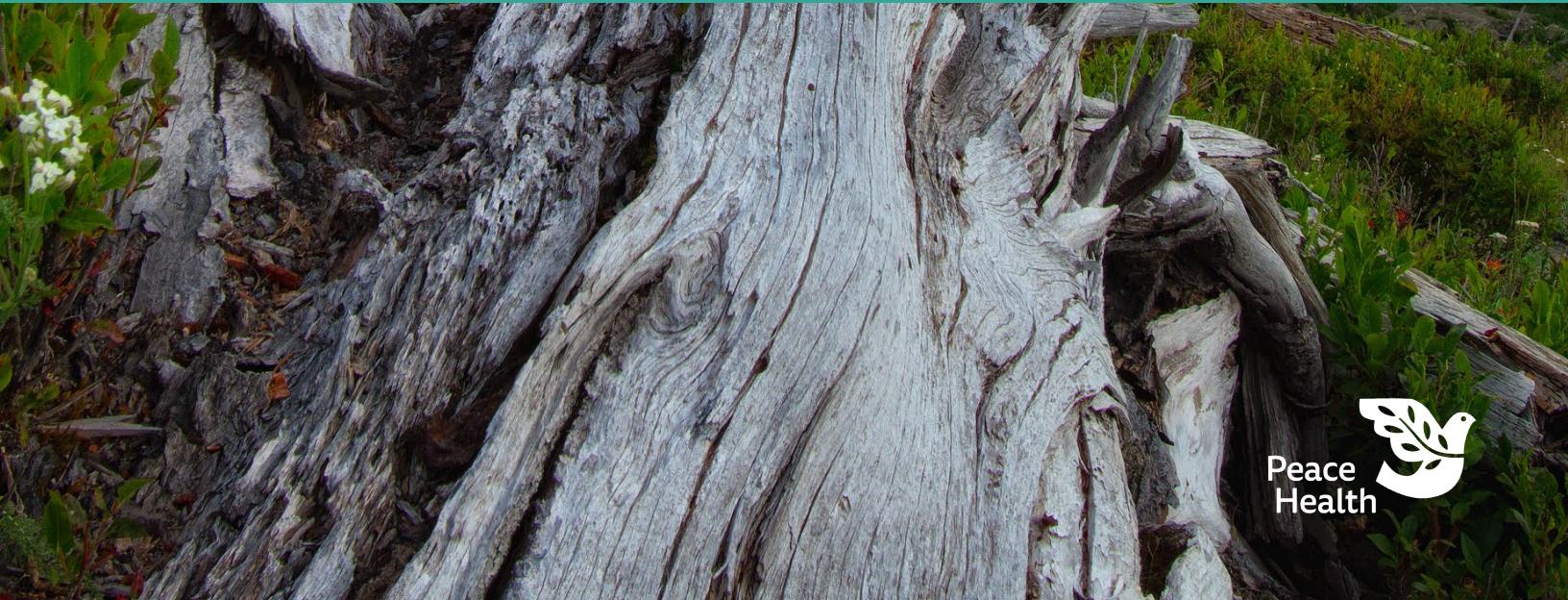




# A Vital Bridge with the Community

PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center

2025 Community Health Needs Assessment



# 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?

We conducted a thorough review of publicly reported data from national, state, and local sources to assess our community's needs. We convened community stakeholders from multiple sectors to review the data and provide feedback on community-wide needs. Our data collection and analysis were completed in the fall of 2024.

## Our key findings

There is a significant need for all types of housing in Cowlitz County, specifically affordable housing and shelter options for unhoused individuals. Specific attention needs to be paid to address the number of unhoused youths in Cowlitz County. The lack of affordable housing options and availability is a concern for the entire community.

Access to resources for food-insecure households continues to be an issue for Cowlitz County residents. Community members ask for improved access to enough healthy foods to feed their families.

The need for support navigating social service resources for low-income community members persists. Expanding community health worker, peer support, and community health advocate programs are critical to improving social drivers of health in Cowlitz County.

Substance use disorder treatment and access to co-occurring behavior health services have become more apparent as the rate of Fentanyl use has skyrocketed. The mental health needs of our community, especially children, continues to be higher each year.

Resources to address the needs of households living in poverty, specifically Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community members who experience poverty at a higher rate than other community members, are needed.

