



Bellingham Herald Op Ed, submitted by Whatcom County Executive, Jack Louws

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Whatcom County currently spends \$11.5 million annually on a very wide and varied behavioral health continuum of care services for citizens. All of these programs and services are wholly or partially designed to make it possible for our citizens with specific challenges to stay out of jail, or to re-enter society after jail with the tools needed for their success. This financial commitment to programming is very close to equaling the amount we spend to operate the jail annually. The scope of our programs include community education, awareness and support; specialized training for EMS (emergency medical services) and law enforcement – such as crisis hostage negotiation, and de-escalation and management of people with acute symptoms of mental illness; school and community programs focused on prevention and intervention as well as treatment /nurse family partnerships; juvenile court/detention behavioral health services; jail behavioral health services; community mental health and substance use treatment and opiate outreach; drug, family treatment and mental health courts; homeless housing services, a district court probation specialized behavioral health unit; intensive case management programs, supportive housing programs, the Rainbow Recovery Center; veterans' relief services; electronic home detention; work release program; jail alternative program; and the jail work crews, among many other jail alternative programs and the Triage Center.

I'm pleased with the work that we are accomplishing, although more can and should be done to reduce recidivism. I'm also pleased that the Whatcom County Council has established a task force to specifically target enhanced alternatives to corrections, that in future years will pay us dividends by reducing or eliminating our need to expand the proposed replacement jail. Highlights of the Ordinance Establishing the Task Force include a commitment to review all current practices, develop specific operational plans, and to plan for a new or expanded crisis triage center. The center would include substantive programming and auxiliary services that would increase our efficiency and effectiveness. The Task Force will develop criteria for location and space needs, consider funding sources and make recommendations to council for both the construction and operation of the center. It will provide specific time frames for decision making and completion, and document assumptions used to project the effectiveness and costs of the center. Also, the Task Force will provide recommendations for enhancement of alternative services in the existing facility prior to the expansion or relocation of it. This commitment comes with specific timelines for implementation that parallels the construction timelines of the proposed new jail.

The work of the Task Force will be in three phases, as follows:

Phase 1 – The Task force will review current practices, facilities, programs and funding sources. It will develop goals for new or modified programs, and provide general information on expenditure and revenue projections. This phase is due to be completed by January 10, 2016.

Phase 2 – As service facilities are identified in Phase 1 the task force will then develop facility specifications, identify possible facility locations, and will recommend 1 or 2 options that include projected short and medium term costs. This is due for completion no later than November 1, 2016.

Phase 3 – The Task Force will develop specific operational plans and budgets leading to implementation of appropriate crisis intervention, triage services and incarceration prevention and reduction programs. This will include details on schedules, assignment of responsibilities, and projected outcomes with a basic business plan for each selected initiative. The Phase 3 report that includes enough detail to proceed with construction and programming of a new or expanded crisis triage center is due no later than March 2017.

The Task Force will begin its work this fall. The County Council is in the process of appointing the members and setting the time and place for the first meeting. The County has dedicated \$75,000 to the effort to provide for professional facilitation to the initial stage of the process. I sense that there has been a community misconception that we are doing and have done little to augment our programming in the recent past, and that is far from the truth. A few examples of work being accomplished include the addition of the mental health court in 2015; the in-progress remodel of the Sun House (short-term mental health and substance abuse housing) financed by Whatcom County, the Rotary Club of Bellingham Foundation, and the Chuckanut Health Foundation; and the remodel of our existing crisis triage center in the Irongate facility to better serve our clients. Also, we have substantially increased our presence in our local schools with counselors to serve the need of our at-risk youth, paid for by local funds. This \$675,000 investment is paying dividends in a substantially reduced juvenile population in our detention center!

Along with the specific examples we have accomplished for diversion and recidivism, we have seated the 4th Superior Court Judge in Whatcom County that will improve our ability to render due process to those accused of crimes. Many people who are not granted or are unable to post bail due to State of Washington guidelines will have their day in court earlier than in the past, as we have more capacity for trials.

Whatcom County is serious about providing alternatives to incarceration, and opportunities for those in the legal system to avoid recidivism. With the resources we have available, we will continue to make wise decisions as to what programs are most effective, and when appropriate, expand them.

You will be asked on the November 3rd ballot to consider a tax increase for the construction of a replacement jail. This jail will house Whatcom County's felons and misdemeanants, and will have medical facilities and program areas that will augment our ability to provide adequate oversight and care for those in custody. Coupling this proposed jail with a new or expanded

triage center, along with all of our high-quality existing programming, will provide the complete range of care necessary to meet the needs of our citizens whatever their circumstance. Please stay involved and informed as you make decisions for our future in November!