Protecting Washington communities from the threats of communicable disease is one of our state’s Foundational Public Health Services (FPHS).

San Juan County Health and Community Services Department provides a wide array of direct public health services, and referrals to social services for their communities.

The county includes almost 17,000 people spread across 621 square miles. 447 of those miles are in the Salish Sea. This isolation adds to the challenges of effectively responding to a communicable disease outbreak.

Chickenpox outbreak in San Juan County

On May 31, 2018, a case of chickenpox (varicella) was reported to San Juan County Health & Community Services (health department). This was the first of 41 cases on Orcas, Lopez, San Juan and Shaw Islands, and the beginning of two distinct outbreaks of chickenpox in the county over the course of eight months.

With the majority of the department’s Community Health and Administrative support staff involved in response, the outbreaks had a significant impact on the health department’s staffing, budget and services. The health department led case investigation and surveillance efforts, and provided information and guidance to providers, schools and the general public in order to prevent the spread of the disease.

Public health responds to unique challenges

In addition to the essential functions above, the health department found itself in the unique position of being the only provider of pediatric immunization services on Orcas Island, which was at the center of the outbreak. On the second day of the outbreak, they set up the first of 35 pop-up chickenpox immunization clinics on Orcas Island. Public health nursing staff provided almost 200 pediatric immunizations during the course of the outbreaks.
FPHS – Critical support for rural communities

Communicable disease outbreaks strain services in any community. But with fewer services and resources to help their community members, rural counties face disease outbreaks without a safety net.

Legislators can help

Legislators can help rural and remote local health jurisdictions—and the schools and community members they serve—by:

**Fully funding the essential public health services rural communities rely on.**

Funding Foundational Public Health Services will allow local health jurisdictions to prevent and respond to communicable disease outbreaks without jeopardizing other critical public health services.

**Supporting policy to prohibit student immunization Personal Belief exemptions.**

This would require students to be fully vaccinated in order to attend school unless they are exempt from immunizations for medical or religious reasons.

Eliminating Personal Belief exemptions would increase student immunization rates and provide community-level protection for our most vulnerable citizens.

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**Costs of the outbreak**

**Schools**

Where cases were associated with a school or preschool, all un- or under-immunized students and staff were excluded from school. Almost 150 students were excluded from various schools during the course of the outbreak.

School districts rely on daily student attendance count for state funding. With over 100 students excluded from one of the larger school districts, this had a significant impact on the district.

Preschools and childcare centers also incurred costs, as many were unable to collect monthly tuition from families whose children were ill, excluded from school, or not able to attend due to the months-long closure of an Infant Room in one of the child care centers.

**Health Department**

The total cost of the outbreak to the health department was over $73,000. Public health response efforts quickly exhausted the department’s emergency funds. The remaining funds came out of the department’s current expense dollars which were diverted from other essential public health programs and services.

Providing immunization services required cancelling and postponing other essential services to the public including Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Nutritional Program, Maternity Support, and Newborn Outreach services. As a result, the caseload for WIC dropped during this time. Because WIC is funded by caseload count from the prior year, the department’s WIC funding will be reduced in the upcoming funding year. This will significantly impact staffing and services.

**Families**

Area families were impacted by all of the above. Working families relying on tourist dollars felt an additional sting during a time of year when they typically earn a significant portion of their annual income.

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**FPHS Partners**

The Governmental Public Health System

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