

North Whatcom Poverty Task Force

2020 Final Report

Recommendations and Next Steps



Introduction

On any given day, there are over almost 1,000 people in Whatcom County¹ that are homeless or unsheltered, with many more one misfortune away from poverty. As our community grows, it is essential that the City looks forward to addressing the concerns of our most vulnerable.

In February of 2019, the Ferndale City Council formed the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force, a temporary advisory body tasked with exploring the needs for the greater Ferndale community and presenting a set of recommendations to the Ferndale City Council that will address the impacts of income inequality, homelessness, food insecurity and rising housing prices.

¹ 2019 Whatcom County Annual Report on Homelessness, Point-in-Time Homeless County. Available online at <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/DocumentCenter/View/41863/Results-of-2019-Point-In-Time-Count-of-Individuals-Living-Homeless-in-Whatcom-County>

The Task Force was composed of representatives with experience in social services, health care, the business community, and direct experience with poverty. It included residents from within Ferndale, as well as from the greater Ferndale area.

Membership of the North Whatcom Poverty Task Force:

Michelle Beck

Councilmember Kate Bishop

Tom Black

Jim Carr

Owen Cool (Vice-Chair)

Autumn Cunningham (Chair)

Ali Hawkinson

Sarah Koehler

Mark Kruetzkamp

Sara O'Connor

Shaiyeda Silverwolf

Riley Sweeney (City Staff)

The goal was to examine the experience of poverty in North Whatcom County and draft a list of recommendations for the Ferndale City Council that addresses these issues. The recommendations would look at immediate solutions, short-term solutions and long-term solutions to poverty.

Poverty is a systemic challenge with a wide array of causes, symptoms and solutions. To be the most effective, the task force was narrowly focused on what change the City of Ferndale could enact, although poverty does not stop at the city limits so

Over the next year, the Task Force met monthly with subject matter experts to delve into different dimensions of poverty. The recommendations in this document owe much of their background and nuance to our subject matter experts and the City is thankful for their participation in the process.

Subject matter experts who contributed to this work:

Greg Winter, Executive Director of the Opportunity Council

Suzanne Nevan, Director of the Ferndale Food Bank

Maureen McCarthy, Community Relations and Marketing Manager with Whatcom Transit Authority

Tim Wilder, Planning Director with Whatcom Transit Authority

Kevin Turner, Police Chief with the Ferndale Police Department

John Gargett, Deputy Director with the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Frances Burkhart, Program Specialist with the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office, Division of Emergency Management

Emilio Vela, Jr., Executive Director of Northwest Youth Services

Steven Gamage, School Resource Officer with the Ferndale Police Department

Gina Barrieau, Workforce Coordinator with WorkSource Whatcom

Samya Lutz, Housing and Services Program Manager, City of Bellingham

Ann Beck, Human Services Supervisor with Whatcom County Health Department

Terri Temple, Coordinator for the Ferndale Community Resource Center

James Valdez, Research Intern with University of Washington



Poverty in North Whatcom County

There is a common assumption that poverty is only a problem in the big cities however poverty in the smaller cities is an ever-growing problem, it just takes different, less visible forms.

In terms of homelessness, there are few residents living on the streets but many living in their cars, or in places not suitable for habitation (tool sheds, barns and attics). There is a perception that the cost of living is lower out in the county but the average rental price in Whatcom County is \$1,850, which is identical to the rental price within the City of Bellingham². The median home price in Whatcom County is actually higher than in Bellingham and is rising at a faster rate³.

While it is rare to see a panhandler on the streets of downtown Ferndale, but one in six Ferndale residents uses the Ferndale Food Bank⁴ to meet their basic needs.

Transit, health care and social services have all made strides forward in the last decade but it still takes over an hour to travel from Ferndale to Bellingham by bus, making it more and more difficult for those in need to stay in the community that they love.

² "Incomes can't keep pace with rapidly rising housing costs", Bellingham Business Journal, 03/20/19. Available online at <http://bbjtoday.com/blog/incomes-cant-keep-pace-with-rapidly-rising-housing-costs/36846/>

³ "Whatcom Housing Rental Rates rising faster than Seattle's", Bellingham Herald, 04/02/2018

⁴ Suzanne Nevan, Director of the Ferndale Food Bank speaking to the NWPTF on 07/06/19. Available online at https://www.cityofferndale.org/PTF/LS_70399.wav

Even the youth of Ferndale are affected. According to a report by the Opportunity Council on youth in crisis, 3.5% of students enrolled in the Ferndale School District experience a housing crisis during the school year⁵. That is approximately 120 students.

The impacts of poverty on a growing community can be devastating. Increasing crime rates, drug abuse, truancy are some of the symptoms but the real danger is that the community will become unaffordable and inaccessible to the people who have lived, worked and grown up here for generations. There is a pressing need to plan not just for our growth but for our most vulnerable to ensure that Ferndale remains the city of opportunity for all.

Organization of Recommendations

To help organize the broad array of possible solutions, this report is divided by category with a brief introduction of the challenges in each sector. There is no silver bullet for solving system-wide challenges however with a concerted effort, over time, approaching the problem from multiple fronts, the impacts of poverty can and will be mitigated.

Obviously, each solution will need to be weighed on its own merits however as a whole, this document represents a substantial step forward in solving these challenges.

⁵ "A Home for Everyone: Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness 2018 Annual Report." – Youth Homeless Count. Available online at: https://www.opcco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/FINAL-Whatcom-2018-homeless-count-report_06292018.pdf

Housing and Homelessness



When considering the challenges of poverty, the conversation naturally turns to homelessness which can be the most visible symptom of poverty. People picture panhandlers on street corners and people sleeping under bridges, but this hides the diversity of the challenges for those experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness can take many forms. It can be sleeping on the street, but it can also be sleeping in a car or sleeping on a couch or in a garage for a few weeks at a time, unable to secure a permanent address.

According to a recent U.S. Conference of Mayors study, people remain homeless for an average of eight months. While many are homeless for only a short period of time, about 20% are homeless for long periods of time or cycle in and out of homelessness.

For the work of the Poverty Task Force, it was essential to zero in on the causes of homelessness and especially the residents who are struggling to get by, being only one turn of bad luck from losing their place to live.

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty⁶, the leading causes for homelessness are

- Lack of Affordable Housing
- Insufficient Income/Unemployment
- Domestic Violence
- Mental Illness/Substance Abuse
- Racial Inequality

⁶ "Housing and Homelessness in the United States". Available online here: http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/UPR_Housing_Report_2014.pdf

Lack of Affordable Housing

Ferndale, and the greater Whatcom County area, have experienced a steep population boom in the last ten years however home construction has not kept pace with the demand. This has impacted both homeowners and renters. Since 2000, the median home value in Whatcom County has increased by 137%, the median rent has increased by 72%, while the median household income has only increased by 46% (Department of Housing and Urban Development).

In short, there needs to be a dramatic effort to increase housing supply and specifically affordable housing in the City of Ferndale. While the recently approved Catalyst projects will provide market rate housing, this will be inaccessible those struggling to get by.

There are a number of programs that can help close the gap