

Presentation for Whatcom County Council

April 29, 2025



COMMISSION
ON SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Inspiring and coordinating community efforts to address sexual and domestic violence

About the Commission



We improve systems so they work better for survivors and the community.

The SA/DV Commission was formed in 1998 by a joint resolution between the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County.



“We gather to solve problems we can’t solve on our own.”

Commission Membership

- Leaders from non-profits, health care, public schools, colleges and universities, faith communities, and human services
- Representatives from Lummi and Nooksack Tribes
- Police chiefs and sheriff, court administrators, county attorney, public defender, and city attorney
- DCYF and DSHS administrators
- Elected officials

Commission Funding 2025

- Whatcom County: \$90,000
- City of Bellingham: \$90,000
- City of Ferndale: \$5,000
- U.S. Department of Justice
Office on Violence Against Women:
\$100,000



In our community in 2023:



Superior Court saw a **125% increase in domestic violence protection order petitions.**



St. Joe's forensic nurses are treating more **strangulation** survivors. In 2023, DVSAS advocates served 81 domestic violence strangulation survivors at the hospital, up from only 7 in 2022.



Sexual assault reports have fallen each year since 2017.

In our community in 2023:



More than 1 in 4 homeless households are **fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence** or other dangerous conditions.



Brigid Collins' Child Advocacy Center conducted **142 forensic interviews with children**, up from 103 in 2022.



Multi-disciplinary **case reviews of intimate partner homicides** identified themes and recommendations for community response.

Why does this matter?



“Healing looks like being believed and supported by my community... being able to walk around town, go to the store, go to the park, living without hypervigilance. Being able to wear my hair down again, wearing clothing that makes me happy, being able to experience joy with my friends.”

Current Projects

Justice for Families

"Systems should help people heal, be safe, and feel justice."

- JFF Team



Restorative Justice

"It's such an on-going curiosity, what does making this right look like?"

- Local survivor



Healthcare Screening & Referral

"It's hard talking to practitioners who don't understand how sexual assault makes medical procedures retraumatizing."

- Local Survivor



We are a resource for:

- ✓ Public health efforts
- ✓ Schools
- ✓ Workplaces
- ✓ Housing providers
- ✓ Media
- ✓ Faith communities
- ✓ Colleges/university



Annual meeting



supporting criminalized survivors

Thurs, May 22

8:30-10:30am

@ Whatcom Community College

For more information or to register:

dvcommission.org/annual-meeting



*“If the violence is unabated, we risk losing our lives.
If we defend ourselves, we risk losing our freedom.”*

- Marissa Alexander, criminalized survivor

Summit on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People



*"The root causes are generational poverty and trauma.
It goes back to colonization."*

– local family member of an Indigenous abduction survivor

Thurs, November 6, 2025

9-5 @ St. Luke's Community Health Education Center

Registration opens in September

Questions or comments?

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COMMISSION

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dvcommission.org

contact@dvcommission.org

About Us

Fulfilling our collective responsibility to prevent and respond to sexual and domestic violence

The Commission works with local agencies, government institutions, and community members to achieve change in systemic responses and prevention of sexual and domestic violence by providing **resources, training, data, and guidance**. We do not provide direct services.

The **City of Bellingham** and **Whatcom County** jointly created the Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence in 1998.

Our Work

- Exploring restorative justice
- Addressing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People
- Conducting case reviews
- Increasing understanding of criminalized survivors
- Expanding access to justice in civil and family law
- Strengthening healthcare screening and intervention
- Using a public health framework
- Improving responses for children exposed to domestic violence
- Enhancing workplace supports for survivors
- Engaging faith communities in prevention and response
- Expanding strategies to prevent and respond to stalking

"We're making systems change, even if it's slow, and there are more changes on the horizon." —Commission Member



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The Commission consists of 17 government and 14 community members. Government officials are designated by government positions. Community members are selected from among stakeholder agencies in the community.