Community members are experiencing social isolation due to decreased levels of community connection, volunteer workforce shortages and other issues. Seniors who live alone without family support are most impacted.

## Who we are and what we believe In

Located near parks, residential neighborhoods, businesses, and commerce in Longview, Washington, PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center and our associated PeaceHealth Medical Group clinics provide vital services to Cowlitz County and adjacent communities, including the southern coast of Washington and the northwest corner of Oregon. PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center provides quality services through the emergency department, trauma program, surgery services, Kearney Breast Center, and specialty care. We provide primary care, rehab services, diagnostic imaging, behavioral health and cancer care. We partner with other local providers to help ensure equal access to care for all members of our community.

We work closely with the federally qualified health center, Cowlitz Family Health Center, and other providers of primary, specialty and acute care who operate in our region. We strive to provide seamless transitions from our services to the community-based organizations that serve the clinical and non-clinical needs of our community members.

*"At PeaceHealth St. John, our mission extends beyond providing care. We are committed to the health and well-being of the entire community. Conducting a thorough Community Health Needs Assessment allows us to understand better the unique challenges our neighbors face. Learning from our community gives us the opportunity to tailor our resources and services to make a lasting impact and healthier future for Cowlitz County residents."*

— Kendall Sawa, Chief Hospital Executive, PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center

As the only hospital in our area and the county's largest employer, our impact is multi-dimensional. PeaceHealth provides living wage jobs in addition to caring for the health of community members through our broad regional referral network of care. With a focus on serving the needs of every individual patient, from hospital care to recovery, we are committed to safety, transparency and continuous improvement.



## About PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center

**74.2**  
Average daily census

**346**  
Total licensed beds

**143**  
Total operating beds

**4.07**  
Average length of stay (days)

**6,673**  
Inpatient discharges

**220,987**  
Outpatient clinic visits

**4,395**  
Surgeries

**52,626**  
ED visits

**747**  
Births

**1,762**  
Caregivers

**434**  
Physicians and clinicians

Source: PeaceHealth FY 2024



## **Building a network of care from the inside out**

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.

# Supporting health justice for all

## Our Mission

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. We believe that every person should receive safe and compassionate care — every time, every touch.

## Poverty and the connection to health and wellbeing

Poverty and health are deeply interconnected and impact individuals and communities. According to the World Health Organization, people living in poverty have a decreased life expectancy and increased child mortality rates.

Poverty profoundly impacts the social drivers of health (SDOH) — the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These factors are responsible for a significant portion of health inequities within and between societies. Poverty shapes these determinants in ways that worsen health outcomes and increase vulnerability to disease.

## Poverty's expansive grip

ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) aims to broaden the picture of poverty to include those just above the federal poverty level. These are individuals and families experiencing financial hardship who do not qualify for financial assistance. These are households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level but less than the basic cost of living for the county. Many ALICE individuals and families continue to struggle, especially with the rising cost of household essentials (housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare and technology). Households below the ALICE Threshold, ALICE households, and those in poverty struggle to afford everyday essentials.

The data on households below the ALICE threshold in Cowlitz County reveals some interesting trends. In Cowlitz County, the percentage of households below the ALICE threshold fluctuated between 41% and 39% from 2010 to 2024. The impact of these figures on the community underscores the ongoing struggle for financial stability faced by a significant portion of the population. Although the number of ALICE households is lower in 2024 than it was in 2010, the impact is still felt significantly by Cowlitz County residents. The 2024 ALICE report highlights the struggle of ALICE households due to the recent increase in inflation. While costs have increased, wages earned by ALICE households have not increased at the same rate. Households who live month-to-month

## A growing community... Cowlitz County, Washington

**110,730** Population

**8.12%** 2010-20 population growth

## Cowlitz County's poverty by race/ ethnicity

<b>38%</b>	American Indian/ Alaska Native
<b>20%</b>	Hispanic/Latino
<b>17%</b>	Black/African American
<b>14%</b>	Two or more races
<b>12%</b>	White
<b>10.2%</b>	Other
<b>2.5%</b>	Asian
<b>1%</b>	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2022) American Community Survey

often forgo essential items like broadband services, and reduce their spending on childcare, food, gas and other resources. These numbers highlight the need for targeted support and intervention to address the economic challenges faced by ALICE households.

