



Whatcom County Health Department

Strategic Plan

2010 – 2014

PUBLIC HEALTH
ALWAYS WORKING FOR A SAFER AND
HEALTHIER WHATCOM COUNTY

**Whatcom County Health Department
Strategic Plan Summary
2010 – 2014**

Long Range Strategies			
	Build community understanding and investment in public health.	Create system level change to improve health outcomes.	Reinforce and support a skilled and informed workforce.
2010 -2014 Strategic Goals	<p>Cultivate political support and community awareness of public health and human service issues, trends, and necessary interventions.</p> <p>Ensure that the role and function of the WCHD as the local public health authority is commonly understood.</p> <p>Maintain the infrastructure necessary to sustain critical public health services.</p>	<p>Coordinate with community partners to build system capacity and resilience.</p> <p>Increase the value and use of community health assessment.</p> <p>Advocate for policies and environmental changes that address the social and environmental conditions impacting health.</p> <p>Develop a plan for improving opportunities for all Whatcom County residents to be healthy regardless of income, education, or ethnic background.</p>	<p>Prioritize communication efforts throughout the agency to promote a high level of awareness, empowerment, and coordination.</p> <p>Cultivate staff expertise and best practices throughout the agency.</p> <p>Encourage cross-agency integration of services and programs to maximize effectiveness and efficiency.</p> <p>Maintain a flexible labor force that can respond quickly to outbreaks and emergencies.</p>

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I. Introduction

The Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) is a local governmental public health and human services agency. The agency is mandated by the State of Washington to provide specific disease prevention and health promotion services in Whatcom County and to facilitate system level coordination for addressing chronic and emergent public health needs.

In response to reduced funding resources and significant public health challenges, the agency launched a strategic planning process in 2009. The planning process aimed to address five strategic questions:

- How do we remain responsive to changing community health needs?
- How do we communicate who we are and what we do?
- How do we incorporate the value of increasing health opportunities in all we do?
- What is an effective process for determining our priorities?
- What competencies should we build in the organization?

In response to these questions, the 2010-2014 Strategic Plan serves as a tool for guiding the allocation of agency resources and focusing development efforts proactively. It also serves as a vehicle for communicating with community partners in joint efforts to ensure that all people in Whatcom County have the opportunities they need to thrive in a safe and healthy environment.

II. Planning Process

The Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD) leads many data collection and planning efforts, both within the agency and in coordination with other organizations in Whatcom County. The 2010-2014 WCHD Strategic Plan does not attempt to duplicate these other planning efforts, but rather serves as a tool for guiding the Department in its own organizational development.

This Strategic Plan provides a long-term perspective for the bi-annual Department Work Plan and budget process, and informs the Department's approach to achieving the public health goals articulated in the Whatcom County Comprehensive Health Plan. Above all, the 2010-2014 WCHD Strategic Plan represents an ongoing process for strengthening the Department's ability to serve the public health needs of a rapidly changing community.

In 2009, the agency engaged in a planning process involving all 80 staff members and the Public Health Advisory Board in a number of ways, including:

- Staff meetings within divisions to generate in-depth analysis.
- Cross-agency staff meetings to facilitate dialogue between divisions.
- Public Health Advisory Board input to gather a broader perspective.
- Management Team meetings with interested staff, to empower leadership from within.
- All-staff meetings to establish common language and common ground.
- Regular email communication and input opportunities for accessibility and transparency.

Ongoing planning efforts will continue to emphasize staff involvement, interdepartmental coordination, dialogue, learning, and creativity. The approach to planning for the Health Department is not "what more can we do?" but rather, "how can we best fulfill our mission and uphold our mandates in a way that is sustainable and increasingly aligned with our principles and values?"

III. Guiding Statements

Mission: Whatcom County Health Department is a local governmental public health and human services agency. Our mission is to lead the community in promoting health and preventing disease.

Vision: All people in our community have the opportunities they need to thrive in a safe and healthy environment.

