

A Vital Bridge with the Community

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center

2022-2025 Community Health Needs Assessment



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PeaceHealth

Message from leadership:

Caring. Resourceful. Bold. These words capture the spirit of how Whatcom community partners have risen to unprecedented challenges.

The last several years have challenged us like never before. The pandemic, extreme weather events, and the health impacts of racism have tested our resilience beyond what we thought was possible. Collaboration has been the saving grace. Whether among our caregivers at the bedside, in council meeting rooms, or on the street offering vital services—we are stronger together.

Some of our most significant learning has come from seeing the disproportionate health impacts of racism experienced in our community. In 2021, Whatcom County passed a resolution declaring racism as a public health crisis. This important step acknowledges that racism is built into the very systems that define and support our society. Acknowledging this reality drove us to co-sponsor the 1st annual North Sound Race and Health Equity Conference in April 2021 and the 2nd annual conference planned for March 2022. Educating the healthcare workforce and changing internal policy and practice is key to changing the systems that we now recognize as imperfect.

We have also turned to our Coast Salish neighbors for guidance on how we can improve the experience for Tribal members in our care. The resilience of the Lummi and Nooksack people is both a teacher and an inspiration for us on this journey. We have taken their words to heart and raised our hands to express our deepest gratitude and appreciation of their heritage and relationship to the land and people. PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center Community Health Board member, Dr. Dakotah Lane of the Lummi Health Clinic, and members of our Community Collaboration Committee have been instrumental in guiding our health equity initiatives.

Most of all, we are humbled. The outpouring of support for PeaceHealth caregivers throughout these difficult times has been tremendous. Handwritten notes, food, music and countless encouraging messages have been of great comfort for our team as they, in turn, compassionately care for others.

On the horizon is a major upgrade of our PeaceHealth St. Joseph campus and the addition of two new clinics—including one in Lynden, Washington—bringing much-needed access to healthcare services in East Whatcom County.

We profoundly appreciate the opportunity to collaborate with our partners in Whatcom County in support of the growing numbers of individuals and families who call this area home.

With grateful hearts,



Charles Prosper
Chief Executive
PeaceHealth Northwest Network



Rachel Lucy
Director of Community Health
PeaceHealth Northwest Network

Our report to the community

The importance of a Community Health Needs Assessment

Every three years, each PeaceHealth location conducts a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) as required by the 2010 Patient Care and Affordable Care Act.

Tax-exempt hospitals like ours—as defined by IRS Section 501(r)—use the CHNA to report current community needs, statistics and activities. We are also expected to develop an implementation strategy outlining our plans to improve the health and well-being of the communities we serve.

We see our CHNA report and implementation strategy as much more than a requirement or obligation. Through this narrative, we are presenting the story of our dedication and service to the community and people we serve. Beyond traditional medical services and care, we are committed to helping people in need.

Click to view previous editions of our [CHNA](#) and [implementation strategy](#).



WHAT IS OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS?



PeaceHealth joined community partners to participate in Healthy Whatcom (www.healthywhatcom.org). Community members have been involved throughout the process, which started with an assessment of key health indicators and has progressed into priority setting and action planning. Our assessment

builds on this strong work and references other key reports. PeaceHealth leaders also met with local nonprofits and other agencies to hear about community needs first-hand. The priorities they shared are referenced throughout this assessment.

Special Acknowledgement: The Whatcom County Health Department provided much of the data contained in this assessment.

KEY FINDINGS

Healthy Whatcom identified three priority areas for child and family well-being:

1. Building resilience through investments in child and youth mental health.
2. Creating a strong foundation for children through early learning and childcare.
3. Increasing stability through housing for families and children.

Each priority represents an extremely well-documented community need that requires collective action. The culmination of Healthy Whatcom's work will be racial equity-focused health improvement action plans with measurable results.

Additionally, this assessment shows where both equity and access improvements are most needed to improve health overall.

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE IN

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center and PeaceHealth Medical Group serve patients from Whatcom County and beyond. Our caregivers deliver a comprehensive range of preventative, emergency, hospital, specialty and recovery services with kindness and compassion.

Whatcom County is bordered to the north by Canada and to the west by the Salish Sea. Mt. Baker and the foothills region form our eastern border. Whatcom County is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of Coast Salish People who have been the spiritual caretakers of these lands since time immemorial. It is a great honor and responsibility to be entrusted with the care of all people who live here, especially the original inhabitants of these lands – the Lummi and Nooksack People.

To meet our community's healthcare needs, PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center works collaboratively with community providers and service partners, including public health, emergency services, Unity Care NW, Sea Mar and many others. In 2021 alone, a total of 20 different community partners were awarded PeaceHealth community benefit funds. These partnerships are celebrated as a shining example of regional collaboration.



About PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center

187 Average daily census

253 Total licensed beds

4.46 Average length of stay
(days)

15,829 Inpatient
discharges

395,362 Outpatient
clinic visits

3,021 Employees

363 Active medical staff

56,284 Emergency
Department visits

1,882 Births

7,490 Surgeries

*Source: PeaceHealth FY 2021; Active medical
staff as of October 2021*

Supporting health justice for all

From our very beginning to the present day

PeaceHealth was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who traveled west in 1890 to care for early settlers and people in need. Their legacy continues today as we recognize that achieving health and well-being is a lifelong journey.

