



Skagit County North Star Project

Call to Action

July 2022

1) Introduction

Homelessness and behavioral health have been important issues in Skagit County for many years. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has added to housing challenges and created and exacerbated mental health issues and substance use disorders in our community.

In March 2022 the Mayors and Commissioners issued a public statement in which they committed to join forces and align their efforts to work towards a healthy and thriving community. This statement included the intention to mobilize the combined forces of the cities and county to do everything within their power to ensure the well-being of every Skagitonian.

2) Purpose

The collaboration represented by the March public statement and this Call to Action are the first steps of a multi-phase whole-of-government effort. There are several linked goals:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing strategies
- Consider service delivery alternatives, with advice from stakeholders, practitioners, and those with lived experience
- Research best practices
- Develop an actionable plan that uses public funds and cooperative action to drive improved outcomes for people who are experiencing homelessness and disabling behavioral health disorders

3) Problem statement

According to a recent study by the Washington Department of Commerce, 2,222 people were counted as homeless or unstably housed in Skagit County.¹ Of these, nearly a thousand were literally homeless (sheltered or unsheltered), and 40% were non-white.

Also troubling, Skagit County schools report that 522 students are homeless or unstably housed.

These conditions are not only untenable and inhumane for those who are personally affected – they also threaten the economic prosperity of Skagit County.

¹ Snapshot of Homelessness in Washington State for July 2021 - https://www.commerce.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/SnapshotWA_January-2021.pdf

Public employees and public budgets experience growing strain. Children with insecure housing struggle to keep up at school. People with disabilities and seniors on fixed incomes find that they can't make ends meet. Employers struggle to recruit and retain workers because they can't find affordable housing. People with unaddressed mental illness and substance use disorders cycle in and out of emergency rooms and jails, placing stress on hospitals, first responders, and the justice system. And, through it all, the most vulnerable among us experience trauma that can last a lifetime.

4) Urgency

It has become clear to the signatories to this Call to Action that the current conditions cannot continue. We believe that it is in our collective interest to join forces now – with the aid of federal and state resources – to reexamine current systems of care and pursue all available avenues to render them more effective.

5) Proposed 8-month work plan

The circumstances that have led Skagit County to this point are complex. Lasting solutions will require multiple strategic policy, regulatory, and financial actions by our local governments. But government cannot improve the current state by itself. We must set the table for collective action with non-profits, businesses, hospitals, schools, financial institutions, neighborhoods, and the community. And we must engage our state and federal partners to bring in additional resources and capabilities that will leverage our own investments.

We will engage in a comprehensive, two-phase planning process, the first phase of which will last through December 2022. The essential components include the following:

- Creation of this Call to Action, which has arisen from some 40 interviews of community leaders
- Analysis and mapping of current resources and gaps
- Research and identification of best practices that fit Skagit County
- Design of a shared North Star vision for improved service delivery and outcomes
- Engagement of stakeholders and the community to react, shape, and finalize the North Star
- Organizational alignment memorialized through a Compact or similar document/declaration

6) Commitments by Leaders

We recognize that government alone cannot solve the current crisis. Nevertheless, local government – our cities and the county – have an obligation and an opportunity to lay a foundation for the systems change work that is necessary. To that end, the signatories individually and collectively make the following commitments:

- a) To actively participate in and remain engaged at a leadership level with the North Star project.

- b) To provide county and city resources that may be necessary to execute on the attached work plan. Such resources will include staff time and expertise; available reports, documents, and data; and funding as jointly determined to be necessary.
- c) To promote a collaborative, inclusive, and transparent process that builds trust throughout the community.
- d) To approach the work from a county-wide perspective, understanding that needs vary from city to city and between unincorporated areas of the county, and that it is in the collective interest of all jurisdictions to support and invest in solutions that show the most promise for the county as a whole.
- e) To recognize that enduring systems change and true collaboration will require
 - i) Pursuit of mutual benefit and honest discussion of differences
 - ii) Willingness to challenge the status quo and deal with difficult issues
 - iii) Readiness to learn, adapt, and embrace whatever actions the group agrees to
 - iv) Commitment to holding ourselves and each other accountable
- f) To acknowledge that our neighbors who are experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, and behavioral health crises are counting on our leadership to address Skagit County's challenges.
- g) To address existing disparities by engaging people with lived experience and focusing on root causes.

7) Accountability

Our goal is to develop a robust North Star framework and plan of action by the end of the year, which will lead to implementation in 2023.

8) Participants and signatories



Mayor Jill Boudreau, City of Mount Vernon



Commissioner Peter Browning, Skagit County



Commissioner Lisa Janicki, Skagit County



Mayor Julia Johnson, City of Sedro-Wooley



Mayor Matt Miller, City of Anacortes



Mayor Steve Sexton, City of Burlington



Commissioner Ron Wesen, Skagit County