

# A Vital Bridge with the Community

*PeaceHealth United General Medical Center*

## 2022-2025 Community Health Needs Assessment



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# Message from leadership:

**Generous. Resilient. Collaborative. These words capture the spirit of our Skagit communities.**

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. These times required flexibility and perseverance as everyone worked together to meet growing community needs.

There is no single story that captures the strength of the Skagit community—there are many. Skagit Public Health shined in their response to the pandemic. They met every new challenge with dedication and resilience, including the mobilization of COVID-19 testing and monumental vaccination efforts across the region. Helping Hands Food Bank shifted operations almost overnight to expand food distribution to areas where hunger is greatest. Community Action of Skagit County tackled new developments to create affordable housing. Both Friendship House and Skagit Connections responded to urgent concerns facing the unsheltered community. This response led to the opening of Skagit First Step, a 24-7 emergency shelter with 45 pallet shelters, and a traveling shower trailer operated by Skagit Connections.

All these stories and more are examples of community health projects that could not be led by a single organization working alone. Many sectors, including government, private businesses, nonprofits, and faith organizations cooperated to bring these projects to life. At PeaceHealth, we are a proud and humble partner in this work. We know there is still much opportunity to improve ahead but firmly trust that the collaborative and generous spirit of the Skagit community will continue to unite us in a common vision.

Our Coast Salish neighbors share a vision for unity and healing. The Samish, Sauk-Suiattle, Swinomish, and Upper Skagit Peoples are great teachers for our healing profession. We have taken their words to heart and raise our hands to express our deepest gratitude and appreciation of their heritage and relationship to the land and people. We hope that new partnerships in the coming years, such as the addition of a Native Liaison role in our Northwest PeaceHealth medical centers, will honor these relationships.

We proudly join with others who envision a brighter future of equity, justice and health for all who call Skagit County home.



Christopher Johnston  
Chief Administrative Officer  
PeaceHealth United General Medical Center



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?

Our process began by thanking our partners at the [Population Health Trust](#), who published an excellent and comprehensive [Skagit County Community Health Assessment: Summary Report](#) in September of 2021. Population Health Trust surveyed community members, held community listening forums, hosted equity panel discussions and interviewed 32 key stakeholders to arrive at seven emerging themes. Our assessment builds on this strong work, and also references other key reports produced locally, including the [2021 UW Housing Assessment](#) and [Affordable Housing: A Priority for a Healthy Population](#). 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.

## OUR KEY FINDINGS

### The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 are among the most crucial health issues.

The Latinx community and other communities of color felt the impacts most. This was made worse by low wages and overexposure to the virus in essential job workplaces.

### Housing availability remains a challenge,

despite efforts and programs at many levels to support affordable and equitable housing.

### Access to behavioral health is limited,

and along with it is a need for substance use disorder care and treatment. Finding resources is difficult and there is often no availability.

### Social isolation and loneliness

are serious yet underappreciated public health risks that affect a significant portion of the population.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted stability for many families, exacerbating existing social inequities as seen by rises in **hunger, homelessness, unemployment, education interruptions, childcare inaccessibility, and behavioral health concerns.**

## WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE IN

Situated alongside the Skagit Valley River, PeaceHealth United General Medical Center is a critical access hospital serving urban, rural and remotely located patients. Through the medical center and PeaceHealth Medical Group clinics, our caregivers deliver an array of preventative care, cancer care, emergency treatment, surgical procedures, and recovery services with compassion.

PeaceHealth's hospital and clinics are located in Sedro-Woolley and Burlington, but our service area is defined by the boundaries of Skagit County Public Hospital District 304. Services extend to individuals in the surrounding communities of Concrete, Bow, Lyman, Marblemount, Rockport, Clear Lake and Hamilton. There are two other hospital districts in Skagit County: Public Hospital District 1 and Public Hospital District 2.

PeaceHealth works collaboratively with other community healthcare providers and community-based service organizations including United General District 304, Community Action of Skagit County, and Skagit County Public Health to meet the healthcare needs in our community. These collaborations are essential to the residents of Skagit County.

