

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 7, 2022
TO: Whatcom County Council
FROM: Brian Murphy, Project Manager and Katherine Goetz, Lead Analyst
RE: Summary of Final Draft of COVID-19 Review

This Final Draft of our COVID-19 Review incorporates comments from the Council Committee work session on June 21, 2022. A summary of the changes is provided below. This memo also responds to the two items requested at the work session in the numbered sections below:

1. “Broad data of the report and the basis for the recommendations, specifically as it applies to the Health Board make-up.”
2. “A review of the scope of work to make sure they have accomplished helping Whatcom County to be ready for the next emergency.”

Summary of Additional Recommendations in Final Draft Report

We have added 10 recommendations in the areas of Planning, Training, and Exercises; Policy Roles and Responsibilities; Staffing; and Information Management. One item that was included in the June 15, 2022 Draft Report as a general consideration has been changed to a formal recommendation. These new recommendations are intended to help Whatcom County be prepared for a broad range of future emergencies by further clarifying roles and improving information sharing. Recommendations added to this Final Draft are listed below (gaps in the numbering sequence are because these new recommendations are interspersed with recommendations from the first Draft Report).

Planning, Training, and Exercises.

- **Recommendation #2.** Address inconsistencies in the Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and County Code, such as who has authority in the absence of the County Executive and who will serve as the lead agency for specific disasters. Clarify the distinction between who has authority in the absence of the County Executive and who has delegated authority to manage government functions.

Policy Roles and Responsibilities.

- **Recommendation #8.** The respective leaders of public health and emergency management should determine how they will work together and be supportive of their mutual working relationship. All levels of County leadership must work to establish healthy working relationships during non-disaster times so that trust between organizational elements exist when disasters do strike.

- **Recommendation #11.** Councilmembers have a role during disasters and can help the County be successful in establishing unity of effort. As the Executive provides situation reports and updates, the Council can help keep constituents informed and collect information from them to assist the Executive in response efforts. However, it is important that everyone stay in their lane and do not leak information prematurely or make promises that cannot be realized. Sharing information before a course of action is developed, adopted, and implemented can create a situation that leads to confusion, contributes to distrust, and can cause unforeseen challenges.
- **Recommendation #13.** Explore the use of different models for ECC organization depending on the type of disaster. If a future disaster is similar in scope and breadth to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Departmental Structure model is recommended.
- **Recommendation #14.** During training, the ICS Command and General Staff Section Chiefs should meet with the WUC Policy Group and clearly discuss roles and responsibilities, to include what types of issues will be escalated to the Executive Policy Group.
- **Recommendation #15.** Expand the WUC Policy Group and come to a clear understanding of which issues will be forwarded to that group for a decision. It is essential that the individuals serving on this board recognize the need to work together toward a common goal.

Staffing.

- **Recommendation #19.** The County Executive should take more a direct leadership role during a declared disaster and direct departments to support the ECC as needed. Departments must designate multiple individuals to be their ECC representatives. These representatives must have authority to commit resources from the department to support the disaster response. These representatives must also have a direct communications channel back to their department directors. The representatives must then attend monthly training sessions and participate in exercises so that they are familiar with ECC operations and can be effective when responding.
- **Recommendation #23.** Evaluate the costs and benefits of repositioning the emergency management function outside the Sheriff's Office. It may be its own department under the County Executive, added to a department that provides countywide services, or an entity that serves the emergency management needs of all communities in Whatcom County.

Information Management.

- **Recommendation #28.** Improve incident information sharing by establishing a Situation Report (SITREP) format and distributing it widely during events. A SITREP should be produced each 24-hour period at minimum. Its purpose is to share information about an incident including the impacts of the disaster and how agencies are responding. Councilmembers and others responding to the disaster should receive a copy of the daily SITREP.
- **Recommendation #30.** Provide training and exercises to department Public Information Officers so they understand the functions of the JIC and they role they will play. PIOs working in the JIC need to come from County departments and may benefit from mutual support from PIOs and communications staff from other public agencies and even business when appropriate. It may be necessary to augment the public information function with County staff who are not PIOs but have skills and abilities that are complementary to the work of the JIC.