We are committed to our Mission: We carry on the healing Mission of Jesus Christ by promoting personal and community health, relieving pain and suffering, and treating each person in a loving and caring way. We are driven by our belief that good health, prevention and community well-being are fundamental rights. We support health justice for all and are especially called to be in service to the most vulnerable members of our community. And we believe that every person should receive safe and compassionate care—every time, every touch.

BUILDING A NETWORK OF CARE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Inspired by a challenge from the [Catholic Health Association's "We Are Called" Pledge](#), we have embarked on a journey to "put our own house in order." We recognize that change starts from within, believing that our caregivers can best focus on others when we put our focus on caring for them. This has been an essential element in preserving our 130-year legacy of community service and care.

PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center and PeaceHealth Medical Group have more than 3,000 employees. As one of the largest employers in Whatcom County, we have an added responsibility to learn and lead. This begins by hiring a diverse workforce and extends to creating conditions where every person feels a sense of belonging. We are proud to join local partners in supporting the North Sound Health Equity Scholarship for Black, Indigenous and Students of Color pursuing healthcare education. In less than a week, the scholarship fund raised more than \$100,000. The first scholarship recipients were named by the end of 2021. Scholarships help address financial barriers, particularly for underrepresented students or those who have faced systemic oppression due to race.

The deep impacts of the pandemic were especially felt by our employees who shouldered the emotional weight of caring for very sick and dying patients. In 2020, 299 PeaceHealth employees in Whatcom County received support to cover housing and utilities (52%), access to care or basic services like internet and transportation (25%), food (20%), and childcare (3%).

But we need to do more—and we cannot do it alone. Community-based partnerships like the ones described in this assessment are crucial for improving equity. By working together, partnerships enable us to address social determinants of health and address the roots of inequity by working together.

“We have a responsibility to shine a light on the profound effect inequities have on health and well-being, and to do something about it. We are called to promote the inherent dignity of each person, to further the common good and seek justice through solidarity, especially in service to the most vulnerable.”

– Liz Dunne, President and Chief Executive Officer, PeaceHealth



PROMOTING SOCIAL JUSTICE ACROSS THE COMMUNITY—AND BEYOND

PeaceHealth has taken steps to increase awareness of social inequities and promote health justice among patients and caregivers in our organizations and across the greater healthcare community. We also recognize the significant journey that lies ahead—with partners and with our community—to move the needle on health justice, equity and inclusion.

RECOGNIZING INEQUITIES AND ELEVATING PARTNERSHIPS

During these unprecedented times, it is clear that Black, Indigenous and People of Color bear undue hardships from birth to death that cannot be explained by socioeconomic factors, culture or behavior. It is evident in kindergarten readiness scores, immunization rates, access to health services, health outcomes, and much more. By acknowledging that racism is built into our societal systems, we can begin the work of changing the root causes of inequities.

GAUGING KINDERGARTEN READINESS AS A KEY INDICATOR

Driving root level change means selecting health indicators that can be tracked over time. This is why Healthy Whatcom chose Kindergarten Readiness as the overarching indicator for our community health improvement action plans.

A growing community

BELLINGHAM:

96,014

Population

18.70%

2010-20 population growth

WHATCOM COUNTY:

237,347

Population

17.76%

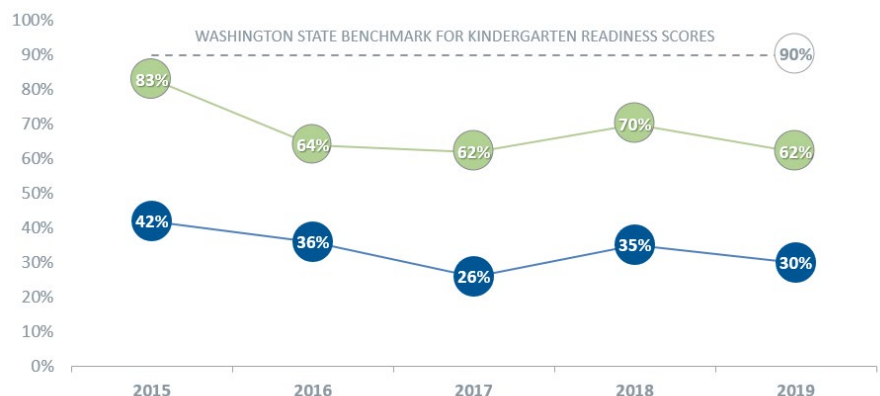
2010-20 population growth

Source: World Population Review

% Race/Ethnicity Data of Population				
	Bellingham	Whatcom County	Washington	United States
White	78	78	68	60
Latinx	9	10	13	19
Asian	6	5	10	6
Multi-Racial	5	4	5	3
Black/African American	2	1	4	13
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	3	2	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1	<1	<1	<1

Source: U.S. Census

Whatcom County **students from low-income households** are half as likely to demonstrate school readiness as their **non-low income peers**.



