

Annual Report Highlights

The Task Force and its committees and workgroups have discussed a number of issues throughout the past year. Committees continue to explore emerging new programs that have the potential to work locally to reduce incarceration and improve behavioral health outcomes. The Task Force regularly reviews and monitors existing programs, and helps with troubleshooting issues as they arise. Highlights of the discussions over the last year include:

The Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force was formed by an ordinance of the Whatcom County Council in 2015 to:

1. review Whatcom County's criminal justice and behavioral health programs,
2. recommend changes to reduce incarceration of individuals struggling with mental illness and chemical dependency, and
3. to reduce jail use by pretrial defendants who can be safely released.

1. **Justice Project Implementation Plan.** The Task Force assisted the Justice Project Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) to develop a needs assessment and gap analysis for recommendations on local criminal legal policy, public safety needs, behavioral health and diversion resources, and facility requirements. The Task Force continues to provide guidance to the County Executive to develop an Implementation Plan for the Needs Assessment.
2. **Legislative Agenda Priorities.** The Task Force helped the Executive's Office refine its legislative priorities for the 2024 legislative session on a variety of important issues, including indigent defense, Medicaid waiver and reimbursement rates, competency restoration, prosecutorial diversion programs, housing, and the 23/7 Crisis Relief Center.
3. **Use of the Anne Deacon Center for Hope.** Since its opening in January 2021, the Anne Deacon Center of Hope has served as a crisis triage center for individuals struggling with mental illness and chemical dependency. It provides service to law enforcement, emergency medical services (EMS) and several companion programs, such the Ground-Level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) program and Mobile Crisis Outreach Team (MCOT).
4. **Competency Restoration.** The Washington State Department of Health and Social Services has struggled to provide timely competency restoration services to inmates in need in the County jail. Local stakeholders are working together to find solutions to the backlog and get much-needed treatment to defendants in the criminal legal system.
5. **Justice Project Implementation.** With the completion of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee's Needs Assessment, the adoption of the Justice Project Implementation Plan, and the voter approved Prop 4 sales and use tax, the Task Force moves into the next phase of Justice Project. The Task Force has begun to implement a number of projects called for in the Implementation Plan.
6. **New Task Force Leadership.** Several long-standing members ended their terms in early 2024, and the Task Force welcomed several new members and elected new leadership. The Task Force and its committees are considering how to be more effective and produce more actionable results.

Looking Ahead – Goals and Priorities in coming months:

1. **Integrating and launching JPOP well** – ensuring lack of duplication with IPRTF/well-defined and established integrations where appropriate
2. **Communications** to public – that are sticky, about progress and impact
3. **Data** – supporting implementing better systems and meaningful data across systems and within systems – measure progress and accountability
4. **Re-invigorating/re-organizing IPRTF** – to evolve to today's needs of oversight and advisory work from community members – as well as to move toward more action and impact
5. Overall, to support progress on **justice implementation plan**
6. Creating / reinforcing a **culture of productive engagement** and impact/action with taskforce individuals and county partners.

**Discussion:** As you, Whatcom County Council, look at the horizon of community needs; contributing factors to incarceration such as the fentanyl crisis, housing shortages, and overwhelming lack of treatment beds for behavioral health and/or substance use disorder; along with the budget and policy opportunities – how can the Law and Justice Council / IPRTF be most helpful to you as an advisory body to your policy-making?