1. Basis for Health Board Recommendation

In the Final Draft report, we recommend changing the composition of the Health Board to align with recent changes to state statute ([RCW 70.05.035](#)). Changing the Health Board composition could address two challenges raised by stakeholder interviews:

- A lack of clarity around the role of the Health Board in comparison to the role of the County Council.
- A need for expertise to oversee the public health aspects of the pandemic response.

As shown in Exhibit 1, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to the health board composition. Some boards are composed of only county councilmembers or commissioners. Some boards include elected officials from cities within the county and five listed below include non-elected officials.

The framework in Exhibit 2 provides a way to evaluate maintaining the existing Health Board membership or expanding the membership. A check mark denotes the option meets the criteria, or in some cases has advantages. Expanded membership provides advantages in alignment with state legislation, clarity of roles, and practical feasibility. If the Health Board maintains its composition, the current Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) would require nine to 21 members and undertake additional functions. Health Department staff would have to support both the PHAB in its expanded role and the Health Board, rather than one entity.

If the County decides to maintain the existing Health Board, these criteria can provide a guide to address the challenges experienced during the pandemic. To achieve clarity of roles, the Health Board can clearly define its responsibilities in County Code. It can work in closer collaboration with the PHAB to bring subject matter expertise into Health Board discussions.

Exhibit 1: Health Board Composition in Select Counties.

County or Health District	2022 Estimated Population	Health Board Composition
Benton-Franklin Health District	312,050	6 members: 3 Benton County commissioners, 3 Franklin County commissioners.
King County*	2,317,700	16 members: 3 County councilmembers, 3 Seattle City councilmembers, 2 suburban city elected members, 8 non-elected officials (as of January 1, 2023). ¹
Kitsap County	280,900	7 members: 3 Kitsap County commissioners, 4 mayors/deputy mayors of cities within the county. Will be expanded to 10 positions, changing to 5 elected officials, 2 tribal representatives, and 3 community representatives. ²
Skagit County	131,250	3 members: 3 elected Skagit County commissioners.
Snohomish Health District*	847,300	15 members: 5 County councilmembers, 10 city elected officials.
Tacoma-Pierce County*	937,400	8 members: 3 County councilmembers, 1 Tacoma City Council appointee, Mayor of Tacoma, County Executive, 1 member from the County Cities and Towns Association, 1 member from the County Medical Society.
Thurston County	300,500	3 members: 3 Thurston County commissioners. Will be expanded to 8 members, adding 1 elected city official, 1 tribal representative, 3 community representatives. ³
Whatcom County*	231,650	7 members: 7 County councilmembers
Yakima County	259,950	7 members: 3 Yakima County commissioners, 2 city representatives, 2 citizen representatives. Expanded to 9 members, adding 2 community representatives. ⁴

* Denotes a Home Rule County.

Sources: Office of Financial Management, 2022; County and Health District websites, 2022; BERK 2022.

¹ <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/health/board-of-health.aspx>.

² https://kitsappublichealth.org/about/board_expansion.php.

³ <https://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/bocc/pages/bohexpansion.aspx>.

⁴ https://www.yakimaherald.com/news/local/yakima-county-commissioners-expected-to-appoint-new-health-board-members-tuesday/article_05478ff6-605b-5531-96c8-6e38e6079db8.html.

Exhibit 2: Evaluative Criteria for Health Board Decision.

Category	Evaluative Criteria	Maintain Existing Health Board	Move to Expanded Membership
Alignment with State Legislative Intent	Does the Board have subject matter expertise?		✓
	Is the Board broadly representative of the community?	✓	✓
Clarity of Roles	Is it clear the Board is a distinct body?		✓
Accountability	Can the Board be held accountable by the public?	✓	
Practical Feasibility	Can Board positions be consistently filled?		✓
	Can the Board be staffed and supported?		✓

2. Scope of Work Review

Most recommendations in the Final Draft Report can be applied to most emergencies and will help the County prepare for a wide range of potential circumstances. There are some findings and recommendations in the Final Draft, such as changing the Health Board composition, that are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and may not have surfaced in a different emergency. Exhibit 3 lists our recommendations and notes which will help the County prepare for a broad range of potential future emergencies, and which are unique to a pandemic response.