Principles:

- ⊕ We believe that the physical, mental, social, and environmental needs of all people must be met to achieve community wellness because health starts where we live, learn, work, and play.
- ⊕ We believe that healthy social and physical environments maximize opportunities for healthy behavior.
- ⊕ We believe that improving opportunities for everyone to be healthy regardless of income, education, or ethnic background is the foundation of public health.
- ⊕ We believe that early interventions with young children and families are essential for improving population health and reducing the burden of disease.

Unique Role

As Whatcom County's public health and human services agency, we hold responsibility for:

1. **Leadership:** We facilitate efforts to identify and respond to priority health issues and collaborate with community partners to develop the systems for promoting health and preventing injury and disease.
2. **Health Assessment:** We collect, analyze, and share information about health conditions, risks, and resources in our community with attention to the social, economic, and environmental conditions that may increase the burden of disease.
3. **Policy Development:** We develop and advocate for policies that strengthen and sustain community health and ensure access to services.
4. **Assurance:** We enforce state and local health regulations, maintain community capacity to respond to critical situations such as disease outbreaks and environmental hazards, and assure the delivery of public health and human services to everyone in the community.

Values

- **Compassion/Respect:** We treat all individuals as we would like to be treated.
- **Cooperation/Collaboration:** We value the input and perspectives of all community members. Our success depends on working with diverse partners toward common goals.
- **Creativity/Innovation:** We create effective new approaches to solve difficult problems.
- **Effectiveness:** We gather information, evaluate our work, and focus our resources efficiently to achieve results.
- **Positive Work Environment:** We create a workplace that fosters enjoyment, teamwork, mutual support, and good humor.
- **Meaningful Work:** We are committed to excellence, being of service, and personal fulfillment in our work.
- **Integrity:** We strive to do the right thing... always, regardless of difficulty.

Definitions

Health: The ability of a system to maintain its integrity in response to challenges. Healthy systems are resilient, diverse, and interdependent.

Healthcare: Services that support the health of individuals, including the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of medical, dental, and behavioral health diseases and their adverse consequences.

Public Health: The science and practice of protecting and improving the health of a community, with preventive medicine, health education, control of communicable diseases, application of sanitary measures, and monitoring of environmental hazards so that everyone has a chance at a healthy life. The opportunity for health starts long before the need for medical care.

Human Services: Services that address mental health, chemical dependency, developmental disabilities, and housing for low income and vulnerable populations.

Health Disparities: The gaps in the quality of health and healthcare across racial, ethnic, sexual orientation and socioeconomic groups. The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration defines health disparities as "population-specific differences in the presence of disease, health outcomes, or access to healthcare."

IV. Context and Challenges

Over the last 100 years, the lifespan of the average American has increased by 30 years with 25 of those attributed to improvements in public health.¹ Today, public health is challenged to continue those advancements. Across the United States, public health departments are undergoing major changes. There is a growing understanding that *public health* must be viewed as a community system, not as a centralized agency providing one-on-one services. To make a lasting impact, the focus of public health agencies has been shifting towards prevention, community engagement, and system change. With reduced funding and staffing levels stretched thin, even the direct public health services mandated by federal, state, and county legislature are being re-examined as opportunities to encourage community awareness and collaboration. The mandates for the Whatcom County Health Department are to:

- Monitor, investigate, and report on communicable diseases.
- Control communicable diseases through appropriate vaccine distribution and monitoring.
- Administer public funding to ensure coordination of services for developmental disabilities, substance abuse, mental health, low-income housing, and homelessness.
- Enforce environmental health regulations including on-site sewage, solid waste disposal, food safety, and clean indoor air.
- Maintain vital records (e.g. birth and death certificates).
- Respond to public health emergencies and natural disasters.

In addition to upholding these mandates, the Whatcom County Health Department, like other public health departments, holds a much larger responsibility for **monitoring** the overall health of the community and **directing** public resources towards the greatest benefit. The Public Health Advisory Board (PHAB) advises the Department and advocates for systems and policies to protect the most vulnerable populations.

To develop a long-range strategic plan for the WCHD, Department staff in all divisions analyzed internal strengths and weaknesses, and external opportunities and threats. Through this analysis, three critical interrelated challenges became apparent.