(17) Designated Government Representatives

Term Exp.	Name	Community Position
January 31, 2025	Deyettea Alexander	Area Administrator, DCYF, or Designated Representative
January 31, 2026	Diane Miltenberger	Administrator, DSHS/Community Services Office
January 31, 2027	<i>Vacant</i>	<i>Designated Representative/Lummi Nation</i>
January 31, 2027	Tammy Cooper-Woodrich	Designated Representative/Nooksack Tribe
January 31, 2027	Greg Hansen	Designated Representative-Whatcom County Cities
January 31, 2028	Rodger Funk	Selected Police Chief-Whatcom County Cities
January 31, 2028	David VanderYacht	Selected Superintendent-Whatcom Co. School Districts
N/A	Elizabeth Hart	Interim Co-Director/Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services
N/A	Jake Wiebusch	Whatcom County Probation Administrator
N/A	Stephanie Kraft	Whatcom County Superior Court Administrator
N/A	<i>Vacant</i>	<i>Whatcom County Health and Community Services Director</i>
N/A	Donnell Tanksley	Whatcom County Sheriff
N/A	Rebecca Mertzig	Bellingham Police Chief
N/A	Eric Richey	Whatcom County Prosecutor
N/A	Starck Follis	Whatcom County Public Defender
N/A	Tami Bennett	Bellingham Municipal Court Administrator
N/A	Sarah Chaplin	Senior Assistant City Attorney

(7) County Community Appointments

Term Exp.	Name	Community Position	Agency
January 31, 2026	Rosemarie Tom	SA/DV Victim Service Provider	Lummi Victims of Crime
January 31, 2026	Krista Touros	Health Care Provider	PeaceHealth/St. Joseph Medical Center
January 31, 2027	Garret Shelsta	Community at Large	Stuff You Can Use
January 31, 2027	Moonwater	Human Service Provider	Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center
January 31, 2027	Raquel Vernola	Institution of Higher Education	Whatcom Community College
January 31, 2028	Heidi Bode	Human Service Provider	LAW Advocates
January 31, 2029	Jessyca Murphy	Community at Large	Make.Shift Art Space

(7) City Community Appointments

Term Exp.	Name	Community Position	Agency
January 31, 2025	<i>Vacant</i>	<i>DV/SA Victim Service Provider</i>	
January 31, 2029	Annie Taylor	Human Service Provider	Annie Taylor Consulting
January 31, 2026	Christina Byrne	Community at Large	Western Washington University
January 31, 2027	Christina Kobdich	Health Care Provider	Unity Care NW
January 31, 2027	Chris Roselli	Institution of Higher Education	Western Washington University
January 31, 2029	<i>Application Pending</i>	<i>Community at Large</i>	
January 31, 2029	Beth Boyd	Human Service Provider	PeaceHealth/St. Joseph Medical Center



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We improve systems so they work better for survivors and the community.

“Sometimes the way that agencies respond, or don’t respond, to you actually ends up being a worse of an experience than the incident.” - local survivor

Commission Meetings

are spaces for learning, discussion, and action planning

Recent meeting topics:

- Work plan development and commitments
- Recommendations from intimate partner homicide case reviews
- Strategies for using public health models to holistically address SA/DV
- Procedural justice

Commission members say:

“We are making systems change...and there are more changes on the horizon.”

“Being a member...gives me confidence that things are going to get better.”

“I super-appreciate the level of respect and work done by this commission...”

Trainings for Community Partners

More than **110 people** attended half-day training on **best practices for schools**. Staff were present from all 7 public school districts and multiple private schools.

One training attendee said:

“This was grounding for me. It helped me identify strengths in how we support and respond to our students, while also giving tangible ways we can improve.”

More than **90 people** attended training on **stalking prevention and response**. Attendees were from law enforcement, prosecution, probation, judiciary, secondary schools, mental health, advocacy, and colleges and universities.