It's important that relationships with organizations like United General District 304 are in place to help care for our community members. The district is headquartered on the same campus as the hospital and leases the land to PeaceHealth. Their focus is on building healthier communities through innovative programs. These district programs support active living, healthy eating and thriving children and families—critical elements of whole-person care. Together, we have collaborated on two projects: the [Skagit Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program](#), which brings healthy food and nutritional education to those who identify as food insecure; and [Help Me Grow® Skagit](#), which connects parents to a continuum of services.

## About PeaceHealth United General Medical Center

**35** Total licensed beds

**4.32** Average daily census

**3.35** Average length of stay (days)

**402** Employees

**253** Active medical staff

**470** Inpatient discharges per year

**54,038** Outpatient clinic visits

**1,370** Surgeries

**11,682** Emergency Department visits

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 focus on caring for them. This has been an essential element in preserving our 130-year legacy of community service and care.

It begins by hiring a diverse workforce and extends to creating conditions where all feel 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.

PeaceHealth has more than 400 employees throughout Sedro-Woolley and the surrounding service area. Our employees are a vital part of our community. Like everyone else, they have been deeply impacted by the pandemic. With this, we recognize the weight and responsibility of caring for both our community and our teams. In 2020, 46 PeaceHealth employees in Skagit County received support with housing and utilities (52%), access to care or basic services like internet and transportation (24%), and food access (13%).

**"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

In addition to creating a supportive workplace, PeaceHealth continues to refine hiring practices to ensure a diverse workforce. We are committed to implementing changes reflective of our Core Values: respect, stewardship, collaboration and social justice.

**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.

**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 organization 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, there is evidence Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities face higher risk for chronic medical conditions. With less access to



**A growing community:**

**SEDRO-WOOLLEY**

**12,182**

Population

**SKAGIT COUNTY**

**131,945**

Population

**15.58%**

2010-20 population growth

**12.83%**

2010-20 population growth

*Source: World Population Review*

**...is becoming an increasingly diverse one**

% Race/Ethnicity Data of Population				
	Sedro-Woolley	Skagit County	Washington	United States
White	75	74	68	60
Latinx	19	19	13	19
Multi-Racial	7	3	5	3
Black/African American	2	1	4	13
Asian	1	2	10	6
American Indian/Alaska Native	<1	3	2	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1	<1	<1	<1

*Source: U.S Census*

healthcare, immigration concerns, language barriers, higher poverty rates and a higher likelihood of working in close contact with others in essential worker jobs, these community members also face higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19.

### POVERTY'S EXPANSIVE GRIP

Our Northern Washington community struggles with the deep effects of poverty and lack of access to care. In Skagit County, ethnic minorities experience poverty at a higher rate than white people. Latinx community members are 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 Skagit County.



### Poverty's expansive grip

Poverty rate by race in Skagit County



Source: [U.S. Census](#) Please note that data reflects only those who have identified on the U.S. Census as a particular race or ethnicity.

# 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 has 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.

A closer look at COVID-19 data from Skagit County and our PeaceHealth facilities shows significant disparities. For example, the Latinx community had 4.5 times more COVID-19 cases per capita when compared to white, non-Hispanic individuals (case rates of 6,624.2 and 1,470.4 cases per 100,000 people, respectively). Only 9% of all patients served from 2019-2021 identified as Latinx, yet they comprised 23% of the COVID-19 cases. This data suggests that, like other healthcare systems across the country, PeaceHealth has more work to do, particularly around addressing racial equity and social determinants of health. This includes the need for more outreach, engagement, cultural sensitivity and understanding, particularly around health access and care coordination.

### COVID-19 VACCINATION EFFORT

The COVID-19 vaccination effort is just one example that demonstrates the importance of changing systems. It was clear from early in the vaccination effort that there were community-specific barriers to access, and that vaccination outreach needed to be customized to reach different audiences. While Skagit County celebrated an important milestone by fully vaccinating 70.3% of the 12+ population by the end of 2021, some groups have consistently lower vaccination rates, including rural and Latinx communities.

