

Generations Forward:

Envisioning a Future Where All Whatcom County Children Thrive

Future Search Conference

October 10-12, 2017

Sponsored by the Opportunity Council and Whatcom County Health Department with funding support from Whatcom Community Foundation and Chuckanut Health Foundation

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the conference was to envision the best possible future to support the optimal health and well-being of young children and their families in Whatcom County. The conference brought together a diverse group of individuals committed to young children and their families for 3 days to discover the values, purposes, and projects they hold in common.

Conference participants included 74 community stakeholders (20+ parents), 2 facilitators and 2 support staff. The meeting was held at the Bellingham Cruise Terminal.

How it Came to Be

The Opportunity Council and Whatcom County Health Department convened a conference planning committee formed with stakeholders representing parents, educators, social services, the medical community, and community-based organizations. The committee met over a six month period to plan the conference and ensure a diverse group of participants from nine sectors including: Parents and Caregivers, Early Learning, K-12 Schools, Behavioral Health and Safety Supports, Health Care, Private Sector and Funders, Policy and Government, Family Support and Basic Needs. Community funders and sponsors provided resources to support conference facilitation, food, facility, parent stipends and child care vouchers.

The Future Search Process

A Future Search Conference is a task-focused planning effort. The process relies on the knowledge and experience of the individuals who have daily involvement in, can influence, or are affected by the conference topic, rather than "outside experts". The process focuses participants on identifying future aspirations and determining what they are ready and willing to do individually and collectively. By the end of the event, participants develop a set of strategic goals and actions they can begin to implement to work toward their shared vision.

"The well-being of our children is a barometer for the future. In one short generation, they will be the parents, workers, volunteers, leaders, and change-makers determining the social and economic vitality of Washington State. If we want a better future for all of us, we need better results for kids now."

State of Washington's Kids 2016

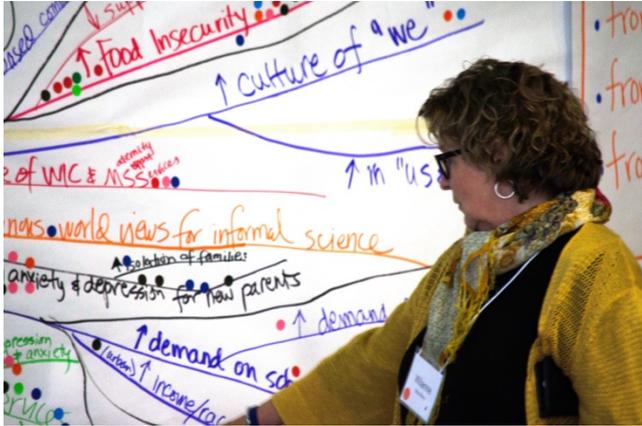
Over the last decade, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of early childhood. In Whatcom County, community leaders have prioritized a focus on young children and families as part of the Whatcom County Community Health Improvement process, recognizing that investing in our youngest children from the start is the most effective approach to improve health, reduce disparities, and advance health equity. Organizations, community leaders and individuals in Whatcom County have heard the call to action to invest in young children and have responded.

In October 2017, the Whatcom County Health Department released a data report of key child, family, and community indicators to provide a backdrop to the Generations Forward conference. The full report can be found on the [Whatcom County Health Department website](#). Here is a sample of the indicators found in the report:

- **Life expectancy at birth** varies considerably by local census track.
- Nearly 44% of Whatcom County families with children under 5 lived **below 200% of the federal poverty level** in 2014.
- 30% of the 2015 births in Whatcom County were to **single mothers**. Differences between dual-income and single-income families contribute significantly to the growth in income inequality.
- Young children under age 5 are more **racially and ethnically diverse** than the population of Whatcom County as a whole.
- Whatcom County lower-income kindergartners are less likely to demonstrate **social-emotional readiness** than their peers.
- The rate of **child abuse and neglect** has been consistently higher in Whatcom County than in Washington State for at least 10 years.
- Whatcom County is considered a **child care desert**, with child care slots available for only 4 out of 10 children.
- More than 56.6% of renters in Whatcom County spend more than 30% of their **income on housing** vs. 28.8% of owner-occupied households.

Major Trends Affecting Families and Children in Whatcom County

As part of the Future Search process, participants developed a mind map, illustrating the internal and external trends shaping the future of families with young children in Whatcom County. After mapping the trends, participants used a dot ranking method to identify major trends affecting Whatcom County families. The trends below are listed in order of interest to the participants:



- Decrease in **child care** availability
- Growing **mental health needs**/ inadequate mental health services
- Increased **demand on school districts**, including demand for social and emotional supports
- Increase in **housing need**/decrease in affordable housing
- Increase in **cultural diversity**
- Increase in **opioid abuse**, disrupting families
- Increase in number of **children with special health care needs**
- Increase in **food insecurity**
- Increased focus on building family resilience

Commitments to Action Based on Common Ground

Following group presentations which dramatized an ideal future for Whatcom County families and children, participants discussed themes common to all the presentations. They then formed action groups around the themes that were of greatest interest to them and that they could collectively agree to support. The action teams created the following statements of commitment to action:

We commit to:

- **honoring** and **supporting** all families in Whatcom County with equal opportunity through building on cultural strengths, celebrating diversity, and working across generations
- **intentionally building** neighborhood/community capacity and resilience through place-based gathering to celebrate, heal, and grow thriving individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities
- **developing** coordinated support, mentoring, and education for parents, families, and guardians in order to strengthen and foster safer, more stable and more nurturing relationships with growing children in Whatcom County
- **improving** access and reducing barriers to family-centered services in centralized physical and virtual cooperation
- **pursuing** an integrated healthcare system, including prevention, wellness, specialty care, and behavioral healthcare, that is affordable, accessible and provides care that families need when they need it
- **responding** to the widespread need within Whatcom County for affordable, quality child care services and early learning programs
- **removing** barriers and **creating** opportunities for families to achieve upward economic mobility and stability with support through a gradual transition out of services and benefits
- **advocating** for initiatives that increase safe, affordable, low-barrier, non-segregated family housing opportunities that are integrated into all neighborhoods and communities throughout Whatcom County
- **investing** in every Whatcom County child and family through reliable efficient financing that people understand

Next Steps

Conference participants will continue to convene collectively and in smaller action groups, inviting new participants to join who are interested in taking action on improving the well-being of Whatcom children and families. The next meeting is **December 6 from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m.** in Fox Hall at the Hampton Inn located at 3985 Bennett Drive, Bellingham, WA. For information contact: Allison Williams, awilliams@whatcomcounty.us, 360-778-6145