	Cowlitz County	State of Washington
At or below the Federal Poverty Rate	12.3%	9.98%
At or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Rate	29%	22.34%
Below ALICE threshold (ALICE + Poverty)	39%	35%

## PeaceHealth's commitment to health equity

PeaceHealth has taken steps to increase awareness of social inequities and promote health justice among patients, caregivers and the greater healthcare community. With the goal of eliminating healthcare disparities, PeaceHealth aims to ensure that all communities receiving care at PeaceHealth are treated justly and respectfully, with equitable access to opportunities and resources and by transforming structures that perpetuate injustice. All funded PeaceHealth Community Health partner organizations agree to uphold health equity standards outlined by PeaceHealth as a part of our effort to serve the needs of our community with our partners.

## Our commitment to the environment

The natural and built environment of a community is a significant social driver of health. PeaceHealth has always sought to do its part to maintain the health of the environment in the communities we serve.

PeaceHealth's Columbia network is committed to building a comprehensive environmental sustainability program to address the significant impact healthcare has on the environment. The healthcare sector generates a large amount of waste and pollution, which contributes to environmental degradation and, indirectly, to health issues within the community. At PeaceHealth, we recognize the vital connection between caring for the environment and caring for the health of our patients and communities. As part of our sustainability initiatives, we are taking proactive steps to reduce waste, improve resource efficiency and engage our staff in environmental stewardship.

A significant part of our environmental efforts focuses on waste reduction. We have expanded recycling programs to capture materials such as blue-wrap, glass, cardboard, plastics and wood, with a particular emphasis on our operating rooms, which generate 30-40% of our organization's total waste. By improving our recycling infrastructure, we have been able to divert a large portion of waste from landfills, contributing to a more



sustainable healthcare environment while ensuring that our high standards of care remain uncompromised.

In addition to waste reduction, we have made significant strides in lowering our carbon footprint by eliminating some of the most harmful inhaled anesthetics traditionally used in our surgeries. These anesthetics are known to have a substantial environmental impact due to their high global warming potential. By removing these from our operations without affecting the quality of care, we are reducing harmful emissions and showing that sustainability goes hand-in-hand with exceptional patient care.

Our commitment to sustainability extends beyond waste management to the conservation of energy and water resources. We have implemented energy-efficient technologies and practices across our facilities, such as upgrading to LED lighting, optimizing HVAC systems and improving building insulation to reduce energy consumption. Additionally, we have introduced water conservation measures, including low-flow fixtures and water-efficient landscaping, to minimize water use while maintaining a safe and comfortable environment for patients and staff. These efforts are helping to reduce our overall environmental impact, lower operational costs and contribute to the long-term sustainability of our healthcare services.

Engaging our staff has been a cornerstone of our sustainability program. Through internal initiatives, we have worked to highlight the critical link between environmental stewardship and patient care. By empowering staff to become active participants in our sustainability journey, we are fostering a culture that values environmental responsibility and recognizes its importance to the overall health and well-being of our community.

Our environmental initiatives have earned us recognition from respected organizations. For the past four years, [Practice Greenhealth](#) has honored PeaceHealth's Columbia network for its commitment to greening its hospital operations. We have also been named Clark County Green Business of the Year for Large Green Business and recognized as the Washington State Recycling Association's Non-Profit Recycler of the Year. These accolades reflect our dedication to reducing our environmental impact and our ongoing efforts to make sustainability a core part of our Mission.



# Our Community Health Pillars

We are determined to help create a healthy community beyond the walls of our medical centers and clinics. Our four pillars inform the purpose of community health. Across these pillars is the awareness of our solemn responsibility to protect the most vulnerable and underserved people in our communities while promoting equity in everything we do. These four pillars include:

- **HOME:** Improve access to service-enriched housing,
- **HOPE:** Increase education and access to treatment and prevention of dependence,
- **CARE:** Expand knowledge, access and engagement with community caregivers, and
- **NOURISH:** Address food insecurities to enhance family and child well-being.

## Bridging the gap in our community

Our priority is to provide the overall best care possible to our entire community. To do this, we need to provide an equitable system of support that recognizes needs, focuses on overcoming barriers and builds resiliency for key segments in our community, including:

- Low-income households and children living in poverty,
- People experiencing homelessness, specifically Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) community members,
- People experiencing food insecurity and lack of access to healthy, culturally specific foods,
- Individuals with substance use disorders and co-occurring mental health conditions, and
- Seniors and those experiencing social isolation.