Beyond vaccination, it has never been more important for us to promote collaboration with our community partners while expanding community-based care options. This is particularly important as we



### COVID-19's disproportionate impact

**9%**

of total patients identifying as Hispanic/Latinx

**23%**

of COVID-19 cases from Hispanic/Latinx population

**4.5x**

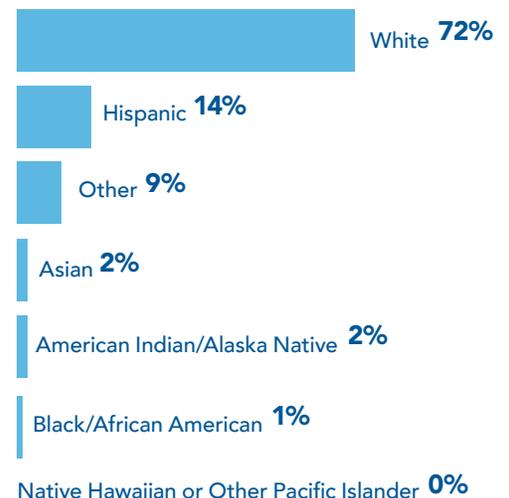
more Latinx COVID-19 cases compared to White, non-Hispanic population

Source: Washington Health Department  
COVID Data [www.doh.wa.gov/emergencies/COVID19/DataDashboard](http://www.doh.wa.gov/emergencies/COVID19/DataDashboard) (as of 11/15/2021)

### Percent of fully vaccinated population, by race and ethnicity

**70.3%**

of Skagit County is fully vaccinated and of those



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

work to address the backlog of demand shared by many of our partners. The many months of remote learning impacted not only students, but also vital programs offered through schools. Just before March 2020, PeaceHealth opened its first Washington state school-based health clinic at Sedro-Woolley High School, only to close operations soon after. Fortunately, services resumed in September 2021 to the delight of teachers, parents, students and the health team.

## 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 Skagit County, we will continue to seek out projects that improve community health and well-being for:

- Individuals with behavioral health conditions
- Families with young children
- Veterans
- Hispanic/Latinx populations
- All Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex community members
- Individuals experiencing developmental disabilities
- Youth and elders

**“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



### 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



# New opportunities for housing and hygiene

## Collaboration expands access to affordable homes and supportive services

Skagit County and its residents are experiencing a housing crisis as evidenced by one of the lowest vacancy rates in Washington state at 0.3% (Source: [Washington Center for Real Estate Research-2021 Spring Apartment Market Report](#)). Despite efforts and programs to support affordable and equitable housing, low availability and the resulting high cost of housing compared to income levels remains a challenge.

A household is considered cost burdened when it spends more than 30% of its income on housing. In Skagit County, single-parent families are particularly impacted. Housing costs consume 33% of their median household income. For households with two parents, housing takes up 24% of median income.

From 2012 to 2020, the average monthly rent in Skagit County increased by \$582 or 76.8% (Source: [Washington Center for Real Estate Research-2020 Fall Apartment Market Report](#)). An increase of \$100 in median monthly rent can result in 39% more unhoused individuals in rural and suburban areas. Although the pandemic eviction moratorium helped keep some families and individuals housed, this was a short-term fix. Our communities are likely to see continued rent increases and a new wave of unhoused individuals.

While our community is working to build more affordable housing options, the response is not enough to match the tremendous need. The [Skagit County Point In Time Count](#) revealed that from 2019 to 2020 alone, the number of unsheltered individuals grew 50% from 210 individuals to 314 individuals and chronically homeless individuals increased 40% from 52 to 73 individuals. These numbers continued to grow in 2021. We expect to see even more unhoused individuals due to increasing rents and the end of the eviction moratorium.

### THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

We're working with our partners to support building housing and shelter capacity in our community and to reach our most medically fragile community members, families and youth experiencing homelessness.

PeaceHealth seeks to invest in community-focused housing projects aimed at preventing future homelessness. Projects that include integrated social services and involve agencies with a reputation for holistically addressing community wellness and housing instability demonstrated the strongest outcomes. We're working with our partners to target efforts that support homeless diversion services and upstream approaches for whole-person care.

