

Community Concerns + Emerging Needs



Equity

Fortunately, there is increasing recognition that while we are all in the same storm, we are not all in the same boat. People who were already experiencing racism, xenophobia, bias, and/or health, economic and other disparities are now experiencing those same injustices at much higher levels. Racial and ethnic disparities persist in familiar areas, worsened by the onslaught of COVID-19: health and healthcare access, employment, income, education and access to basic needs ranging from food to housing.

Community and philanthropic leaders need to allocate resources in ways that prioritize addressing these disparities while ensuring that those choices work for the people experiencing them. This work needs to happen during the response phase and continue throughout the reimagining and recovery phase as we strive for communities that work for everyone – communities that are better than pre-pandemic. Equity must be a top priority for WCP and others committed to cultivating a community in which everyone is able to reach their potential on their terms and feel like they belong.



Healthcare and Mental Healthcare

Responding to COVID-19 in our community requires healthcare providers to increase capacity for care and find new ways of delivering services to comply with physical distancing and other Health Department guidelines. Providers like Unity Care Northwest, SeaMar Community Health Center and Compass Health are critical players, helping screen and treat patients and helping relieve pressure on hospitals and emergency rooms. These providers are stepping up to implement things like patient testing and screening procedures, telehealth services, and curbside pharmacy pickup, all while scrambling to properly outfit staff with personal protective equipment.

As many people struggle with increased anxiety, depression, and exacerbated mental health issues resulting from the COVID-19 crisis, our healthcare systems and providers must find new ways to “see” and treat these patients. This involves investing in additional technology and resources to make sure our community’s physical and mental health needs are being met.



Housing

With 2 in 5 Whatcom County households struggling to make ends meet prior to COVID-19, this crisis is shining a harsh light on just how many people in our community are unhoused and/or in danger of becoming so. The nature of social distancing requires new models and solutions for keeping individuals and families safely sheltered and, when necessary, in isolation or quarantine. Couch surfing is no longer an option. And for far too many people, sheltering at home isn't a safe option. Our community is working hard to bolster current housing systems and come up with collaborative solutions to keep our friends and neighbors safe and sheltered.



Isolation and Loneliness

Social distancing is necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately, for many vulnerable populations, sheltering in place may not be healthy or safe. Elderly citizens and individuals who live alone can quickly become even more socially isolated. In addition to lacking human interaction, they may find themselves without food, transportation, or other basic needs. People who struggle with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues can find them exacerbated by a constant state of crisis. They may also have trouble accessing the medications, therapy, and other coping mechanisms they typically rely on to manage their conditions. And because domestic violence and abuse rates are closely tied to rising levels of mental and financial distress, those who live in unstable or volatile households are at a much greater risk for violence.

Local organizations like Unity Care, Compass Health, the Bellingham Food Bank, Meals on Wheels and More, Whatcom Family YMCA, Lydia Place and Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services are working hard to reach out to these populations and continue delivering food, counseling, and advocacy services to the most vulnerable in our community.



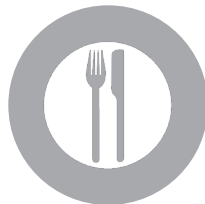
Domestic Abuse and Violence

Data speaks volumes. Depending on the metric, rising numbers can indicate a growing problem. Numbers that are flat or even below historical levels, may signal improvement. However, circumstances and context play an important role. In the case of domestic violence, particularly in an environment of unprecedented unemployment filings and other factors that cause stress at home, a drop in reporting may actually indicate that conditions at home are more perilous for some than before COVID-19. Adults who might have been able to reach out for help pre-pandemic may no longer have the option. Children who are typically in the company of teachers and other parties required to report any evidence of abuse may be out of sight. Monitoring the numbers remains essential. And, we need to apply what we know about domestic violence and child abuse so that we stay focused on ways to adapt and support efforts to keep people safe.