One training attendee said:

“This training was incredibly valuable in equipping us with the tools to provide safer, more-informed, and trauma-aware support...”

Re-Imagining Justice

developing survivor-centered restorative justice responses in Whatcom County

Local survivors have said:

"I wish community could have come together more to talk about it and acknowledge what was happening with him and even brainstorm how to keep ourselves safe, how to keep people in the community safe, and how to hold him accountable."

"It's been such an on-going curiosity, what does making this right look like?"

"If there was some kind of larger process, a larger container around it, with support people in place, then yes. Absolutely."

This is a collaboration with **Make.Shift Art Space**, **Western Washington University**, and the **Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center**.

We have accomplished:

- Year-long learning series
- 40+ local survivor interviews
- Statewide presentations on our work
- Literature reviews of local, national, and international resources
- Consultation with similar programs already implemented
- Implementational manual outline

Next steps: **Secure multi-year operational funding** to hire staff and drive program implementation.



Whatcom County Summit on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP)

"Every Native woman who has ever served on the commission has asked us to work on MMIP."

- Commission Director

More than **160 people attended** the first Summit on MMIWP in 2024. **Every person who filled out an evaluation said they would attend again.**

The Summit included:

- Lummi Victims of Crime Shawl Ceremony
- Understanding MMIP Keynote
- Survivor Panel
- Tribal Storytelling
- Native Experience in Healthcare
- MMIP: A Collaborative Approach by Law Enforcement
- Serving MMIP Families in Social Services
- Action Commitments
- Information and Resource Tables

**2025 Whatcom County
Summit on MMIWP:
November 6, 2025**

Healthcare Screening & Referrals Pilot Project

Goal: Develop and provide tools and training for healthcare providers to be able to identify and provide initial support for survivors and then refer them to local resources.

Why?

In 2023, our intimate partner homicide case review team recommended **providing healthcare providers with “tools, training, and response protocols to identify and support survivors,”** particularly in prenatal and maternal and child health settings.

“People have asked me why I didn’t say anything... There were so many signs that I was dealing with something, that something was wrong. I feel like someone should have asked me.”
-local survivor

“It’s hard talking to practitioners who don’t understand how sexual assault makes medical procedures re-traumatizing.”
-local survivor

According to the American Medical Association (AMA), nearly 50% of survivors seek care in medical settings before disclosing their abuse.

Next steps:

- Survivor interviews
- Provider surveys
- Literature review
- Develop tools, protocols, and training
- Identify local clinic(s) for pilot implementation
- Evaluation

Justice for Families

increasing access for survivors to civil and family law remedies

Project goals:

1. Achieve accessible, easy to navigate, trauma-informed, and procedurally just court processes
2. Create welcoming, standardized, and clear court processes for meaningful language access and disability access

The multi-disciplinary Justice for Families team says this project is important because:

“Everyone deserves safety.”

“We have a chance to do something.”

“My family needed this help when I was a kid.”

“Systems should help people heal, be safe, and feel justice.”

“Violence/trauma has massive ripple effects.”

Project partners:

- DVSAS
- LAW Advocates
- Whatcom County District Court Administration
- Whatcom County Superior Court Administration
- Local trainers and consultants

Who funds the Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence?

General operating funding (2025)

Whatcom County: \$90,000

City of Bellingham: \$90,000

City of Ferndale: \$5,000

Justice for Families Project Funding (2025-2027)

U.S. Department of Justice,
Office on Violence Against Women:
\$600,000 for 36 months

Funding is for:

Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence

DVSAS

LAW Advocates

Trainings for local court staff and court-aligned professionals

Summit on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (2025)

Mt. Baker Foundation

PeaceHealth Foundation

PeaceHealth Tribal Affinity Group

Educational Consortium for Cultural Recognition

“The Commission fulfills our collective government and community responsibility to effectively prevent and respond to sexual and domestic violence.”

-Commission member