Graphic Source: Whatcom County Health Department | Data Source: WA Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Kindergarten Readiness tells us how well systems are supporting children by measuring six domains of early learning. Unfortunately, since 2015, Kindergarten Readiness in Whatcom County has been trending downward for all students and no Whatcom County school districts meet the Washington goal that 90% of all incoming kindergarteners are kindergarten ready. This trend disproportionately impacts those in low-income households and Latinx, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Black students in particular. For example, 57% of white students are assessed as kindergarten ready, but only 20% of Black students. Turning this curve in the right direction will require collaborations that meet the basic needs of families and create access to high-quality early learning experiences.

POVERTY’S EXPANSIVE GRIP

Our Northern Washington community struggles with the deep effects of poverty and lack of access to care. In Bellingham, ethnic minorities experience poverty at a higher rate than white people. Latinx community members are 50% more likely to experience poverty than their white neighbors. According to the American Community Survey, just 1 in 10 white residents face poverty compared to 1 in 5 Latinx residents in Whatcom County.

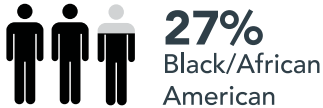
The Opportunity Council’s 2021 Prosperity Project: Community Needs Assessment offers additional insights into where access needs are greatest, providing a detailed look at the experiences of low-resource households in Whatcom County. Households were asked which services are important to them and how easy it is to access those services. One of the key takeaways was that **dental care and housing services were ranked as most important as well as most difficult to access.**

	Dental	Housing	Jobs	Childcare	Mental Health	Utilities
Households with children age 5 and under	√	√	√	√	√	√
Seniors age 60+	√	√				
Spanish-speaking households	√	√	√			
People of Color	√	√	√			

Source: [Opportunity Council, Prosperity Project, 2021](#)

Poverty’s expansive grip

Poverty rate by race in
 Whatcom County



Source: [U.S. Census](#)

A year that inspired action

Answering the call of an unprecedented time in history

2020 saw a remarkable convergence of critical challenges in the United States: racial and social injustice and COVID-19. The pandemic cast a light on how continuing inequities in income, education and access to health and social services inordinately affect Black, Indigenous and People of Color. As the pandemic has progressed, it has become clear that vulnerable members of our community were more at risk for infection, hospitalization and death.

COVID-19 VACCINATION EFFORT

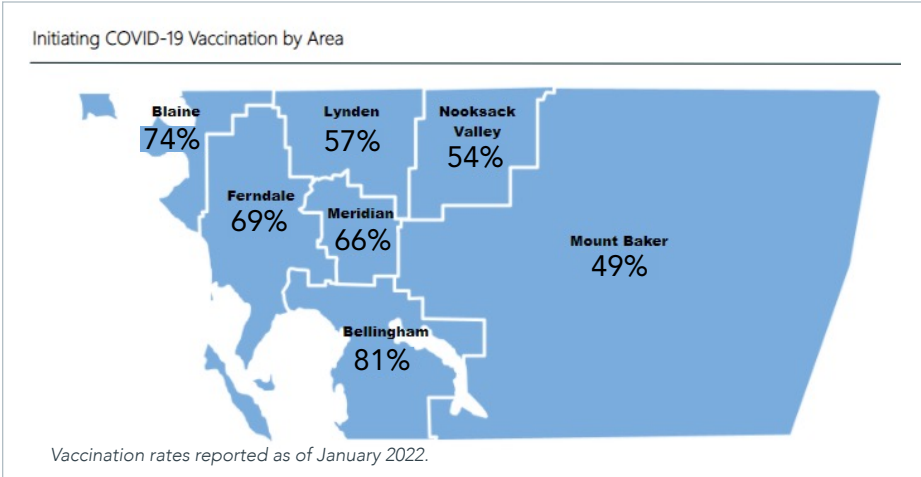
COVID-19 vaccination efforts further demonstrated the importance of addressing systemic racism. Early in the effort, it became clear there were community-specific barriers to vaccination that required focused outreach. As 2021 drew to a close, Whatcom County celebrated the milestone of 70% of its population ages 12 and older being fully vaccinated. However, some groups, including rural Whatcom and Latinx communities continue to have lower vaccination rates.

Of the Total Whatcom County Population

159,195 (69.8%)
people initiating vaccination

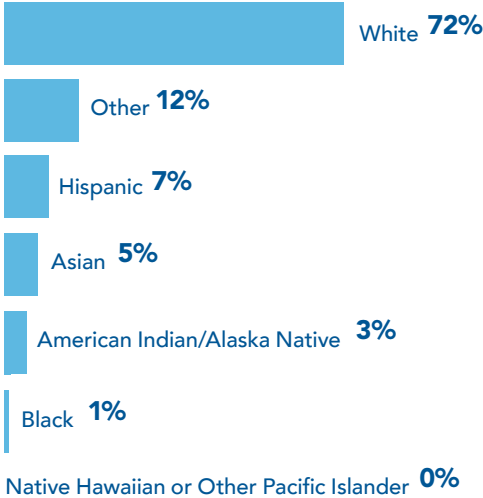
145,988 (64%)
people fully vaccinated

(Vaccination rates reported as of January 2022)



Percent of fully vaccinated population, by race and ethnicity

64%
of Whatcom County is fully vaccinated and of those



Source: [Washington State Department of Health COVID-19 Data Dashboard](#) (As of 11/15/2021)



On June 25, 2021, the PeaceHealth Medical Group administered the final dose at its large-scale vaccination clinic. This marked the end of an impressive chapter in vaccinating the Whatcom County community against COVID-19. Vaccination continues on a smaller scale today.

