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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 12, 2011**

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## **Whatcom County Sees Drop in Homeless, Rise in Doubled-Up**

Number of homeless decreases 18% from benchmark year, 2008

**BELLINGHAM**— Bellingham, WA: Since the economic downturn in 2008, the number of people who are homeless – living on the street, in emergency shelter or transitional housing – has decreased 18%. But while the economy seems to be slowly turning around, the number of people who have had to seek shelter in the homes of friends and family has increased 24% over that same period.

In late January, staff and volunteers from nonprofits, schools, churches, and local government fanned out across the County looking for homeless families and individuals. “The Point-in-Time Homeless Count is a daunting undertaking,” said Gail de Hoog, Whatcom County Housing Specialist, “And our community has learned to do it very well. We’re grateful for all the support for this effort each year.”

The annual homeless census is required by the Washington State Department of Commerce and the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Locally, members of the Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, use the annual count as a measure of progress toward its goal of cutting homelessness in half by the year 2015, using 2008 as a baseline.

“We began implementing our community’s 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in 2008, investing in new and expanded strategies, such as housing-first approach, rapid re-housing, and homeless prevention,” added de Hoog, who is the County’s lead planner for ending homelessness. The new investments appear to be paying off. Using consistent measures of homelessness from year to year, the overall number of people who are homeless and for whom we know where they are staying is down 18%, from 851 in 2008 to 700 in 2011. This includes people who experience long-term homelessness and who are disabled, a figure that is down 48%, from 158 persons in 2008 to 82 persons in 2011.

“These outcomes result from new partnerships and a high level of coordination between many service providers, local government, landlords, and volunteers,” said Greg Winter, Director of the Whatcom Homeless Service Center at Opportunity Council. He thinks it’s remarkable that even while the economy has produced a doubling in the unemployment rate, record foreclosures and bankruptcies, that there is any homeless decrease at all. “Still, the fact that so many more people have had to move in with friends and family is a troubling sign that more families will wear out their welcome and fall into homelessness,” added Winter.

Fortunately, at the same time that local and state funding for homeless housing programs has fallen victim to drastically reduced budgets, the high level of collaboration occurring in Whatcom County has attracted new funders. Since 2009, new resources include:

- Rapid Rehousing for Families demonstration grant, a HUD pilot program occurring in only 23 communities nationwide,
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grant to provide permanent housing to survivors of domestic violence,
- HUD/VA Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing vouchers that provide permanent rental subsidy and supportive services for 25 disabled, chronically homeless veterans,
- HUD Supportive Housing Program grants to provide permanent rental subsidy for 25 chronically homeless, disabled individuals, and
- Federal Block Grant funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration to provide case management to chronically homeless adults and youth.

Earlier this year, Whatcom County hosted the nation's first HEARTH Academy Clinic, a program of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the country's leading think tank and advocate for ending homelessness. The Clinic brought together 20 local organizations to develop plans to further coordinate homeless housing services and new performance benchmarks to measure progress.

“Whatcom County has long been known for how well our service providers work together,” said de Hoog, who added, “We are about to take this to a new level and we expect tremendous impact. We can and will end homelessness in Whatcom County.”

*For more information on Whatcom County's annual Point-in-Time Count, and the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, contact Gail de Hoog, Whatcom County Health Department, (360) 676-6724, ext. #30693, or [GdeHoog@co.whatcom.wa.us](mailto:GdeHoog@co.whatcom.wa.us)*

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