



Department Report

August, 2026

Equity – Collaboration – Compassion – Transparency – Innovation - Service

Leadership:

Health Director

- Department updates will be shared at the 8/4 joint meeting.

Health Officer

- Current focus for Dr. Harley is monitoring and supporting work across several areas, including:
 - The U.S measles resurgence and recent healthcare exposures in WA.
 - Federal Medicaid changes with upcoming implementation of the new eligibility rules and work requirements and the need to establish a framework for monitoring local trends.
 - Wildfire smoke conditions monitoring and maintaining readiness to provide timely guidance on potential health impacts.
 - Foodborne illness and drinking water safety in the context of a multi-state Cyclospora outbreak and seasonal increases in harmful algae blooms.

Financial Services:

- The department's proposed budget was submitted to the County Executive's Office for review and consideration.
 - The proposal includes measures to improve cost recovery of department operations from state and other restricted funding sources, in order to help preserve the County General Fund's discretionary resources for use by other departments.
 - Further, it deletes vacant positions and stages the department to reassign work of remaining staff to perform activities that can be funded by our various restricted funding sources, such as grants, state allocations, and special revenue funds.



- This work assignment flexibility is needed to deal with significant losses in federal and state funding for public health services, despite the federal and state mandates for our public health services.
- It also reorganizes the department budget for greater transparency to see where the General Fund's discretionary resources are to be used.

Communicable Disease and Epidemiology (CD&E):

- **The Immunization Program** continues to strengthen partnerships with local school districts to support compliance with Washington State school immunization requirements and reduce the risk of student exclusion due to missing vaccinations. We have partnered with five of the seven school districts to provide Back-to-School vaccination clinics and continue to expand our collaboration based on district needs. Support includes immunization compliance reviews, data entry assistance, translation services, staff training, and education for students and families. We remain committed to providing flexible support to school districts whenever resources allow. In addition, we continue to offer twice-weekly immunization clinics at the Girard site for children and uninsured adults to ensure consistent community access to vaccines.
- **The Refugee Health Program** continues to support refugees as they transition into the local healthcare system by improving access to services, increasing understanding of available resources, and connecting individuals with ongoing care. A primary focus has been completing I-693 vaccination assessments for individuals seeking adjustment of immigration status. The program is also monitoring and evaluating the impact of recent HR-1 policy changes on the refugee population to ensure services remain responsive to evolving needs. We are also exploring opportunities to continue and expand this work through ongoing grant funding.
- **The Tuberculosis Program** continues to manage multiple active tuberculosis (TB) cases at various stages of treatment while providing comprehensive case management, care coordination, contact investigations, and follow-up. Staff continue to work closely with healthcare providers and community partners to strengthen latent TB screening and preventive care throughout the community.
- **Infection Prevention**
 - A COVID-19 outbreak was identified in a long-term care facility in July, the first reported outbreak since May.
 - The Infection Prevention team is investigating a multidrug-resistant organism (MDRO) at an assisted living facility. An on-site infection prevention and control assessment was completed in partnership with the Washington State Department of Health.
- **Sexual Health**
 - Walk-in STI clinic offered Tuesday and Thursday at Girard.

- Staff are preparing to implement a dual point-of-care HIV and syphilis test. The new test is expected to streamline testing and improve access during community outreach activities.
- Preliminary 2026 syphilis cases (January–June) have decreased (by 66%) compared with the same period in 2025.
- Preliminary 2026 gonorrhea cases (January–June) have increased (by 100%) compared with the same period in 2025.
- **Communicable Disease**
 - Continued Ebola preparedness efforts in coordination with local and state partners.
 - Monitoring travelers returning from affected regions; all monitored travelers to date have been assessed as low or very low risk.
 - Acquired specialized personal protective equipment (PPE) to support the safe evaluation of symptomatic persons under monitoring.
 - No cases of cyclosporiasis have been identified in Whatcom County to date.
- **Safety and Support Program**
 - Our Safety and Support Program Nurse continues to utilize her wound care certification to provide advanced wound care for clients with complex wounds who face barriers to engaging with traditional healthcare services. She is also coordinating with Tribal and community partners to explore opportunities for enhanced care coordination and improve access to supportive services for vulnerable populations.
 - Our Health Care Access Program Specialist is working closely with community partners to monitor and prepare for upcoming changes to health insurance programs, helping to coordinate and ensure community members maintain access to needed healthcare services.

Community and Organizational Development (COD):

- Granted additional FPHS funding to provide Epidemiology & Surveillance services to San Juan County. Plan to increase regional collaborations in the areas of epidemiology, disease surveillance, assessment, and emergency preparedness.
- Working with Central Finance to identify efficiencies in the contract process- from RFP to evaluation. Products will include documented workflows, defined processes, and a health contract maintenance dashboard to monitor contract progress in both outcomes and finances.