Dispute Resolution

Even when waters are smooth, people have disputes. Heightened tensions and stress make being patient and even reasonable more difficult than usual. The costs of unresolved disputes range from financial to relational. Building dispute resolution skills is a cost-effective way to help people handle discord at home, at work and around the neighborhood.



Food Security

Food security needs and challenges across Whatcom County continue to evolve. On the positive side, food banks, school districts, senior centers and other organizations have been agile, creative and collaborative in modifying their operations in order to reach more residents under complex and dynamic circumstances. The soft launch of an expanded home delivery service for people unable to access emergency food pick-up sites rolled out smoothly on April 3. The program expanded countywide on April 6, and includes phone and online application.

Interruptions to supply are already occurring for area food banks and other emergency food providers. Some corporate in-kind donors have changed their policies regarding some food donations, resulting in a reduction in rescued food available for redistribution. Forecasts are being developed in partnership with a professor from WWU's College of Business and Economics for potential food insecurity demand. Additionally, a comprehensive strategy is being developed to minimize supply and supply chain interruptions. Members of the Food Security Task Force are reaching out to local farmers to pursue forward contracts to ensure that, despite the shrinking restaurant market, local growers continue to produce at planned or higher levels so that there is ample fresh product available for consumption and processing.



Childcare

Our childcare systems were already struggling, and COVID-19 has added layers of additional complexity to this issue. Early learning, daycare, and afterschool programs were already operating on slim margins. Now they face increased staff requirements to comply with social distancing guidelines. At the same time, they are experiencing drastic drops in revenue as families sheltering in place choose to keep their kids at home. Some childcare providers have been tapped to provide free care for the children of essential workers and first responders, but there is no clarity about how these services will be paid for. *(continued...)*

Community Concerns + Emerging Needs (cont.)

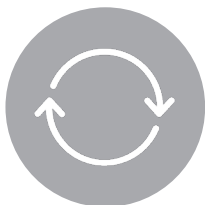
The WCP Partners are currently in discussion with Whatcom Unified Command, the YMCA, and the Opportunity Council regarding childcare needs. Ensuring access to childcare for our essential workforce is a shared priority of the organizations. In addition to funding, one or more of the WCP Partners are engaging in policy/advocacy efforts. For example, advocating for:

- *Inclusion of grocery workers in Tier 1 and essential worker categories (since enacted by Governor Inslee)*
- *Provision of public funding for no-cost childcare for those essential workers unable to pay*
- *Utilization of already established and licensed childcare programs in the community*



Information + Referrals

As new relief and resources are developed by the government and other organizations, there is a growing need for Information and Referral services to help individuals and organizations understand what they are eligible for and how to access relevant resources. This is an ongoing discussion with WCP partners and is being informed by the work of the Opportunity Council's Community Resource Center, Whatcom Family and Community Network, Whatcom Community Health Worker Network, and others.



Business/Organization Continuity

With the cancellation of fundraisers and events, many of our nonprofit partners are seeing loss of operating revenue. At this time, the WCP partners are focused on continuity of services to our most vulnerable populations as well as those impacted directly by the pandemic. There are many financial needs for general operations continuity and keeping individuals employed, both in the nonprofit sector and in the private business sector. WCP is heartened to see programs like the SBA Paycheck Protection Program enacted and barriers being removed for people to access unemployment payments and are directing organizations to these resources as appropriate. The Whatcom Community Foundation is working with partners across the state to develop a zero-interest loan program for small businesses (as well as individuals) that prioritizes credit protection as well as business continuity.



Tech Assistance/Protective Equipment/Re-engineering services

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, many organizations are needing to invest in upgraded technology, protective equipment, and in re-design of their services. Our healthcare organizations are looking to provide services through tele-health, or virtually; the services that need to be provided in person, such as our Homeless Outreach Team, are needing personal protective equipment to safely provide services; and organizations such as the Bellingham Food Bank have had to completely reimagine their workflow to allow for food distribution in a way that complies with social distancing and gathering precautions.