Challenge #1: Emergency Response

Responding to public health emergencies such as disease outbreaks, mass casualty incidents, or naturally occurring disasters is a mandated responsibility of the Health Department. To do this successfully, the Health Department must:

- Monitor local, regional, national, and international risks to public health.
- Determine which agencies need to be involved in preparation and response.
- Lead planning efforts to make sure the community is prepared.
- Manage critical inter-agency and public communications.
- Maintain an infrastructure of trained staff, equipment, and other resources to be able to respond effectively to public health emergencies.

¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00056796.htm>

Public health emergencies are often unpredictable in size and scope, and the Health Department must be prepared to ramp up efforts without warning. This means that the agency must be uniquely flexible and able to get “all hands on deck,” while at the same time maintaining a base level of service for other core functions. The challenge for the Department is how to build this flexibility and resilience within the agency and for the County as a whole.

Challenge #2: System Capacity

The Health Department engages organizations and community leaders in the process of defining optimal health and coordinating the resources necessary to create it. In this ongoing exploration, the Health Department serves as a lead agency to:

- Identify relevant health data and then gather, analyze, and communicate information about health issues and outcomes.
- Bring together community partners to share information and identify best practices.
- Coordinate multiple agency and community planning efforts.

To build system capacity, several important issues are at stake. First, identifying, analyzing, and communicating meaningful data is crucial for directing resources effectively and ensuring that practices and policies are based on sound data. The Department does not currently have the technology, training, and time to do this well. Secondly, while the trajectory of public health is moving towards system and policy change, there will always be some level of direct services provided. The challenge is to make sure that the Department is providing the right services at the right time. There is a need to increase the flexibility of service delivery, so that staff can focus more attention on system development work. By strengthening the network of public health and human services, those agencies best positioned to deliver direct services will be enabled and empowered to do so. The Department would ideally be positioned to fill emergent service gaps as needed, and then build systems to reduce those gaps over time.

Challenge #3: Communications

Internally, the Department faces communication challenges because operations are not all located in one building. This is compounded by our diverse programs, services, and partners. A more problematic issue is the ability to provide effective public education and communication. In order for the Department to fulfill its leadership role, it must cultivate the support of the community it serves. The challenge is to forge community understanding of causes and effects, so that there is a willingness to make the changes that will reduce the incidence of disease and improve health outcomes.

Looking ahead

Building on the strengths of highly committed staff and community partners, the Department is positioned to meet these challenges in the coming five years. Taking incremental steps towards the strategic goals and objectives, the Department will judiciously leverage resources at the regional, state, and federal level to meet the public health needs of Whatcom County.

V. Strategies, Goals, and Objectives

Long Range Strategies

- A. Build community understanding and investment in public health.
- B. Advocate for system level change to improve health outcomes.
- C. Reinforce and support a skilled and informed workforce.

Long Range Strategy

A. Build community understanding and investment in public health.

Strategic Goal

1. Cultivate community awareness of public health and human service issues, trends, and necessary interventions.

Objectives

- a. Establish a coherent database of health indicators that “tells the story” with relevant statistics and outcome measures.
- b. Develop and implement a communication plan for “telling the story” to citizens, leaders, and community partners.

Strategic Goal

2. Ensure that the role and function of the WCHD as the local public health authority is commonly understood.

Objectives

- a. Make certain that all health department employees and PHAB members are able to succinctly and accurately communicate WCHD responsibilities.
- b. Maintain a high quality user-friendly website that serves as an up-to-date public resource and effectively represents community health goals.

Strategic Goal

3. Maintain the infrastructure necessary to sustain critical public health services.

Objectives

- a. Establish the base level of infrastructure necessary to sustain public health and secure the funding necessary to fill gaps.
- b. Judiciously leverage resources and alliances at the regional, state, and federal levels.
- c. Enable PHAB and elected officials to fully understand sources and uses of public funds and serve as informed and effective advocates for public health.
- d. Provide PHAB and elected officials with the information they need to demonstrate how public health services and policies produce positive outcomes.