Large-scale vaccination clinic results, by the numbers:

Numerous members of our community have shared their appreciation for the vaccine clinic, noting the efficiency and compassion of the team.

5,013

hours of service provided by 106 volunteers

70,000

total vaccine doses administered

5,452

vaccine doses administered on our highest volume week

400

caregivers who worked at the clinic, including 30 providers

1,287

vaccine doses administered on our highest volume day

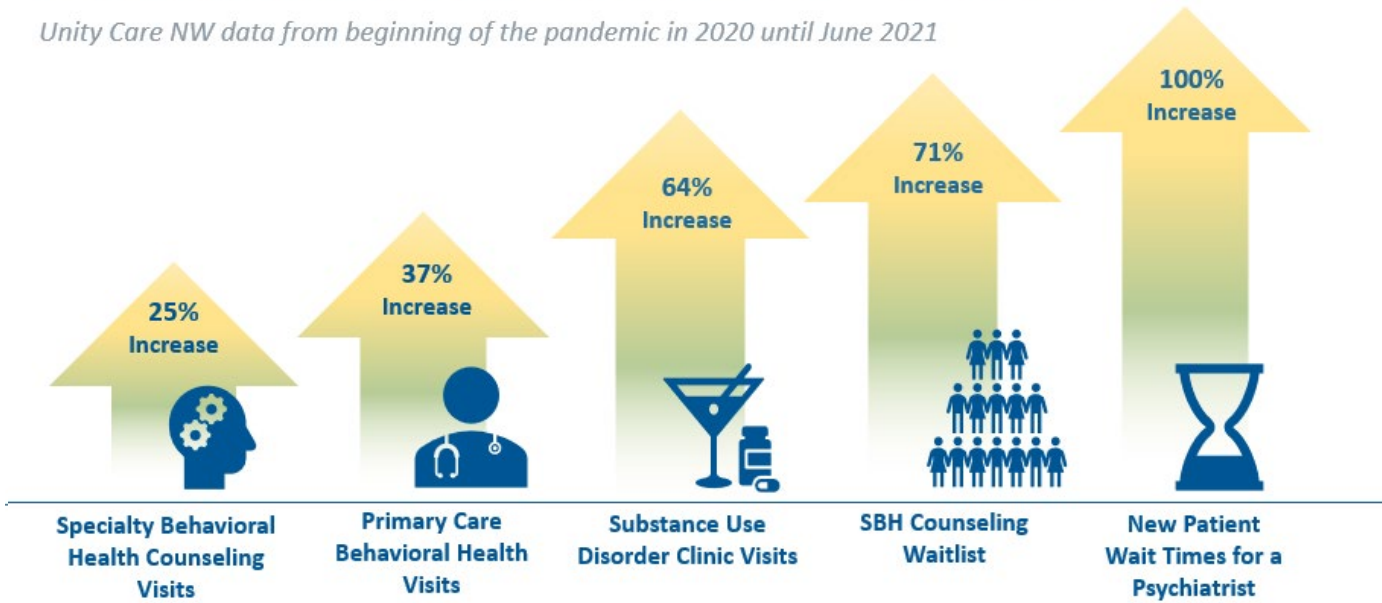
Source: PeaceHealth Medical Group Vaccination Data 2021

DEMAND FOR SERVICES ACROSS THE COUNTY

Looking beyond the community vaccination effort, it has never been more important for us to collaborate with our partners to expand community-based care options. This is particularly critical as we work to address the backlog of demand for behavioral health, primary health, substance use and school-based counseling services shared by many of our partners, including Unity Care Northwest.

Unity Care Northwest has seen significant increases in Whatcom County’s **demand for behavioral healthcare related visits** over the past 14-16 months.

Unity Care NW data from beginning of the pandemic in 2020 until June 2021



Graphic Source: Whatcom County Health Department | Data Source: Unity Care Northwest

“As our population ages, there is a greater need for healthcare. But many of our current providers of the same age group are retiring, so we need to attract new generations of providers. In order to do so, we must address workforce disconnections around skills, benefits, consideration for health and childcare because they are dangerous sources of stress for our communities.”

– Meghan McCarthy, System Director of Community Health, PeaceHealth

OUR FOUR PILLARS OF COMMUNITY HEALTH

Our four pillars of community health ensure that we are partnering to create a healthy community beyond the walls of our medical center and clinics. Across these pillars is the awareness of our solemn responsibility to care for the most vulnerable and underserved people in our communities while promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in everything we do.

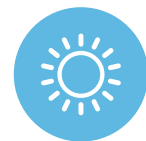
Enhancing health for all requires we focus on those that have been the most underserved and historically marginalized. In Whatcom County, we will continue to seek out projects that improve community health and well-being for:

- Elders and youth
- All Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities
- Families and people experiencing poverty, housing and food insecurity
- People who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
- People whose primary language is not English



HOME

Improve access to service-enriched housing



HOPE

Increase education, access to treatment and prevention of dependence



CARE

Expand knowledge, access and engagement with community caregivers



NOURISH

Address food insecurities to enhance family and child well-being



Ensuring equity and alleviating health impacts

Collaboration fuels The Way Station

Safe and affordable housing is a vital condition for health. Unfortunately, the average vacancy rate for rental housing in Whatcom County is functionally zero, driving up the average cost of any rental units that become available. The high cost of housing puts added stress on families and can lead to poor mental and physical well-being.

