onsite security during activations with an average of two security guards on site and an additional patrol around the neighborhood each night.

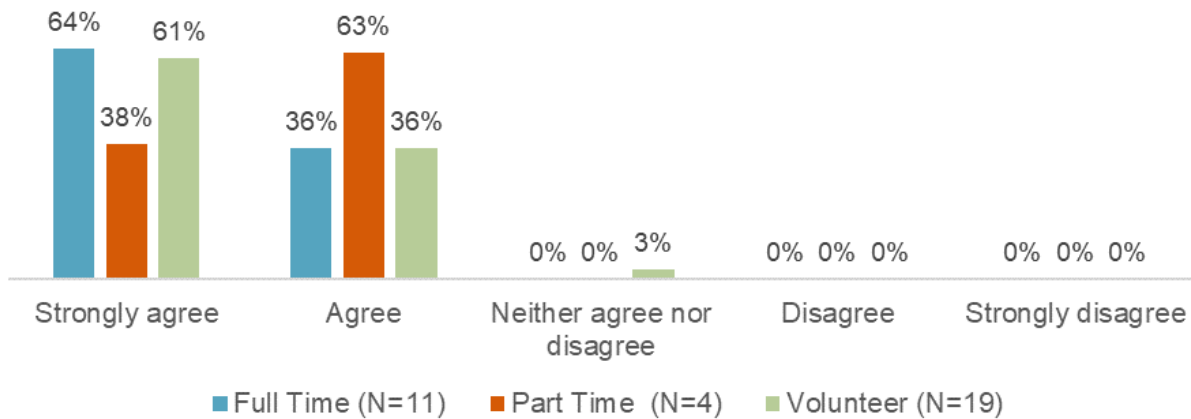
Staff and volunteers were prepared to manage a variety of crises and respond to the needs of guests in a communal environment. Preparations included the training curriculum previously mentioned as well as equipment and supplies including multiple first aid kits, two-way radios, an automatic external defibrillator (AED), and naloxone (commonly called Narcan) to carry in vests worn while on duty. A total of eight 911 calls were made by SWS staff for support addressing one violent incident (discussed below), one trespass, and six medical emergencies. Of the six medical emergencies, three were requests from guests to be transported to the emergency room for a variety of reasons and three were in response to overdoses that had been reversed with administration of naloxone.

On January 21, a stabbing occurred outside the shelter. Although no staff members witnessed the incident, they responded immediately by providing medical assistance. The victim was transported for professional medical care when first responders arrived on site. Security personnel were not present at the location where the incident took place. In response, the shelter implemented a guest capacity limit of 80 individuals to reduce the guest-to-staff ratio and provide for greater staff oversight of guests. While the fire marshal had originally approved occupancy for up to 85 individuals in the main sleeping area and an additional 5 in the check-in area, this reduction was made to help manage the overall environment and maintain a safer atmosphere, rather than due to any concerns related to building capacity.

Strengths:

1. All guests were required to sign an agreement to abide by shelter rules and could be exited and denied reentry for a day, month, or whole season depending on the severity of the violation. This framework is relatively easy to manage in the fast-paced shelter environment and provides a mechanism to remind guests of rules and shared expectations.
2. After January 21st, to improve nightly intake procedures, guests were checked in for the evening in groups of five, rather than all at once, to prevent overcrowding at the entrance.
3. Of the temporary staff hired in the fall, five had worked at the SWS the year prior. The historical knowledge of those staff was invaluable throughout the season. They were able to provide a perspective that captured lessons learned from the previous season and improvements they saw in 2024-2025.
4. Of the 23 part time staff and volunteers that responded to survey questions, all said they would be open to returning to work at the SWS in the next season.
5. Those who worked and volunteered at the SWS said that they felt safe working at the SWS and that they had access to the supplies needed to do the job.

Safety



Areas for Improvement:

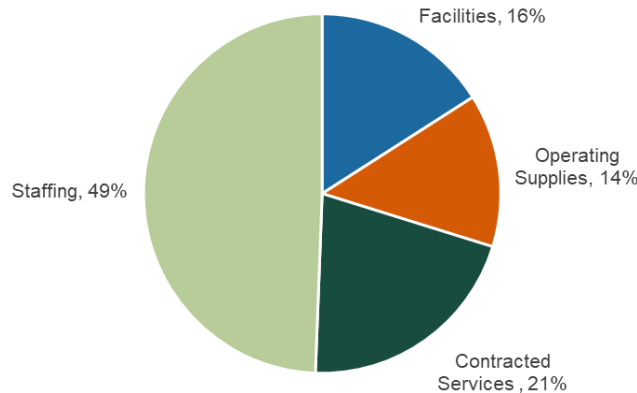
- A. Several guests were removed from the premises for attempting to smoke in the indoor restrooms, but strategies and devices used to detect smoking did not work consistently, leading to potential low-level contamination of the indoor restrooms.
- B. Guests often resisted being redirected to the designated outdoor smoking area, with many facing mobility challenges. Some lingered for extended periods in the indoor restrooms, which were among the few private spaces available. Unfortunately, these restrooms were used beyond their intended function.
- C. Security personnel assigned to the SWS primarily focused on responding to violent incidents and did not consistently address general rule violations. The quality and effectiveness of security services varied significantly depending on the individual personnel on duty. There were multiple nights during the shelter's operation when security coverage was limited or entirely absent. The irregular activation schedule and extended hours posed challenges for the contracted security provider in maintaining consistent and adequate staffing levels.
- D. Staff were exposed to traumatic incidents like overdoses, violence, verbal altercations, and behavioral health crises. There were also concerns raised about secondhand smoke from legal and illicit substances during shelter operations. Although these situations are not uncommon in these types of settings, internal policies can be improved to provide guidance on how to address and process these challenges. For example, increasing opportunities for team building and debriefing as well as infrastructure created to support staff members and volunteers who witness traumatic incidents.
- E. Staff reported in our surveying process that coordination of updates around rule changes could be inconsistent across shift leads. Coordination could be improved, with a suggestion to hold off on implementing changes until it has been established across shifts.
- F. Staff ratio and cost could be lowered with the use of a camera system on site to monitor areas that do not require 24-hour staff surveillance.

Improvements Made:

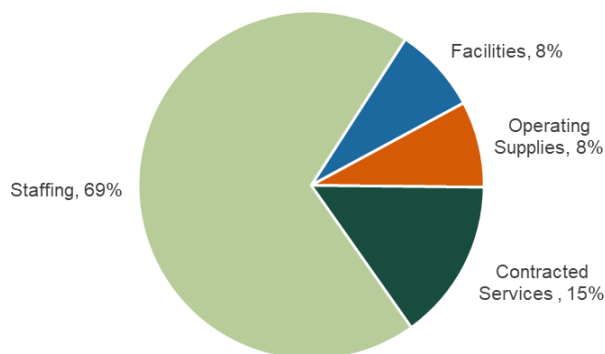
- Two-way radios were utilized by all staff on site to facilitate operations. They enable immediate, real-time coordination among staff, improving emergency response and reducing risk.
- The facility used for the SWS this season had separate staff break areas and restrooms. These spaces provided staff with privacy and an opportunity to take breaks, particularly following crisis situations, offering essential respite from the demands of the busy shelter environment.
- The addition of designated SWS shift leads added a supervisory structure that was frequently leaned on by staff and volunteers. Shift leads acted as the primary responder to all emergencies and provided direction to a team with varying levels of experience.

SWS Project Expenses

24-25 SWS Project Expenses



23-24 SWS Project Expenses



The cost for the SWS project was roughly \$415,000 which is broken down into four general categories:

Facilities – includes site lease (including utilities), initial modifications to meet occupancy codes, ongoing maintenance and repairs. Cost was approximately \$66,000

Operating Supplies – includes durable supplies such as cots, sleeping bags, pillows, blankets, shelving units, medical supplies (including first aid kits and AED), as well as consumables including water, food, and janitorial supplies. Cost was approximately \$57,000.

Contracted Services – includes waste removal, portable toilet rental and servicing, volunteer coordination, laundry, janitorial, and onsite security contracts. Cost was approximately \$86,000.

Staffing – comprises temporary and regular WCHCS time spent providing services at the SWS when activated, as well as additional WCHCS staff time spent operationalizing, managing the daily needs, and demobilizing the SWS project between November 1, 2024 and March 15, 2025. This does not include additional hours for administrative

functions such as payroll processing, human resources, or other support from county departments external to WCHCS. Cost was approximately \$204,000.

Staffing costs represent the majority of the SWS expenses, with the following factors contributing to the overall labor costs:

- Number of staff. The physical layout of the site, lack of cameras or digital infrastructure, combined with the level of services needed by the guest utilizing this resource necessitates increased minimum staffing ratios to ensure the safety of staff, volunteers, and guests.
- Coordination and logistics. Utilizing temperature-based criteria to determine which night(s) the SWS will operate requires increased WCHCS staff time to monitor forecasts on an ongoing basis and make daily operational decisions, as well as communicating with employees and volunteers to coordinate staff when the facility is scheduled to open. This model also requires added staff time supporting communications to the public and other stakeholders to make sure partners, and especially guests, are aware of which nights the SWS is open.
- Recruitment and training. It is very challenging to recruit temporary part-time, on-call as needed staff who would be asked to work overnight shifts during inclement weather with potentially as little as 48-hours' notice.