Long Range Strategy

B. Create system level change to improve health outcomes.

Strategic Goal

1. Coordinate with community partners to build system capacity and resilience.

Objectives

- a. Convene community partnerships to reorganize systems and share resources in targeted areas in the Comprehensive Health Plan.
- b. Provide data and data analysis to assure that programs and policies are evidence-based.
- c. Develop programs and policies that improve opportunities for all in our community to live healthy lives.
- d. Avoid gaps in services by ensuring that any changes in Health Department services are coordinated with community partners.
- e. Seek increased diversity in community partnerships.
- f. Expand community partnerships to include groups and organizations that work to provide opportunities for health to all regardless of income, education, or ethnic background.

Strategic Goal

2. Increase the value and use of community health assessment.

Objectives:

- a. Improve systems for identifying, tracking, analyzing, and communicating data that will be the most useful and meaningful.
- b. Increase coordination with other agencies that collect and communicate health indicator data.
- c. Use community health assessment results as a communication tool.

Strategic Goal

3. Advocate for policies and environmental changes that address the social and environmental conditions impacting health.

Objectives

- a. Educate staff, PHAB members, and community partners about policy as a public health intervention.
- b. Develop a community driven policy agenda within the next five years.
- c. Allocate adequate staff time and training for advancing policy level work.
- d. Maximize improvements in population health and minimize disease burden by giving priority to prenatal and early childhood initiatives and to families with young children.

Strategic Goal

4. Develop a plan for improving health opportunities for all Whatcom County residents where they live, learn, work, and play.

Objectives

- a. Ensure that social and environmental health factors are incorporated into data tracking and “telling the story.”
- b. Utilize tools and insights gained from other health departments across the U.S. to inform efforts in Whatcom County.

C. Reinforce and support a skilled and informed workforce.

Strategic Goal

1. Prioritize communication efforts throughout the agency to promote a high level of awareness, empowerment, and coordination.

Objectives

- a. Continue assuring that all staff receives media releases and agency level updates.
- b. Expand opportunities for staff engagement in Department evaluation and planning.

Strategic Goal

2. Cultivate staff expertise and best practices throughout the agency.

Objectives

- a. Maintain an inventory of best practices that are being used in the agency.
- b. Advance the expertise and capacity to identify, track, analyze, and communicate health indicator data, and ensure that all staff has a working understanding of logic models and data-driven program evaluation and development.
- c. Establish ongoing training programs to promote a culture of leadership, cultural competency, and customer service.
- d. Develop targeted staff development and training programs to further Strategic Plan objectives.
- e. Ensure that staff performance and accountability meet standards for quality improvement.

Strategic Goal

3. Encourage cross-agency integration of services and programs to maximize effectiveness and efficiency.

Objectives

- a. Adjust staffing creatively and flexibly within and between divisions.
- b. Empower staff to explore innovative ways to coordinate services and provide public health education.