Homelessness continues to be a persistent concern across our community. Whatcom County saw a 22% increase in its population of people experiencing homelessness as of the 2021 Point in Time Count, the highest recorded number since 2008. Families were especially impacted. From 2020 to 2021, there was a 77% increase in the number of Whatcom County families waiting for housing. That number represents nearly 100 Whatcom families—a 10-year high.

New developments like the Mercy Housing NW Barkley project and others are in the works to support families experiencing housing insecurity, but relief can't come soon enough.

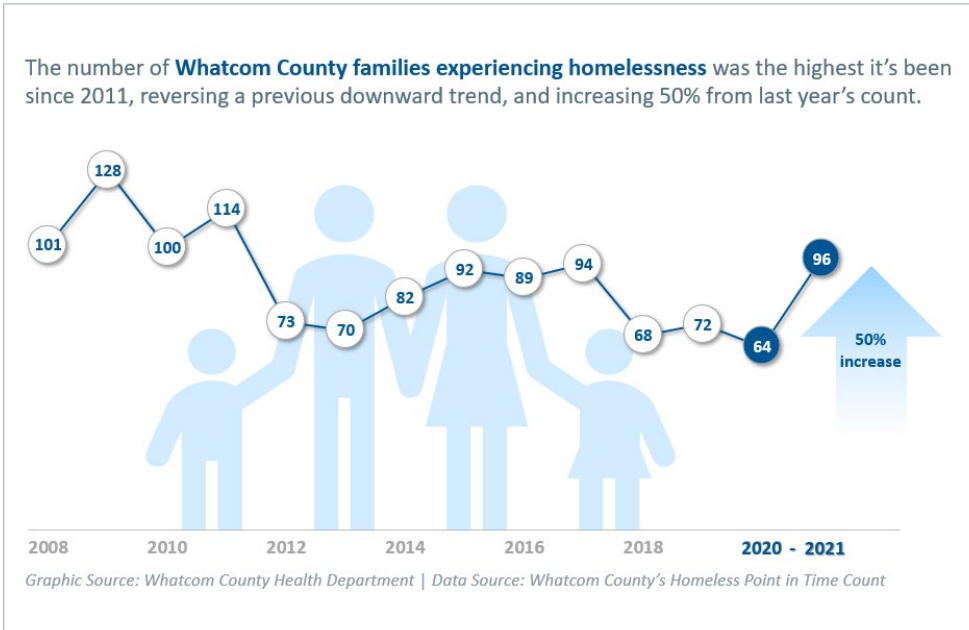
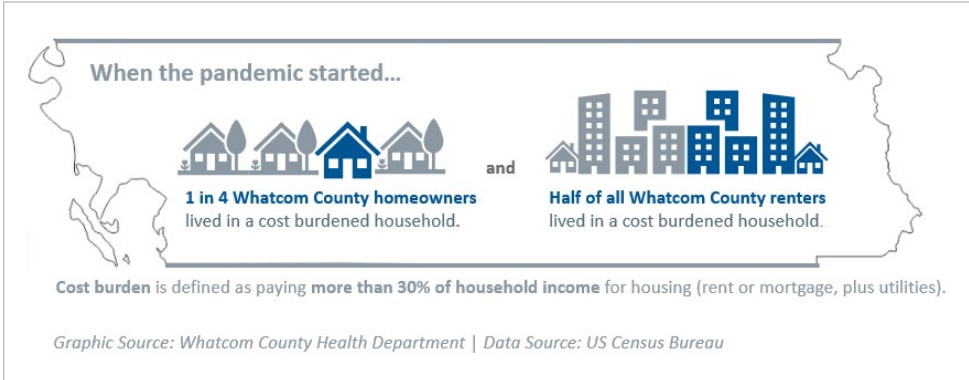
Housing realities in Whatcom County

0.8%
rental vacancy

\$1,245
average rent

776 sq.ft.
average apartment size

Source: [U of W. WA State Apartment Market Report, 2021](#)



The same supports and programs are desperately needed for unaccompanied Whatcom County youth. Roughly 40% of homeless youth nationwide identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) – compared to 7-10% of the general youth population identifying as LGBTQ (Source: *NW Youth Services, 2021*). Programs like NW Youth Service’s Queer Youth Project (QYP) are dedicated to supporting youth through school-based programs, development opportunities, care referrals, and free counseling. PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center donated \$35,000 in community benefit funds to enhance QYP efforts in 2020 and 2021.

THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

We’re working with our partners to support our most medically fragile community members experiencing homelessness as well as families and youth experiencing homelessness.

PARTNERS COLLABORATE TO DESIGN THE WAY STATION

Our partnership with The Way Station is focused on alleviating immediate health impacts for unhoused people to assist their transition to sustainable housing. Following renovation of an existing building, The Way Station will open its doors as a safe and welcoming place for individuals and families experiencing homelessness to access a constellation of health and social services. Eighteen beds of 24-7 recuperative respite care will be available, accompanied by medical and behavioral health and hygiene services including laundry and shower facilities. PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center joined partners from Whatcom County, City of Bellingham, Opportunity Council and Unity Care NW to envision this facility. PeaceHealth contributed an initial \$400,000 to seed the project. Together, we have raised the millions required to open The Way Station’s doors in 2023.