Exhibit 3: Applicability of Recommendations

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
1. Update the CEMP to ensure it complies with current federal and state requirements. Consider using Washington State Emergency Management Division (EMD) assistance, either on-line tools or technical support. Add a Pandemic Annex.	✓	
2. Address inconsistencies in the CEMP and County Code regarding authority in a disaster and line of succession.	✓	
3. Review and update Continuity of Operations Plans annually with particular attention to orders of succession and delegations of authority whenever personnel changes affect key positions.	✓	
4. Develop and update plans, procedures, and job aids to build a stronger capability to respond to and recover from disasters. Conduct training and exercise programs for all levels from elected officials to all those working within or supporting unified command.	✓	
5. If the County continues to use Incident Command System (ICS), a much more concerted effort must be established to implement ICS at the Emergency Command Center (ECC). To do so will require representation from all the County departments, as well as other agency representatives and volunteers, with multiple individuals being trained to a much higher level of proficiency than that which was experienced in the pandemic response.	✓	
6. Ensure job aids, videos, or other just-in-time training materials are available to orient first-time responders to the facility, processes, and their assigned positions.	✓	
7. Conduct training for councilmembers, elected officials, and department heads on crisis communications.	✓	

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
8. Establish healthy working relationships between county leaders during non-disaster times so that trust between organizational elements exists when disasters do strike.	✓	
9. Councilmembers should not work or drop by unannounced at executive work areas, including the ECC, during disasters. Protocols should be established, and appropriate training delivered.	✓	
10. Review the language in the County Code to define the Health Board's powers and responsibilities clearly. Include elected officials in disaster preparedness training and exercise activities to include roles and responsibilities during disasters.		✓
11. Councilmembers can help the county be successful in establishing unity of effort. If the Executive provides situation reports and updates, the council can help keep constituents informed and collect information from them to assist the Executive in response efforts.	✓	
12. Expand Health Board membership to include representatives from public health/medical fields. Consider adding elected officials from cities. Update Whatcom County Code to reflect changes.		✓
13. Explore the use of different models for EOC organization depending on the disaster. If a future disaster is similar in scope and breadth to the pandemic, a Departmental Structure model is recommended.	✓	
14. During training, the ICS Command and General Staff Section Chiefs should meet with the WUC Policy Group and clearly discuss roles and responsibilities, to include what types of issues will be escalated to the policy group.	✓	
15. Expand the WUC Policy Group and come to a clear understanding of which issues will be forwarded to that group for a decision.	✓	
16. Establish one organizational structure for the response effort. Once that executive-level decision is made, individual departments need to work together within that unified structure toward common goals.	✓	

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
17. Develop and practice a virtual operational capability and develop social distancing guidelines in the ECC. If space becomes an issue, consider some functions that may be able to work off-site or remotely.	✓	✓
18. Use common terminology for the emergency coordination center. Choose the name and refer to the facility by that name in documentation, training, exercises, and incidents.	✓	
19. The County Executive should take more a direct leadership role during a declared disaster and direct departments to support the ECC as needed.	✓	
20. Elected officials are not only accountable to constituents but must be leaders and cheerleaders to county employees.	✓	
21. Maintain Health Department staffing at levels able to perform mandated requirement as well as support community expectations will benefit Whatcom County as they recover from this disaster.		✓
22. Add one public information position and one planning position to the emergency management staff.	✓	
23. Evaluate the costs and benefits of repositioning the emergency management function outside the Sheriff's Office.	✓	
24. Conduct training on emergency procurement policies and procedures.	✓	
25. Health Board / Council members should consider alternatives to standard procedures when a timelier model will improve disaster response.	✓	
26. Public Health should develop and then achieve concurrence on a policy regarding sensitive health information.		✓
27. Develop procedures to ensure appropriate personnel receive information that keeps them informed.	✓	
28. Improve incident information sharing by establishing a Situation Report (SITREP) format and distributing it widely during events.	✓	
29. Establish a single JIC that is managed by a single individual. Develop procedures, train to them, and exercise them.	✓	

Recommendation	Applicable to Most Emergencies	Applicable to Pandemic Response in Particular
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30. Provide training and exercises to department Public Information Officers so they understand the functions of the JIC and they role they will play.