*"The Community Health Needs Assessment process serves as a conversation starter that leads to an understanding of our communities that statistics cannot create alone. At PeaceHealth, we find value and joy in building the relationships that make those conversations never-ending."*

*– Liz Dunne, PeaceHealth President and CEO*

## Recognizing inequities and elevating partnerships

BIPOC communities are at higher risk for chronic medical conditions. With less access to healthcare, immigration concerns, language barriers, higher poverty rates and systemic issues that have led to inequitable access to needed services, we recognize our need to prioritize equity of access in our work to address the needs of our community. PeaceHealth aims to do this alongside our partner organizations. We support programs that seek to understand the needs of different cultural communities and provide culturally-specific services to ensure all community members feel heard, understood and supported in their efforts to achieve health.

PeaceHealth and the [Southwest Washington Equity Coalition \(SWEC\)](#) have partnered with Puget Sound Sage to bring Sage's Community Leadership Institute to southwest Washington. [Vancouver Community Leadership Institute \(VCLI\)](#) is a six-month fellowship program that supports, trains and prepares emerging leaders from low-income communities and communities of color to sit on boards and commissions. Fellows are trained in issues like housing, land use, transit, climate and economic development. They learn the nuts and bolts of government processes, such as municipal budgeting, parliamentary procedures, and lawmaking, as well as advocacy and communication skills.

Now in its third cohort in southwest Washington, VCLI has served over 30 participants from Clark and Cowlitz Counties. Fellows and graduates have served on boards for the following organizations: Vancouver Housing Authority, Clark County Community Action Advisory Board, Clark County Developmental Disability Advisory Board, Washington Realtors DEI Committee, Clark County Justice Group and the Washington Coalition for Police Accountability.





# Community priority: Affordable housing

## Community need

Over the past decade, the number of available rental properties in Cowlitz County has plummeted. For years, the vacancy rate for rental housing in our county was among the lowest in the state, at 1% or lower and just 0.5%, as reported in the last CHNA. The rental vacancy had improved to 2.8% by the end of 2023. Although vacancy rates have improved, in Cowlitz County, there is still more need for low-income housing than there is housing available. As of fall 2021, the waiting list for low-income housing vouchers closed with 1,900 households and many more who were not even able to apply. This has persisted in the time since.

According to the [Housing Opportunities of SW Washington Strategic Plan](#) for 2020-2025, 47% of low-income housing voucher applicants are households with children. On average, renters in Longview use 30% of their income for housing, meeting the HUD-defined 30% threshold for cost-burdened families. In the 2023 Washington State Department of Commerce Homeless Point-in-Time Count, there were 318 homeless individuals in Cowlitz County. In 2023, 137 were unsheltered. These numbers are a “snapshot,” with data collected on one day each year. Service providers indicate that the true number of individuals in Cowlitz County who are struggling with housing is at least double and possibly triple what has been collected at the point-in-time count. When we compare this with the number of cost-burdened households in the county, there is potential that the unvalidated numbers shared with us by our partner agencies may be the true indication of need in our communities.

During the 2023-24 school year, 262 homeless students were enrolled in Kelso School District and 255 were enrolled in Longview School District. This equates to more than 500 homeless students in the two largest school districts in Cowlitz County, some of whom are unaccompanied, meaning they are under the age of 18 without the support of an adult.

## New opportunity for housing

In Cowlitz County, there is a significant need for low-income housing. The construction of new housing for low-income households helps to alleviate the number of households who are cost-burdened by housing and helps to house individuals and families who are unhoused or living in shelters.

Over the past three years, PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center has contributed significantly to the efforts of low-income housing providers in Longview and Kelso as they seek to build new affordable housing. PeaceHealth contributed \$700,000 in capital

## Housing realities of Cowlitz County

- 12.8%** Housing insecure households
- 15%** Severely cost-burdened households
- 34%** Cost-burdened households
- 2.8%** Rental vacancy rate

Source: WA State Apartment Market Report 2023, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## People experiencing homelessness by the numbers, 2023

- 318** Homeless individuals during point-in-time count
- 137** Unsheltered individuals during point-in-time count
- 199** Unhoused households with children

Source: 2023 Point-in-Time Count, Washington State Department of Commerce & Council for the

funding to support three new housing efforts led by [Housing Opportunities of SW Washington](#), [Kelso Housing Authority](#) and [Lower Columbia Community Action Program \(CAP\)](#). Each of these three organizations is working with multiple partners and funders to construct 1-, 2-, and 3-bedroom apartments that will prioritize access to housing for unhoused households, individuals with disabilities, veterans and BIPOC community members who have been historically underserved. Two of the new housing locations are currently under construction, and the third is in the planning phases. In 2025, Housing Opportunities of SW Washington will open 20 new apartments for occupancy, Kelso Housing Authority will also open 32 new apartments, and Lower Columbia CAP will break ground on new apartments.