“Housing instability and homelessness are enormously complex issues, but there is one simple guiding moral imperative: Everyone should have access to decent, safe, and affordable housing. Housing should be considered a human right that we need to invest in as a nation.”

– Greg Winter, Executive Director Opportunity Council

KEY BENEFITS

- Partner co-location offers an array of unique supports under one roof.
- Provides a safe and welcoming place where individuals experiencing homelessness can heal and recuperate after illness or hospital stay.
- Offers access to much-needed hygiene services (e.g. showers, restrooms and laundry).



HOME - Community priorities: sharing a common vision

PeaceHealth looks forward to continuing vital housing partnerships with organizations that share a common investment vision – Mercy Housing NW, Lydia Place, Northwest Youth Services, Opportunity Council, Road2Home, Interfaith’s Family Promise Program, and others. We applaud their collective efforts.



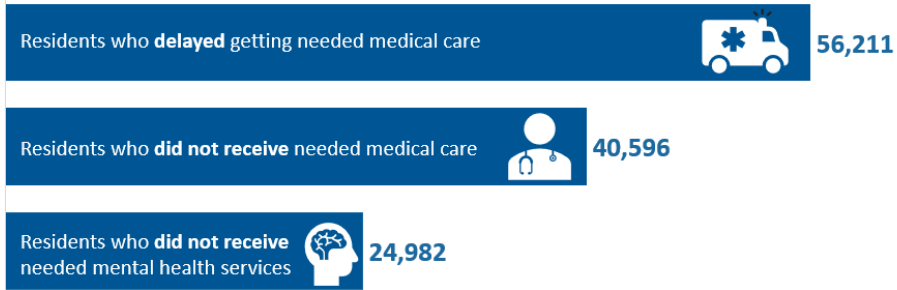
Providing whole-person care

Matching investments in treatment with investments in prevention

Services that help people with behavioral health and substance use issues are in great demand, made worse by the anxiety and isolation of the pandemic. Long wait times to see behavioral health providers are common throughout Whatcom County. In addition, our community is living with the long-term impacts of the opioid crisis. A rise in street forms of fentanyl has been especially dangerous, leading to spikes in overdose related deaths. According to the [Washington State Department of Health](#), drug overdoses in Washington State are at a five-year high.

Unmet behavioral health needs by the numbers

During the pandemic, a large number of Whatcom County residents did not access physical or behavioral health care services when they needed them.



Graphic Source: Whatcom County Health Department | Data Source: WA State Department of Health

THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

Disturbing overdose trends could be far worse without changes led by healthcare professionals to ensure safe prescribing practices and access to treatment and prevention resources.



Eric Harry and Dr. Kevin Lee speak with patient about their plan for care (2019)

The collaboration between Cascade Medical Advantage and PeaceHealth celebrated four years of partnership in 2021 by achieving a very special milestone. In June 2021, Cascade Medical Advantage Navigator Eric Harry helped his 1000th patient since the program first began. Navigators, like Eric and Scott Elzea help patients with Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) during their hospital stay by offering vital services for treatment. Cascade Medical Advantage has an excellent reputation for helping patients continue with Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) after their stay.

Cascade Medical Advantage recognized that new parents needed similar support, and responded by adding Natalie Andrews, a Perinatal Public Health Nurse to the team in 2020. Together, Cascade Medical Advantage and the Childbirth Center implemented the Eat, Sleep, Console model of care for Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome

(NOWS). This mother-centered approach focuses on rooming babies with parents after birth. Simple things, like swaddling, swaying, breastfeeding, skin-to-skin contact, and low-level stimulation, dramatically reduce the need for medication while the baby is monitored for withdrawal.

These statistics reflect the urgency with which we need to strengthen supports and protective factors for youth and adults. For youth, one of the most important protective factors is the presence of a caring adult. In addition, peer, family, school and community connections all help lower rates of anxiety and depression that put youth at risk for suicide and substance use.

Continuing to make investments in programs like Communities in Schools (CIS) peer health mentoring and individualized support for students is a great example of acting locally to impact these trends. In 2020-2021, PeaceHealth invested \$85,000 to support the growth of CIS programming in Whatcom County.



HOPE - Community priorities: addressing barriers to care

More community collaboration is needed to address persistent inequities in access to behavioral healthcare. Immigrants, refugees, and people seeking asylum face stigma and hesitate to access public services for fear it will put them at risk. Stakeholders also report a lack of culturally sensitive, multilingual mental health workers to meet the needs of diverse communities. Partnerships like Cascade Medical Advantage continue to grow and evolve to meet treatment demand.

KEY BENEFITS

- 70% of patients continue with substance use disorder treatment once started. This is one of the highest success metrics in the state and nation.
- Clinical protocols and programs ensure healing relationships and safety for patients.

“By approaching the opioid epidemic through an evidenced-based, trauma-informed, harm-reduction lens, 1,000 people are on a pathway to wellness having been offered the option of treatment and outpatient support. The real change was the shift in our culture of caring by our interdisciplinary staff, including hospital-based physicians, care management, and leadership. It takes a team to achieve these outcomes.”