Recommendations

Ensuring access to safe, warm, and dry shelter during the coldest months of the year will remain a vital priority in supporting the most basic needs of our unhoused community members for as long as the number of people experiencing homelessness remains higher than the number of shelter beds in Whatcom County. Based on the key observations outlined in this AAR, the following recommendations are provided to enhance the capacity, quality of service, and cost-effectiveness of future winter shelter operations.

R1 – Prioritize additional nightly sheltering capacity during the coldest months instead of sporadic, criteria-based severe weather sheltering.

This remains a recommendation from the 2023-2024 operation. Historically the Road2Home's (R2H) winter shelter costs as an example, the nightly model was significantly more cost effective than the criteria-based model we use for the SWS on a cost per guest served per night comparison (\$125 for R2H versus \$181, or \$152 if the cost of the lease is subtracted). Although a less efficient use of funding, a decision to operate as a criteria-based model was made primarily because it would cost less in absolute terms. This was important because no new funding was dedicated for the shelter, and it was unclear if there would be support from outside agencies (City of Bellingham or others), or if then-committed grant funding would become available in early 2025.

Operating a shelter on a monthly basis (rather than just on certain nights) in the winter allows for greater efficiencies in staffing by being able to offer regular and recurring hours to both staff and volunteers. This results in needing a smaller overall team and helps build greater staff cohesion through an increased frequency of working together.

Regular nightly operations also eliminate the need to continually update activation information to guests and partner agencies, as the shelter is reliably operational regardless of temperature and precipitation.

Historical weather data indicates that overnight low temperatures in March consistently average in the low to mid-thirties, with occasional dips below freezing. Additionally, March is typically among the wetter months of the year. Extending the shelter season through the end of March would offer unhoused individuals continued protection from cold and wet conditions, reducing the risk of hypothermia and increasing overall safety.

R2 – Expand hours of operation to include daytime hours.

Guests frequently reported difficulties finding safe and appropriate places to be during hours when the SWS was closed (between 9am and 4pm), only to return later when it reopened for the following evening. Incorporating daytime operations into future planning could alleviate pressure on community partners—such as the public library—and offer guests increased safety, stability, and continuity of care.

If daytime operations are not a regular amenity, future SWS activations should prepare for as-needed 24/7 operations. Particularly in the event of below freezing daytime temperatures, as well as holidays, when other daytime sheltering options are reduced.

R3 – Identify a contracted provider OR establish a dedicated WCHCS team to sustainably operate and manage a nightly winter shelter as described above

A request for proposals for SWS services is set to post in May of 2025. The last two years however, the RFP process has not been successful; therefore, WCHCS should also engage in contingency planning to potentially operate a nightly winter shelter in the event the RFP process is unsuccessful.

Should WCHCS directly operate a shelter again next winter, the department should also consider establishing programmatic positions, particularly a shelter manager and temporary, dedicated coordinating staff, to accomplish this work as well as expertise and ability to train volunteers and other temporary staff on behavioral health and de-escalation skills required for safely addressing the complex needs of shelter guests. This remains a recommendation from the 2023-2024 operation.

Appendix A: Scope and Methodology

This AAR includes information collected via surveys conducted in March and April of 2025. WCHCS staff, temporary staff, community partners, and volunteers were asked to provide both quantitative ratings of their experiences and observations, as well as optional qualitative feedback. Focus areas included the facility, equipment, and supplies; training and scheduling; and communications.

In addition to the surveys, the AAR team also facilitated multiple hot washes (debriefs) in which participants were asked the following five overarching questions related to the planning and operation of the SWS:

- What went well and why?
- What could be improved and how?
- What should we do differently next time?

The tables below include organizations that contributed to the AAR process and participation metrics. Feedback collected was then compiled and used to inform the noted strengths and areas for improvement within the applicable objective(s). WCHCS subject matter experts then reviewed and validated the observations and recommendations noted within the AAR.

Data Collection Metrics

Hot Washes	Hot Wash Participants	Survey Groups	Survey Responses
6	32	5	38

Participating Organizations

County / Local
Whatcom County
City of Bellingham
Private Sector / Non-Governmental Organizations
Ferndale Community Services
Opportunity Council
Whatcom Transit Authority
Lighthouse Mission Ministries
Bellingham Public Library
Lutheran Community Services

Appendix B: Acronym List

AAR	After-Action Review
AED	Automatic External Defibrillator
BPD	Bellingham Police Department
COB	City of Bellingham
CPR	Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation
DVSAS	Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
FCS	Ferndale Community Services
FTE	Full Time Employee
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NWS	National Weather Service
R2H	Road2Home
RFP	Request for Proposal
RSD	Response Systems Division
SUD	Substance Use Disorder
SWS	Severe Weather Shelter
WCHCS	Whatcom County Health and Community Services