## PeaceHealth investment

PeaceHealth has partnered with multiple organizations to support the homeless crisis response system, emergency shelters and access to housing support for youth and teens, and it has increased the number of low-income housing opportunities in Cowlitz County over the past three years. Investments of \$910,000 in support of [Janus Youth Services](#), the Cold Weather Shelter, the [Emergency Support Shelter](#), [Lower Columbia CAP](#), [Housing Opportunities of SW WA](#) and the [Kelso Housing Authority](#) have all helped to address the housing needs of our community members in impactful ways.

## Key benefits

- More than 70 new low-income households will have access to affordable housing.
- Chronically unhoused, and historically unserved community members will be prioritized for new housing units.



# Community priority: Increase access for all

## Community need

Cowlitz County has a higher incidence of substance use than the state average. In 2023, reports showed that 17% of adults and 21% of 10<sup>th</sup> graders in the county reported using tobacco products (vape, smokeless or cigarette) in the past 30 days compared to 11% and 13%, respectively, across the state of Washington. Cowlitz County reported 36 drug overdose deaths per 100,000 residents, compared to 25 deaths per 100,000 residents in the rest of Washington State, according to 2022 Washington State Department of Health reports.

Behavioral health needs have continued to increase across the state over the past three years. Drug overdoses rose in Washington State by 30% in both 2020 and 2021 and continued to grow by 17% in 2022. This trend includes a significant increase in the number of deaths related to synthetic non-pharmaceutical fentanyl, far more than any other substance, according to the University of Washington Drug and Alcohol Institute in 2022.

In March 2023, the Washington State Department of Health Healthy Youth Survey assessed the health behaviors and mental health and resiliency of more than 217,000 youth in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12.

Although still concerning, the results of the survey showed improvements in the mental health of youth compared to the past surveys completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of depression or contemplation of suicide among 10th graders declined from 30% in 2021 to 15% in 2023 – the lowest it has been in 20 years. Students also reported an increase in support from trusted adults and schools and academic success for the same period. Transgender and LGBTQI+ students continue to report higher incidences of depression and self-harm. These statistics reflect the positive work that has occurred to support youth since the pandemic and continue to highlight the need for more mental health support for youth.

## The opioid crisis in our community and state

<b>38</b>	opioid drug overdose deaths in Cowlitz County (WA DOH 2022 Opioid and Drug Use Data Dashboard)
<b>17%</b>	increase in the number of overdose deaths in Washington State (University of Washington Drug and Alcohol Institute Washington State, 2022)
<b>42%</b>	of all Washington State injury deaths are drug overdoses (WA DOH Opioid Overdose Dashboard 2022)
<b>17%</b>	of all Cowlitz County adults smoke (Robert Wood Johnson 2021 County Health Rankings)
<b>21%</b>	of all Cowlitz County 10 <sup>th</sup> graders use tobacco products (WA DOH 2023 Healthy Youth Survey)
<b>18%</b>	of all Washington State 12 <sup>th</sup> graders have used alcohol in the past 30 days (WA DOH 2023 Healthy Youth Survey)



*"The Recovery Café has helped me to go forward in life after cancer treatment and given me and my wife a sense of purpose to help others by sharing in their struggles. This is why the experiences I have been through make me want to help and encourage others and show them that there is hope,"*

– Tim, Chai Rivers Recovery Café participant

## Support and access for all

Chai Rivers Recovery Café has been a partner with PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center since late 2022, providing support for individuals in Cowlitz County who are in recovery. Chai Rivers uses a best-practice-based Recovery Café Model focused on sobriety and support to meet the needs of each individual who walks in their door. The open-door program provides peer support, employment services, access to housing, recovery coaching, recovery groups and, most importantly, connection to the community for individuals. Over the past two years, the café has grown significantly, serving more than 1,050 individuals. The impact of their programs has led to 146 people finding stable employment, 63 households gaining access to stable housing, and 3,720 recovery classes and groups. The hard work of the Chai Rivers community has helped people who have struggled to find hope, support, connection and community to live full lives.