– Eric Harry, Counselor, SUDP, MAT & OPAT
Care Coordinator, Cascade Medical
Advantage & PeaceHealth



Addressing barriers to total health

Community connectors serve as a bridge

Community caregiving is about engaging people in their everyday lives and addressing factors impacting their health. Since social and economic factors represent 40% of a person’s total health, community health workers and others who help people navigate supportive services can make a significant difference. This is especially true when patients leave a healthcare setting and return home. Preventing hospital re-admissions and repeat emergency department visits is an important measure of success. Our community features a thriving network of supportive programs designed to meet our community health goals.

THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

Emotional well-being and access to physical and mental healthcare are important social determinants of health. Throughout the pandemic, we continued to participate in vital initiatives focused on improving health access and addressing equity gaps.

The pandemic intensified the need for community health workers. While accessing support services has always been challenging, virtual and remote interactions made it more difficult than ever for people to connect to services.

FAMILIAR FACES RECEIVE GRACE

Local programs have expanded their community reach during this difficult time. The Ground-Level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) program and Sea Mar and Unity Care NW Community Connectors connect people who have frequent hospital or emergency visits with case workers offering additional support. Since its formation, the GRACE team has worked with an average of 100 individuals per year, graduating many. Some participants reduced calls to 911 by 80% after the program.

Community Connectors from Sea Mar and Unity Care NW work with clients to navigate barriers in their health journeys, sometimes working with more than 1,600 patients annually. Patient challenges include housing, transportation for follow-up appointments, in-home care and accessing insurance. Combined, these programs have received more than \$100,000 in PeaceHealth funding each year since their inceptions.

Rural and remote navigation need by the numbers, 2021

50

average commute miles, round trip from rural and remote areas to access care

60%

farmworkers who speak languages other than Spanish
(Source: Sea Mar Promotores Program 2021)

47%

Spanish-speaking community members able to find providers who understand their culture, identity and language
(Source: Help Me Grow Survey, 2021)

7

indigenous languages spoken at one vaccine outreach clinic

KEY BENEFITS

- Decreased utilization of EMS and emergency care and other services for non-urgent reasons.
- Vital navigation support for patients facing barriers after a care visit.
- Up-to-date care plans in the Emergency Department for familiar faces.

CONNECTING CARE SERVICES FOR TRIBAL MEMBERS

2022 marks the addition of a new, important role in PeaceHealth Northwest facilities: the Native Liaison. This unique partnership with Northwest Washington Indian Health Board employs a liaison to work seamlessly across settings, advocating for Tribal members as they navigate emergency care, hospitals, hospice, in-home care, specialty visits and childbirth. Connectedness and trust will be cornerstones of the program as Liaisons connect Tribal members with the care and support they need for health and healing.

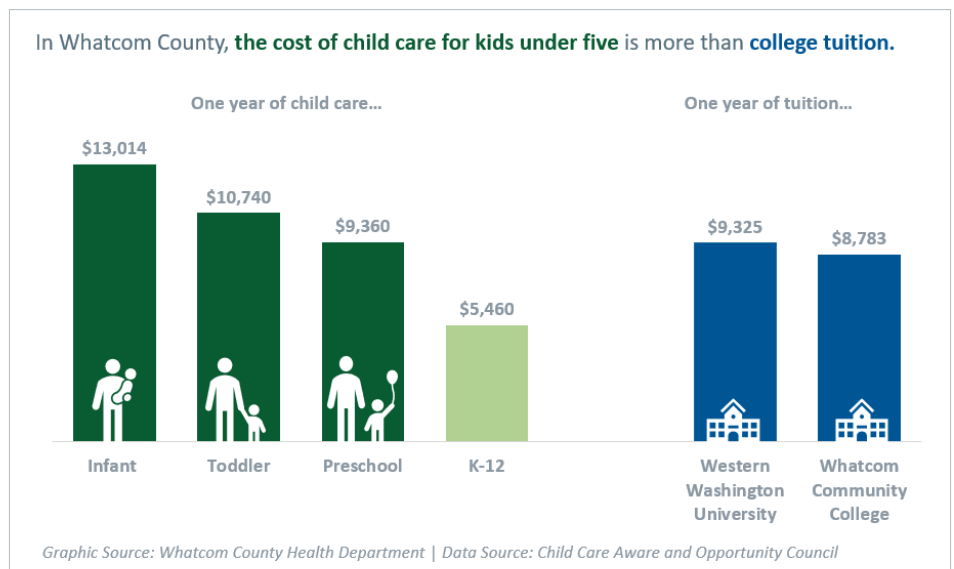
A GROWING NEED FOR CHILDCARE

The COVID-19 pandemic had a [significant impact](#) on the affordability and availability of already-stretched childcare services in our region. Twenty-four percent of the state’s licensed childcare providers closed their doors during the pandemic—some permanently—reducing capacity and shrinking the childcare workforce by 30% or more. During school closures, many parents found themselves serving as full-time caregivers, teachers and employees.