- Started Phase 1 of the MAPP 2.0 Community Health Improvement Cycle. Initiative title: Healthy Whatcom.
 - Monthly convenings of Healthy Whatcom Core Group since March
 - Convened the Partnership & Power Analysis workgroup, and conducting community interviews.
 - Conducted Process Evaluation- an assessment sent to participants and partners of the last cycle to help inform the current cycle.
- Implementing an electronic request form and standard project management process to help quantify central work and provide more streamlined services.
- Developed a charter and Safety Committee to assess health staff safety in the workplace and in the field in order to develop appropriate policies and procedures to ensure safety of employees.
- Hosting 2 interns: One supporting the development of an early childhood spotlight on the WCHI using data from the Child Wellness Survey oversample, RAPID surveys, and HCF work. The second is supporting a healthcare access snapshot- sending out surveys and conducting phone calls to all health providers in Whatcom County.

Community Health and Human Services (CH&HS):

- The Housing team is making final decisions on the most recent Request for Proposals that closed at the end of June. The team received nearly 30 applications to fund programs starting in January 2027. With over \$27 million in requests and a reduced contract budget of about \$14 million, the need continues to outpace available funding. Applicants should hear from staff by the end of July, early August on whether their programs will be moving into contract development.
- The Healthy Children's Fund team is excited to move the AID Kit childcare subsidy and rate augmentation contract forward. It is scheduled to come to County Council on August 11th for approval and if approved, it will reduce the burden of childcare costs for both families and the childcare providers.
- Our NFP team has been working closely with our Prevention team to bring more connection and information to the community. Recently the NFP supervisor visited the Ferndale Coalition meeting to learn about what was happening in the community, as well as share out more information about the NFP program.
- Opioid Awareness Day is scheduled for August 28th and the team will be on hand to support the event. The team is also partnered for All Hands Whatcom and is helping to plan that community event in October.
- Some members of the prevention team recently completed a "Counter Tools" assessment as the lead for the region. This involved visiting over 300 businesses that sell tobacco and vaping products and surveying how they are being promoted, displayed and sold to help reduce the number of youths that might be able to access it. This was a

huge lift by the team who worked with colleagues throughout the region to get it completed.

- The developmental disabilities team has launched rental assistance specifically for households with individuals eligible for DD services. About \$50,000 has been set aside from DD millage to help keep families in their homes and provide support and resources where needed. This is a new addition to the program and is making quite an impact on the community. There is also a brand-new provider, Chinook Enterprises working with the DD program to bring more supported employment and community inclusion services. They have been operating successfully in Skagit County and we are excited to have them step into the Whatcom area.

Environmental Health (EH):

- After nearly four decades of service, Tom Kunesh, Food Safety Supervisor, retires on Sept. 30. A request for recruitment is anticipated following the required 30-calendar day hold as part of the County's austerity measures. Josh Leinbach, will supervise both the Living Environment and Food Safety programs in the interim.
- For the 4th year, Erica Littlewood distributed DIY air cleaner kits to partner agencies, mostly in east county. Many thanks to Northwest Clean Air Agency for supporting this important project.
- Programmatic development and implementation have commenced under a new body of work, called Source Control, in Solid Waste. The purpose of this program is to help protect local streams, lakes, wetlands, groundwater, and marine waters by working with businesses to prevent pollution from entering the stormwater system. In addition, the program is a requirement of the County's municipal stormwater permit.
- The Local Management Plan for Operations and Maintenance of Septic Systems will be sent to PHAB in September for review and feedback. This plan operationalizes Whatcom County Code 24.05 sections for operations and maintenance and directs the priorities of the program based on limited resources. This plan is required by code and is required to be voted on and adopted by Whatcom County Council. Anticipation of adoption is estimated for March 2027.

Response Systems (RS):

- The Response Systems division (RSD) continues to operate direct services to support some of our most vulnerable community members.
 - o Alternative Response Team (ART)
 - o Ground-level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE)
 - o Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD)
 - o Mental Health Court
 - o Street Medicine

- o Overdose Prevention and Response pilot
- RSD is in the process of hiring an Assistant Manager to support the daily operations of programs, work towards Medicaid billing for case management and crisis response services, program evaluation, staff training and an overall focus on quality improvement.
- Program funding for existing programs is somewhat challenged due to funding cuts at the state level. Moving into 2027, the LEAD program has a gap in funding that could result in a reduction to services. Health leadership is working with partners and funders to avoid any service reductions.
- BH Special Projects Manager, Hannah Fisk, continues to support the Justice Project as a subject matter expert on BH services and therapeutic interventions. Hannah is part of the core team working to design the new jail, the Behavioral Care Center (BCC) and expand ReEntry and BH services across the continuum.