## Cowlitz County behavioral health by the numbers

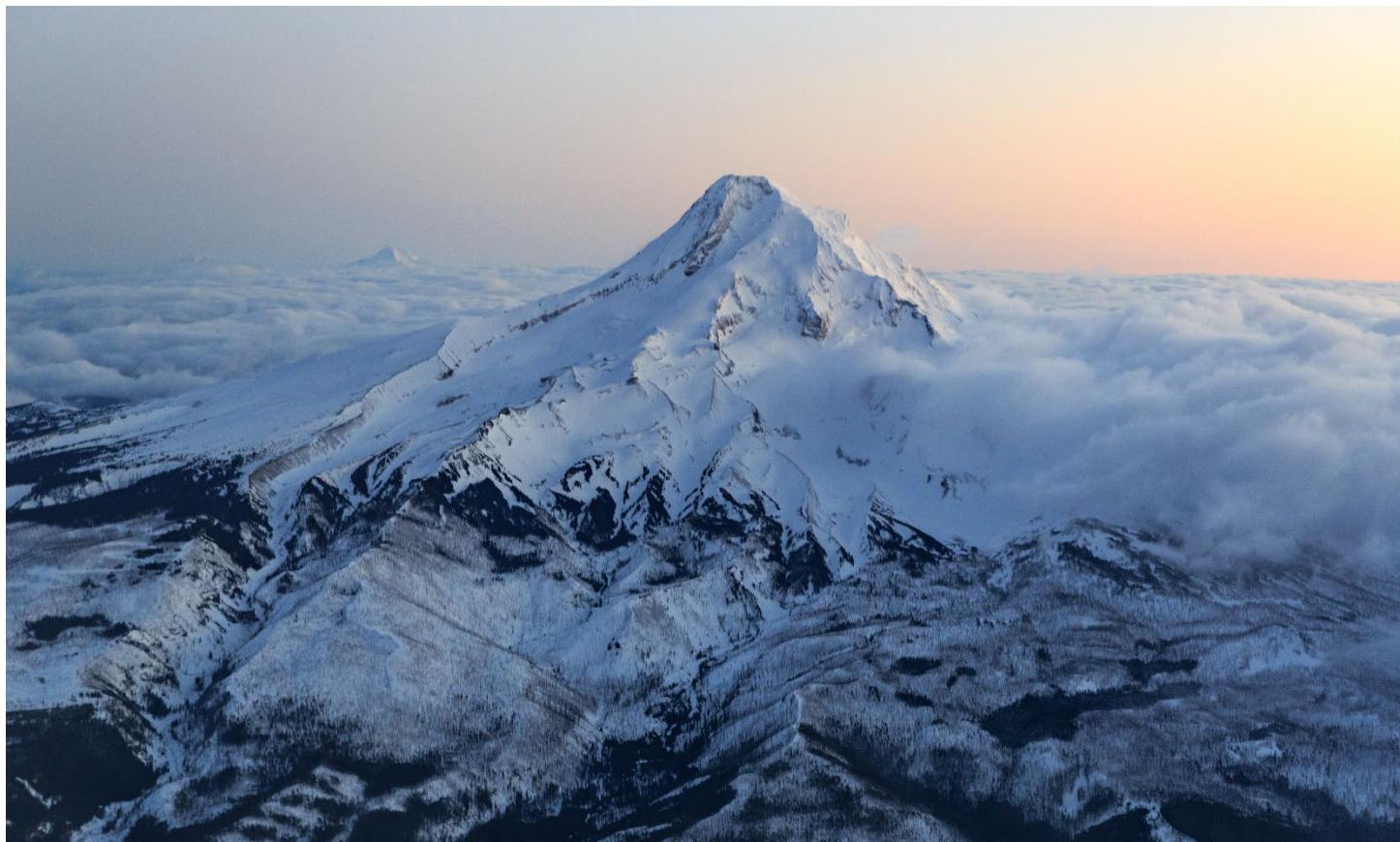
- 10<sup>th</sup>** leading cause of death in Washington State is death by suicide (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2023)
- 15%** age-adjusted suicide rate per 100,000 individuals (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2023)
- 83%** of Washington State communities without enough mental health providers (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2023)
- 37%** of Washington State 12<sup>th</sup> graders are unable to stop worrying (WA DOH 2023 Healthy Youth Survey)
- 15%** of Washington State 10<sup>th</sup> graders considered attempting suicide (WA DOH 2023 Healthy Youth Survey)