### Housing realities in Skagit County

# 33%

of single-parent household income spent on housing

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

# 35%

of people who received housing services in 2020 were 17 years old or younger

Source: [Washington State Department of Commerce Homeless Management Information System \(HMIS\), 2020](#)

# 40%

increase of chronically homeless individuals from 2019-2020

Source: [Skagit County Point in Time Count—Washington State Department of Commerce](#)

# 50%

increase of unsheltered individuals from 2019-2020

Source: [Skagit County Point in Time Count—Washington State Department of Commerce](#)

# 77%

increase in rent since 2012 (Approx. 9.6% increase annually)

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



## TRAVELING TRAILER TO PROMOTE HEALTHY HYGIENE

As the number of unsheltered individuals in Skagit County grew throughout 2020, it also became more difficult to serve these individuals. Driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing guidelines, traditional shelters were forced to limit capacity, putting more pressure on an already vulnerable community. During this time, unhoused community members could not access public showers. Skagit Connections stepped forward to help address this need with a vision for a traveling shower trailer that would serve the five major jurisdictions across Skagit County.



In 2021, PeaceHealth United General Medical Center and several other nonprofits came together to fund the purchase of the traveling shower trailer. Most shower and hygiene access remains shut down across Skagit County, especially for people living on the streets, and the personal and public health implications are immense. Community Action of Skagit County noted that some clients hadn't been able to take a shower for more than four months. By eliminating barriers to hygiene and access to supportive care, we increase opportunities for our community members to thrive. PeaceHealth contributed \$10,000 in community benefit funding to help purchase the new shower trailer.

Our recent collaborations include a pilot project with Community Action of Skagit County's Cascade Landing. Community Action is working with local government, private developers and the community to create affordable housing opportunities. By partnering with the property owner of an existing building, existing offices were reconfigured into cozy, affordable apartment homes. Cascade Landing will add 35 units to the housing market once renovations are completed. This is an important pilot project, considering that the 2021 vacancy rate is just 0.3%.

### KEY BENEFITS

- Provides access to much needed hygiene services (showers, restrooms).
- Reduces demand on other public showering sites while bringing showers to remote and rural areas.

**“The most compelling challenge our community faces is the lack of housing people can afford. Not only is housing a basic human right, it is a pre-requisite to individual and community health, the cornerstone of recovery from addiction and medical treatment, and a necessity for children to learn and thrive.”**

– Bill Henkel, Executive Director,  
Community Action of Skagit County



## HOME - Community priorities: housing as health

We believe that affordable housing should be a human right. When we provide housing in our communities, everyone is better off, and health is more attainable. This is especially true for individuals with disabilities, veterans and the medically fragile.

Prioritizing collaborations that serve these groups and preventing people from becoming unhoused is the important work ahead.





# Resiliency in the face of hardship

## New partnerships provide engagement and connection for youth

Services that help individuals with behavioral health and substance use issues face great demand, made worse by the anxiety and isolation of the pandemic. Long wait times to see behavioral health providers are common throughout Skagit County and often there is no option but to send people elsewhere to seek care because the demand continues to outpace the availability in our region.

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. More people in Washington died of drug overdoses in 2020 than any year in at least the past decade.

### YOUTH FACE MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

We are inspired by the youth in our community. They have navigated difficult times and shown resilience in the face of overwhelming change. Unfortunately, youth in our area faced significant behavioral health needs even before the pandemic started.

The [2019 Healthy Youth Survey](#) highlighted that 38% of 10th graders in our county felt so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more that they stopped doing their usual activities. In addition, the survey revealed that 58% of 12th graders were unable to stop or control worrying, and 23% of 12th graders considered attempting suicide. With COVID-19 shuttering our school districts as well as many critical local businesses and congregation spaces, the pandemic has further illuminated deep isolation, mental health challenges, behavioral ramifications, and threats to the overall well-being of Skagit County youth.

In March of 2021, the University of Washington partnered with the Washington State Health Care Authority, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Department of Health to survey more than 32,000 high school students in grades 9-12 across the state about their mental health.

Results in this [survey](#) were staggering. More than 17% of high school students reported they had seriously considered attempting suicide and more than 53% of transgender students said they seriously considered attempting suicide. These statistics reflect the urgency to strengthen mental health supports for youth.