The cost of childcare has increased significantly over the last 20 years. Federal poverty guidelines have not kept pace, leaving many low-income families without access to publicly funded care. According to a preliminary report [County Child Care Demand](#) by Western Washington University in partnership with United Way of Whatcom County, childcare availability for kids under five would need to triple to more than 5,800 spots by 2025 to meet demand.

“In this extended pandemic, partnerships and open lines of communication are key. Everything has changed, yet we still serve the community together. When we do our best to stay updated, we can better serve others.”

– Yolanda Rodriguez, Hospital Community Connector and Liaison to Sea Mar Community Health Center



CARE – Community priorities: closing gaps for underserved communities

Future work needs to build on the foundation of community health worker programs to reach underserved communities through new roles and creative approaches like mobile pop-up health clinics and outreach fairs. Success also requires closing the gap in language services through more in-person interpreters and addressing the needs of speakers of Mayan indigenous languages and other languages of limited diffusion. Additional community partnerships are needed to improve access to vital basic services like dental care and affordable quality childcare.





Building innovative, culturally appropriate networks

Ensuring food reaches underserved communities

Access to healthy affordable food is a critical issue affecting children and families in our communities. We believe everyone should have access to nutritious food because food insecurity can lead to a lifetime of negative health consequences. There is a clear connection between food insecurity and high levels of stress, poor nutrition and chronic diet-related diseases like obesity and diabetes.

The COVID-19 pandemic erased decades of progress in reducing food insecurity. In 2018, an estimated 1 in 9 Americans was food insecure. That translates to more than 37 million people, including more than 11 million children, who don't have consistent access to nutritious food. That number peaked to new heights in 2020 and still has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.



Commons Thread PeaceHealth garden volunteer

THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

We are working with our partners to increase equitable access to culturally appropriate, nutritious food in hard-to-reach areas.

Food insecurity is part of a complex web of issues related to not having enough resources to meet basic needs. Even households that only experience periodic food insecurity often struggle with multiple challenges including lack of affordable housing, healthcare, steady employment and a living wage. The result is often a series of tradeoffs. While food insecurity is related to poverty, not all people experiencing food insecurity live below the poverty line.

A food environment index indicates access to healthy foods by considering the distance an individual lives from a grocery store, supermarket or other locations for healthy food purchases as well as the cost barriers to accessing healthy food. The Food Environment index ranges from a scale of 0 (worst) to 10 (best) and equally weights two indicators of food environment: 1) limited access to healthy foods, and 2) food insecurity.

Whatcom Food Access by the numbers, 2020

1 in 4

household members hungry because they did not have enough food

37%

low-income respondents likely to have gone hungry in past 12 months

Source: [Opportunity Council, Prosperity Project Community Needs Assessment 2021](#)

BELLINGHAM FOOD BANK EXPANDS REACH

Farmworker families labor tirelessly through the growing and harvesting seasons to supply food to our community. Long working hours, lack of transportation and language barriers make accessing food bank sites difficult.

In 2019, Bellingham Food Bank recognized that even with expanded hours at their main distribution site, more had to be done to meet the needs of families facing food insecurity. Through a multi-partnership with Agape Service Project, they were able to connect underserved families with nutritious, culturally relevant grocery food boxes during peak farming seasons.

This collaboration of service organizations—known as *Viviendo Bien*—works with farm employers to serve families. The collaboration involves Northwest Educational Service District 189, the *Vamos Outdoors Project*, the Whatcom County Library System (supporting children’s programming and outdoor education), and the Lynden School District and *Common Threads Farm* (providing free breakfast and lunch). The program plans to reach 280 households each week in the summer of 2022.

In 2021, PeaceHealth contributed \$75,000 in funding to support the efforts of Bellingham Food Bank and the Whatcom YMCA’s food distribution efforts.



PeaceHealth Pediatrician Dr. Filuk checks out items in the BFB grocery box. The Pediatrics Clinic is a newer distribution site for the food boxes.

KEY BENEFITS

- Bellingham Food Bank packs 700 grocery boxes weekly for distribution via their home and satellite delivery program.
- Fresh produce is locally sourced from Whatcom and Skagit farms.



NOURISH – Community priorities: expanding access to nutrition

Innovative programs that combine access to healthcare with food security are already happening in our community and we’d like to see them grow. With a focus on expanding access to affordable, nutritious food, PeaceHealth will continue seeking ways to support partnerships with food pantries, community meals, fruit and veggie prescription programs, community gardens, and mobile distribution programs that focus on serving hard to reach communities.

Delivering better nutrition

32,348

home delivery food boxes

5,646

food boxes delivered to farm workers

2.8 million

pounds of food distributed

Source: Bellingham Food Bank, 2020

“Nourishing communities is about so much more than just food, even for a food-focused organization. It’s really about how are we seeing, loving and supporting one another.”

– Laura Plaut, Executive Director Common Threads, a nonprofit that connects kids to healthy food in the garden, kitchen and at the table.

Final thoughts

For times ahead

Our Community Health Needs Assessment process holds us accountable to listening and learning from our communities. PeaceHealth recognizes that our work is far from over. The needs are forever evolving—and so are we.

We are humbled and honored to serve and learn from our communities. We pledge to continue our collaborative work, standing beside our partners during these challenging times. We invite you to join us in our pursuit of health justice for all.

TOGETHER WE WILL BUILD THE FUTURE.