## PeaceHealth investment

Over the past three years PeaceHealth has contributed \$200,000 to partner organizations who work directly with individuals of all ages in our community to address and prevent mental health and substance use disorders. Our partnerships with [Chai Rivers Recovery Cafe](#), Hello Life, and community health worker organizations have helped to build resilience among community members who have struggled to access resources to address their mental health needs due to stigma, and the limited resources available in our communities.

### Key benefits

- Serving individuals in the community increased engagement.
- Increase in access to substance use and mental health services.
- Ability to provide care for minor medical needs without transport to clinics or hospitals.





# Community priority: Supporting the whole person

## Community need

Demand for whole-person care — addressing both the medical and social needs of individuals in our community — is high. Our partnerships with community organizations aim to reach deep into our communities to engage individuals and families in their everyday lives, addressing social, economic, and behavioral needs that impact their health. This is especially important when patients leave our direct care and return home to manage their health. Our goal is to create supportive environments where patients can develop the skills and community relationships needed to manage their health. According to the 2024 ALICE data, 39% of individuals in Cowlitz County are employed but living on the edge of poverty. This contributes significantly to the social stresses they experience daily, impacting all areas of their lives. This stress, social isolation and lack of resources often lead to unstable housing and access to food, as well as mental health challenges. To truly serve our community, we need to support the efforts of organizations that can holistically address these needs to help community members maintain or improve their health.

Supports navigating access to safe housing, nutrition and emotional well-being can significantly improve individual health today and increase the likelihood of maintaining or improving health as patients age. According to the 2021 American Community Survey Data, 12.8% of individuals in Cowlitz County live in poverty, and 15.5% are disabled. Notably, 9% of Cowlitz County adults have diabetes, just above the state average of 8%. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation also shared that 38% of Cowlitz residents are overweight or obese. These factors are indications of inadequate social support leading to health consequences for community members.

## Culturally specific care for uninsured

To address whole-person care, including the social needs of patients, PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center has partnered with [Community Health Organization Improving Care and Equity](#) (CHOICE) to co-fund the Youth and Family Link Community Health Worker Program. This collaborative program creates a real-time, face-to-face connection for patients who have identified social needs while they are in the emergency room or the hospital.

In collaboration with PeaceHealth's social workers, the community health worker steps in as the patient prepares to leave the hospital to provide support and connection to resources that will support the patient's individual goals and overall well-being.



## Indicators of poor social support

- 12.8%** of Cowlitz County residents live in poverty
- 15.5%** are disabled
- 9%** have type-2 diabetes
- 38%** are overweight or obese



*"Link was the first help that found me. My CHW came to see me in PeaceHealth Cardiology. She was kind and full of advice I happily used. 80 and feeling afraid. I felt blessed to have her take an active look to see what I needed. She didn't act like it was just a job."*

*– Recipient of CHW Services*

This proactive program is making a difference for our community members. It is common for individual patients to receive a referral and learn that their entire household has needs that have gone unmet. When this happens, the community health workers take action and provide wrap-around support to the entire household with the knowledge that an individual will not be successful on their own if their loved ones are also struggling. This allows community health workers to expand their reach beyond referred patients, addressing their needs before they have reason to seek care in the emergency room or hospital.

Beginning in January 2024, the program received 62 referrals from the hospital, and 40 of the referred patients were ready to work with community health workers to address their needs. Through service to these patients and their families, 530 connections have been made to education services for children, housing, mental health, dental care, assistance with insurance, access to clothing, transportation, food and personal hygiene items, help replacing lost identification, and stable phone services. All of the needs served by the community health workers help to reduce the barriers that impact a person's health. This program provides a connection and a healthy path forward for community members who have long struggled.

## PeaceHealth investment

Over the past three years, PeaceHealth has contributed \$169,215 to partner organizations that work directly with individuals of all ages in our community to offer peer support and community health workers. Youth and Family Link, Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of SW Washington, Community Health Partners and others provide outreach and support services to help community members gain access to services that will improve their health. These services range from housing and food assistance to help with navigating health insurance, education services and transportation. Without the valuable resources provided by community health workers and peer support, community members struggle to have their basic needs met.