### The opioid crisis in our community and state

Nearly **1 in 3** people know someone struggling with opioid use disorder  
*(Source: [Skagit Rising](#))*

**10.2%** of Skagit County deaths are drug overdoses  
*(Source: [WA DOH Opioid Overdose Dashboard](#))*

**15%** of Washington deaths are drug overdoses  
*(Source: [WA DOH Opioid Overdose Dashboard](#))*

**5%** of 10th graders recently took prescription opioids to get high  
*(Source: [Skagit Rising](#))*

## Skagit County Behavioral Health by the numbers

# 8th

leading cause of death in Washington is death by suicide  
(Source: [www.afsp.org/statistics](http://www.afsp.org/statistics))

# 16%

age-adjusted suicide rate per 100,000 individuals  
(Source: [www.afsp.org/statistics](http://www.afsp.org/statistics))

# 88%

of Washington communities without enough mental health providers  
(Source: [www.afsp.org/statistics](http://www.afsp.org/statistics))

# 58%

12th graders unable to stop or control worrying  
(Source: [2019 Healthy Youth Survey](http://2019.HealthyYouthSurvey.org))

# 22%

12th graders considered attempting suicide  
(Source: [2019 Healthy Youth Survey](http://2019.HealthyYouthSurvey.org))

**“We were concerned about rising rates of depression, anxiety and suicide among youth prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic has exacerbated the crisis to alarming levels. Our schools are overwhelmed and there are few youth-serving providers, which is compounded by a disjointed system of connecting youth to care.”**

– Danika Troupe, Program Coordinator, Certified Health Education Specialist, United General District 304



### THE COMMUNITY SPOKE—AND WE LISTENED

Disturbing overdose and behavioral health trends could be far worse without changes led by healthcare professionals and our trusted partners to ensure safe prescribing practices, access to treatment and prevention resources and community outreach.

### PARTNERSHIPS PROVIDE POSITIVE CONNECTIONS FOR YOUTH

In response, PeaceHealth prioritized supporting local organizations that are increasing community connectedness and providing positive paths to youth engagement. PeaceHealth contributed \$7,000 to the [Trek for Treasure Program](#) and the Burlington-Edison GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness & Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). Trek for Treasure is a unique hiking adventure for people of all ages, challenging families and friends to get out into the outdoors and be active together. Funding provided by the collaboration allowed GEAR UP families to participate in this hiking adventure together.

The University of Washington GEAR UP Project is part of a national effort to help students from low-income families prepare for and succeed in higher education. Funding this project was especially important to PeaceHealth

because it enables families and students to get outdoors and engage in physical activities that have the potential for long-term impacts on nutrition, weight and the physical and mental health of our community.

As a result of COVID-19, we have seen a sharp increase in unmet social emotional needs among students, especially those of color whose family members are more than likely to be frontline workers. Providing school sponsored activities that get students outdoors on the weekends has addressed students' mental health needs during a time when they are not able to socialize or participate in all their regular activities. The GEAR UP partnership built upon this work.

#### KEY BENEFITS

- Encourages community connectedness and physical activity to promote overall well-being.
- Promotes family bonding and strengthens connections to mental health services.



### HOPE - Community priorities: partnering to improve access

Demand for behavioral health and substance use services continues to outpace availability in Skagit County. In addition to finding ways to collaborate with partners and improve access, we also recognize the importance of focusing upstream to prevent the need for services later in life. Programs that support families with education, outreach and early support to prevent adverse childhood experiences are critical. This includes continuing to support community care coordination work and efforts to provide healthy, safe peer and family connections.

Increasing access to drug and other substance use education, suicide prevention and early intervention services for adolescents and children is equally essential.





# Improving inclusion in systems of care

## Community connectors serve as a bridge

The essence of community caregiving is engaging all people in the context of their everyday lives and addressing the factors that impact their health. Since social and economic factors represent 40% of a person's total health, community health workers and other roles that help people navigate support services can make a significant difference.

Difficulty navigating complicated systems of care is commonly reported by Black, Indigenous and People of Color communities. When asked, members of our community noted three areas of improvement for healthcare systems: language access, access to in-person interpreters and access to culturally oriented healthcare providers. PeaceHealth teams are committed to working with community partners who focus on this work to ensure smooth access to all members of our community.