Strategic Goal

4. Maintain a flexible labor force who can respond quickly to outbreaks and emergencies.

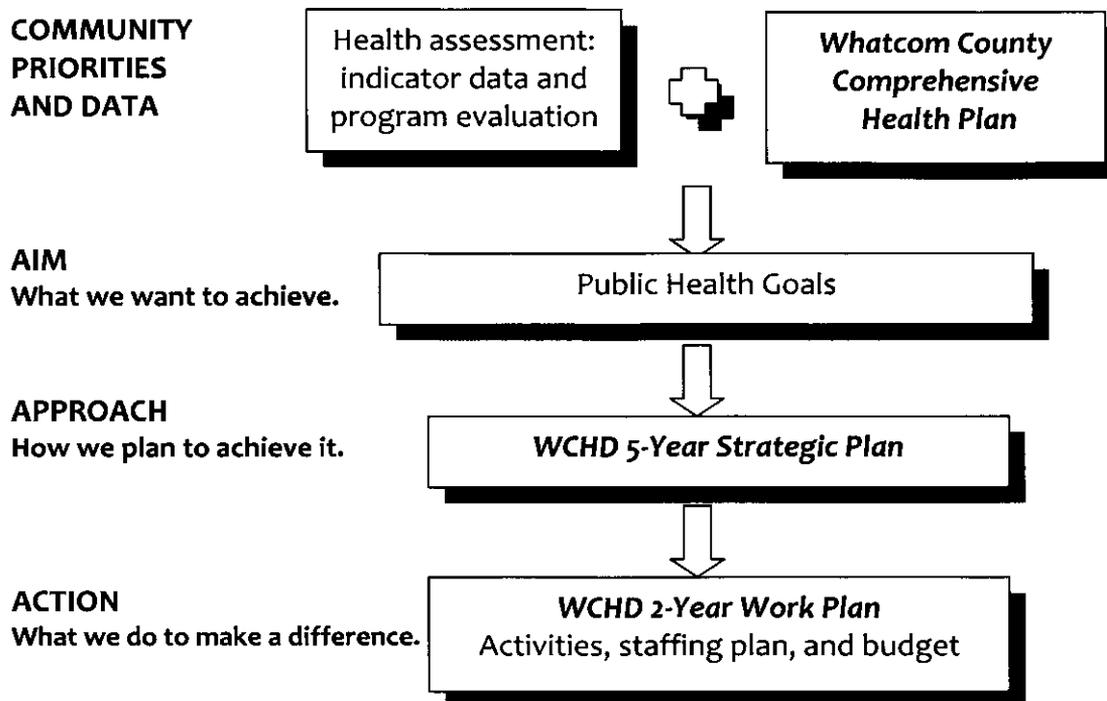
Objectives

- a. Evaluate and improve agency systems for emergency preparedness and surge responses, to protect agency resilience and reduce stress on employees.
- b. Anticipate the risk of misinformation and provide clear, proactive messaging through multiple media outlets.
- c. Ensure that elected officials understand the costs and staffing requirements associated with preparation and surge response.

VI. Process of Implementation

The 2010-2014 Strategic Plan represents an ongoing process of setting priorities, reflecting on what is being learned, and taking realistic steps forward. The Strategic Plan provides the organizational guideposts for staff and management to discuss and determine where to focus time and resources. At the broadest level, the implementation of the five-year Strategic Plan occurs through the development and monitoring of the bi-annual Work Plan and budget. An Agency Planning Team, composed of management and staff representatives from all divisions, manages this process and oversees communication with agency staff and the PHAB.

Every two years, the Planning Team reviews the Comprehensive Health Plan and health indicator data to establish or revise long-term public health goals. The strategic planning matrix (Appendix A) is then applied to the long-term goals, to develop the bi-annual Work Plan and budget.



VII. Appendix A: Planning Matrix

Whatcom County Health Department 2-Year Work Plan Development Matrix

EXAMPLE

	Build Community Understanding and Investment in Public Health	Create System Level Change to Improve Health Outcomes	Reinforce and Support a Skilled and Informed Workforce
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data, information, or partnerships would we need? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What systems or policy changes would we advocate for? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training or development needs would we focus on?
Promote Health for all and Reduce Health Disparities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete health disparities assessment (sentinel conditions). • Conduct policy-maker assessment of understanding of public health. Address gaps in understanding. • Establish relationships with media to communicate public health priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase diversity of partnerships. • Identify and advocate for policies that improve health opportunities for all. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct social determinants of health and health advocacy training for all staff. • Develop Health Opportunities Team.
Improve Health and Well-being of Young Children			

	Build Community Understanding and Investment in Public Health	Create System Level Change to Improve Health Outcomes	Reinforce and Support a Skilled and Informed Workforce
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data, information, or partnerships would we need? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What systems or policy changes would we advocate for? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training or development needs would we focus on?
Meet Behavioral Health Needs Through Continuum of Services and Supports			
Create Sustainable “Healthy Community” Environments			
Protect Public from Communicable Diseases and Emergent Conditions			
Achieve Public Health Standards for Organizational Excellence			