## Key benefits

- Improved health outcomes and less need for acute health care services.
- Trauma-informed and culturally informed approach.
- Support and follow up for improved access to essential services.



# Community priority: Getting food where it's needed

## Community need

In 2024, Feeding America reported that 15,890 individuals in Cowlitz County were food insecure, approximately 14.4% of the total county population. In comparison, the rate of food insecurity for the state of Washington for the same period was 11.5%, and 13.5% nationally. USDA data indicated a national increase in food insecurity of 3.1% between 2021 and 2022. This is the largest single-year increase in food insecurity since 2008 and the highest rate of food insecurity since 2014.

While food insecurity is related to poverty, not all people experiencing food insecurity live below the poverty line. Of the individuals in Cowlitz County who are food insecure, only 70% qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. The remaining 4,767 food-insecure individuals do not meet the income requirements to qualify for assistance and must find food in other ways.

A food environment index indicates access to healthy foods by considering the distance someone lives from a grocery store or supermarket, locations for healthy food purchases in most communities and the inability to access healthy food because of cost barriers. The Food Environment index ranges from a scale of 0 (worst) to 10 (best) and equally weights two indicators of the food environment: 1) limited access to healthy foods and 2) food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

## Home delivered meals

Beginning in July 2020, PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center established a partnership to expand the Meals on Wheels program provided by [Lower Columbia CAP](#) (CAP) to meet the short-term nutrition needs of food-insecure patients as they are discharged from the hospital. Patients who express interest receive 90 days of home-delivered meals after they leave the medical center.

This partnership has allowed PeaceHealth and CAP's Meals on Wheels program to serve patients in Cowlitz County of all ages who need high-quality nutrition to recover from an illness. Typically, individuals need to be 60 years of age or older to qualify for one meal a day from Meals on Wheels. The program has allowed us to increase access to anyone leaving a PeaceHealth hospital in southwest Washington who has food insecurity or a medical need, providing them with two meals each day.

## Food access in Cowlitz County

**7.2/10** Cowlitz County Food Environment Index vs. 8.4 in Washington State and 7.0 nationally

**14%** are food insecure vs. 9% in Washington State and 12% nationally

**9%** have limited access to healthy foods vs 5% in Washington State and 6% nationally

*Robert Wood Johnson 2023 County Health Rankings, 2019 data*



<sup>1</sup> Feeding America & Cowlitz County, Washington County Health Rankings and Roadmaps



*"His concerns about getting food for the weeks following his discharge were eliminated after we got Meals on Wheels set up. The service played a crucial role in having a safe discharge plan, allowing a young person with great potential for independence to avoid further escalation in needs and disability."*

*– PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center social worker*

Since the start of the program, Meals on Wheels has served 45,360 meals to 160 patients who received care at PeaceHealth St. John Medical Center. The meals provided to patients have made a significant difference in their ability to heal and recover after a hospital stay. Due to this program, the food provided and the support of program volunteers connecting with patients, there was a 28% reduction in hospital admissions and a 30% reduction in emergency room visits for the patients enrolled in the program when compared to the prior year. The success of this program has allowed PeaceHealth to expand our Meals on Wheels partnership to serve other PeaceHealth locations in the Oregon network and the Northwest network.

## PeaceHealth investment

PeaceHealth has partnered with multiple organizations to support gardening and nutrition education, food production and distribution over the past three years. Investments of \$136,770 in support of [Lower Columbia School Gardens](#), [Youth and Family LINK](#), and [Lower Columbia CAP](#) have helped grow the network of accessible nutritious food for residents of Cowlitz County who are food insecure.

## Final thoughts

At PeaceHealth, we recognize that the journey to health and well-being is constant. Driven by our belief that good health, prevention, and community wellbeing is a fundamental right, we are humbled and honored to serve and learn from our communities. Our Community Health Needs Assessment process holds us accountable to listening and learning from our communities and informs the development of our Community Health Improvement Plan. The needs are forever evolving—and so are we. We pledge to continue our collaborative work in the community and invite you to join us in our pursuit of health justice for all.

## Key benefits

- Improves access to high-quality foods.
- Supports healthy eating habits and healing after illness.
- Decreases hospital emergency room visits and repeat hospital admissions.