Families have long advocated for a single point of entry to resources and referrals for care. Unfortunately, Skagit County has historically lacked a comprehensive system for promoting healthy child development and early childhood education. Programs were not sequential, housed at multiple locations and often maintained enrollment criteria that limited participation.

One outcome of these issues can be seen in declining kindergarten readiness rates. Kindergarten readiness is a key community health measure that tells us how well systems are doing preparing children to learn in kindergarten by measuring six domains of early learning. In Skagit County's Burlington-Edison and Sedro-Woolley School Districts, only 37% of kindergarten students enter school ready to learn (Source: [WAKids Report Care, 2021](#)). Even fewer low-income students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners begin kindergarten ready to learn. These inequities in readiness follow children well beyond their early years and throughout their lifespan.



### Navigation need by the numbers 2021

**60%**

farmworkers that speak languages other than Spanish

*(Source: Sea Mar Promotores Program 2021)*

**37%**

children who are kindergarten ready

**24%**

licensed childcare providers in Washington state closing their doors either permanently or temporarily

### 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 particularly when it came to overall system care coordination.

## PROMOTING ACCESS TO CARE SERVICES

Knowing change was needed, partners united to launch Skagit's Help Me Grow®. PeaceHealth joined the effort by awarding \$285,525 to United General District 304 to seed the program launch. Help Me Grow® focuses on family and community outreach, coordinated access, child healthcare provider outreach, equity, data collection and analysis, and childcare. We know that investing in early childhood through prevention and early intervention saves money by reducing downstream costs of compromised health and development. Studies such as [Early Childhood: High Return on Investment](#) released by University of Pennsylvania cite a \$4-\$9 return on investment per \$1 invested in comprehensive, high-quality birth-to-five early education.

## A GROWING NEED FOR CHILDCARE

In late 2021, Help Me Grow® Skagit turned their attention to the growing affordable childcare crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on affordability and availability of childcare services, which were already stretched thin in the region. During the pandemic, 24% of licensed childcare providers in Washington State closed their doors either temporarily or permanently, reducing capacity and cutting the childcare workforce by 30% or more. (Source: [Child Care Aware](#)). From 2016 to 2020, Skagit County lost 16 licensed childcare providers and nearly 100 licensed childcare spots.



During pandemic school closures, many parents struggled to fill multiple roles of full-time caregiver, teacher and working parent. Demand for childcare will only increase as more parents return to working outside the home. Meanwhile, the cost of childcare has increased significantly over the last 20 years, but federal poverty guidelines have not changed, leaving many low-income families unable to access publicly funded care. In the state of Washington, Latinx families spend 24% of their median income on childcare compared to 14% for White families.

### KEY BENEFITS

- Family Resource Navigator provides a central, coordinated access point for families with developmental or behavioral concerns or questions.
- Early screening and detection connect families to services during vital developmental years.
- Networking between community providers enhances overall system care coordination.

### Cost of childcare as percentage of median income in Washington State

**17%** Married Couple Families

**14%** White

**24%** Hispanic

**31%** Single-Parent Families

**21%** White

**50%** Hispanic

### Number of licensed childcare providers/spots, Skagit County

**107/2,536**

September 2016

**91/2,482**

September 2020

Source: Skagit County Population Health Trust, 2020-2021 Community Health

**“For children and families to thrive, our community needs stable housing, access to high quality childcare, and an easily navigable system that connects them to the other resources they need, when they need them.”**

– Lyndie Simmonds, Thriving Children & Families Pillar Supervisor, Help Me Grow®

## CONNECTING CARE SERVICES FOR TRIBAL MEMBERS

2022 will also bring the addition of a new and important role called the Native Liaison to PeaceHealth Northwest facilities. This unique partnership with Northwest Washington Indian Health Board will employ a liaison to work seamlessly across care sites advocating for Tribal members as they navigate emergency care, hospitals, hospice, in-home care, specialty care visits, and childbirth. Connectedness and trusted relationships will be the cornerstone from which Liaisons connect Tribal members with care and support needed for health and healing.



### CARE – Community priorities: closing gaps for underserved communities

Our future work needs to build on the strong foundation of community health worker programs to reach underserved communities through a combination of new roles and approaches like mobile pop-up health clinics and outreach fairs. Success will also require closing the gap in available language services. People prefer in-person interpreters, but we are experiencing a gap in Russian, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and Punjabi interpreters. At the same time, we're seeing a growing community of speakers of Mayan indigenous languages and other languages of limited diffusion.

Finally, additional community partnership is needed in the face of limited access to vital basic services like dental care and affordable, quality childcare.





# Providing healthy meals & nutrition

## Connecting children with weekend meals and addressing the root causes of diet-related disease

Access to healthy and affordable food is a critical issue affecting children and families in our community. We believe everyone should have access to nutritious food because food insecurity can lead to a lifetime of negative health consequences. Significant data demonstrates the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption to food stability and a skyrocketing prevalence of hunger, homelessness, unemployment, healthcare inaccessibility, education interruptions and behavioral health concerns.

According to [Feeding America's October 2020 report](#) on COVID-19's impact on food insecurity, an estimated 17 million children across the nation could go without enough to eat this year. That's one in six children. In Skagit County, more than 2,700 households have income below the federal poverty level and are receiving basic food assistance, making them more likely to experience food insecurity. According to Feeding America, child food insecurity is hovering at 16.2% in Skagit County with 3,400 households with children under the age of 18 on basic food assistance, equating to over 4,400 food insecure children.

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 difficult choices between paying for rent, food or healthcare. 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.

### 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.

**“I have heard from many participants in our Skagit Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program that it has been harder to make ends meet during the pandemic, and consequently, more difficult to purchase healthy food options. Some folks are having to decide between paying bills and purchasing fresh produce.”**

— Adele Eslinger, United General District  
304 Program Coordinator

### Skagit County Food Access

# 7.8/10

Food Environment Index  
in Skagit County

# 12%

Food  
insecurity

# 6%

Limited access  
to healthy foods



Source: [Skagit County, Washington | County Health Rankings & Roadmaps](#)

## PROMOTING ACCESS TO HEALTHY AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE FOOD

Helping Hands Food Bank is Skagit County's largest direct emergency food provider. In 2020, Helping Hands distributed 2.2 million pounds of food to more than 14,000 individuals. They also make sure that 1,700 students have access to food every weekend when they are not in school. The Cutting Hunger on Weekends (C.H.O.W.) program sends students home with a backpack filled with 5-10 lbs. of shelf-stable foods such as cereal, milk, mac and cheese, breakfast bars and prepackaged fruits and vegetables. PeaceHealth contributed \$20,000 over two years to support Helping Hands' food distribution efforts.

The Skagit Fruit and Veggie Prescription program (FVRx) also helps address local nutrition needs. This program connects healthcare providers, nutrition professionals and grocery retailers to people with chronic, diet-related illnesses. Enrolled patients receive vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables and also meet with a PeaceHealth educator monthly to set goals. Participants report that focusing on healthy food choices increases their energy to do the things that matter to them.



United General District 304 runs the FVRx program and PeaceHealth has contributed more than \$30,000 over three years to see it continue.

### KEY BENEFITS

- Children and their families receive nourishment on school weekends when they could be at greatest risk for hunger.
- Kids are able to go back to school on Mondays ready to learn.
- Nutrition information and easy recipes along with FVRx vouchers encourage families to try new fruits and vegetables.

### NOURISH – Community priorities: expanding access to nutrition

Innovative programs that combine healthcare access and food security are happening in our community right now and we'd like to see them grow. With a focus on expanding access to affordable, nutritious food, PeaceHealth will continue to seek 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.

### Skagit Food Access by the numbers 2020-2021

**2.2 million**  
pounds of food delivered

**14,000**  
individuals served

**1,700**  
students provided meals on the  
weekends

**5-10**  
pounds of shelf-stable food provided  
in weekend backpack program

# Final thoughts

## For times ahead

Our Community Health Needs Assessment process holds us accountable to listen and learn from our communities. PeaceHealth recognizes that our work is not over. 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.**