

MEMORANDUM

TO: Megan Dunn, Chair, Snohomish County Council
Jared Mead, Vice Chair, Snohomish County Council
Stephanie Wright, Councilmember, Snohomish County Council
Nate Nehring, Councilmember, Snohomish County Council
Sam Low, Councilmember, Snohomish County Council

FROM: Dave Somers, Snohomish County Executive

DATE: May 24, 2022

RE: Institutionalizing Public Health Success

There have been discussions for at least ten years to stabilize and prioritize public health by integrating the Snohomish Health District and Snohomish County, like most large counties in the state. The last two plus years of pandemic response have provided us with the experience of near integration, which has shown us that integration of the two organizations is in the best interests of our residents and public health.

As you know, Snohomish County's Department of Emergency Management, working with the Snohomish Health District, have been preparing an After-Action Report for our Snohomish County Emergency Operation Center's COVID-19 response. One of the key findings in that report is to make formal what has been informal for the last two plus years of COVID-19 response: integrating the Snohomish Health District and Snohomish County.

With the Snohomish County Council's approval, consultations have been taking place with members of the Board of Health, Cities, Towns, Tribes, State and Federal Officials, and other key public health partners. We wanted to report back on the outcome of those consultations and make recommendations for action by the Snohomish County Council and the Snohomish Health District Board of Health.

During our consultations, we heard a number of questions that we would like to address:

- What are the benefits of integration?
- What would the governance be after integration?
- How would public health be structured?
- What would happen to Snohomish Health District staff?
- What are potential risks of integration?
- How do we ensure the independence of public health?
- What is the formal process of integration?

Integrating the Snohomish Health District and Snohomish County

For the duration of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SHD and Snohomish County have acted as one. We worked together as a policy group and at the Emergency Coordination Center. This unity of purpose and process was only possible because of the specific partnerships and personalities in key leadership positions at the Board of Health, the Snohomish County Council, and the Snohomish County Executive Office.

The benefits of integration are many, including:

1. **Unity of Purpose:** The last two years have shown that a unified Snohomish Health District and Snohomish County effort improves the delivery of public health services, minimizes bureaucratic obstructions, provides unity of purpose, and increases resilience. By permanently unifying, we can make formal what has been merely informal the last two years. We can also ensure elimination of bureaucratic red tape between SHD and County operations. For example, Snohomish County already provides IT services for SHD. This has been good for both operations. We believe we can have even greater efficiency by combining operations, like most major counties across the state and region. Also, during the pandemic, the dual authorities of Snohomish County and the Snohomish Health District could have been a catastrophic barrier to success, since it could have caused significant conflict between SHD and the County. Only because of the collaborative nature of key positions during the pandemic could we avoid serious problems, much like we saw in other jurisdictions across the country.
2. **Fentanyl/Heroin/Opioids Crisis:** Both SHD and Snohomish County work on the opioid crisis, with various responsibilities shared between SHD and Snohomish County Human Services. As a more unified effort, we could bring even more resources to bear on saving lives and reducing substance use disorder.
3. **Disease Prevention and Control:** One of SHD's primary roles in the community is disease prevention and control. By creating Public Health Snohomish County, we will have more opportunities to collaborate on the full range of efforts needed to keep our residents healthy and prevent disease transmission.
4. **Sheltering:** While Snohomish County Human Services takes the lead on most sheltering issues, SHD plays an important role with the management of volunteers.
 - COVID-19 Response – SHD and Human Services coordinated with shelters to reach our houseless population to do COVID-19 testing and supply masks, hand sanitizer, educational materials and more.
 - Disease prevention – SHD has a vested interest in diseases that tend to impact many of our houseless residents (such as hepatitis A). Integration will allow SHD and Human Services greater ability to address these challenges.
 - Smoke/Cold Weather Shelters – A unified effort for our seasonal shelters would provide additional resources to this challenge that will only become more prevalent as the global climate changes.
5. **Grant Management:** The creation of a unified effort will place us in a stronger position to both utilize existing local funds, such as the 1/10 of 1% sales tax funds, to support integrated efforts and attract additional grant dollars and other funding to address some of our county's most pressing challenges. Human Services has significant expertise in competitive grant acquisition and management, providing additional capacity for pursuing public and environmental health grants.
6. **Streamlined Permitting:** By having integration of Public Health and Snohomish County's permitting operations, we could streamline the process, improving response times to better serve the public during the housing crisis and to better serve our businesses – such as those in the food service industry who already work closely with public health – as they recover from the economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** Snohomish County and the SHD have made Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion central parts of their missions. Snohomish County has an Office of Social Justice that would be a resource for public health professionals, and the Health District has an active Community Equity Advisory Board, a Public Health Advisory Council, and other ongoing efforts around health literacy and equity that would bring additional perspectives to bear on community health and county services.

8. **Nuisance Properties:** By creating Public Health Snohomish County, we would be able to have more tools to respond to nuisance properties, providing additional leverage to address this community blight.

By having the entire county's human resources to draw from, much like during the last two years of pandemic response, we can more effectively bring our collective expertise to address public health challenges. Also, public health would have access to additional resources, either from expanded grant opportunities or county funding. There is a wide array of technical skill, resources, and human resource capacity that is otherwise unavailable or limited for public health, when it is a separate entity. Of course, our pandemic response is not yet complete, and the unity of the COVID response will be only improved by integration in the new Public Health Snohomish County.

Governance, Structure, and Staff

One of the major questions from public health partners was about governance and structure for the integrated entity. Our goal with governance would be twofold: ensure public health decisions are not politicized and also ensure cities, towns, Tribes, and public health professionals have a say in the direction of public health in Snohomish County. The Health Department would still be run by a Director and rely on the talents of a Health Officer.

The new board of health would have representatives from public health professionals, cities, Tribes, and the County Council.

During the 2021 legislative session, the Legislature passed [Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1152](#) (E2SHB 1152), supporting measures to create comprehensive public health districts. Among other changes, E2SHB 1152 expands local board of health membership to include an equal number of elected and non-elected persons. Non-elected members include:

- Public health, health care facilities, and providers;
- Consumers of public health; and
- Other community stakeholders.

The legislation directs the state Board of Health to adopt rules regarding the appointment process for these non-elected members. The selection process must be fair and unbiased and ensure membership of local boards of health include balanced representation of elected officials and non-elected persons with a diversity of expertise and lived experience. [Local Board of Health Composition | SBOH \(wa.gov\)](#)

The Snohomish Health District would be moved to the county as a whole. Health District staff would become Snohomish County employees, with the added security of being part of county government. County leaders have committed to safeguarding health district and county staff as a result of integration.

Potential Risks to Integration

We believe the risks of creating Public Health Snohomish County can be mitigated through a careful and deliberate process of integration. Of course, there would be some minor disruptions as systems and staff transition within the new entity. However, we believe the benefits far outweigh the risks. For example, we expect that the risk of later losing funding or staff for public health services will be lessened by integrating public health into the county, where we can focus on sustainable funding, long-term planning, and maintaining adequate public health staffing for a thriving county. Also, we have committed to ensuring no SHD staff lose their jobs as a result of integration.

Protecting the Independence of Public Health

Much like other county staff—engineers, medical examiners, social workers, or other highly-trained experts—public health professionals require significant independence to ensure they are not making decisions based on political pressure or inappropriate influence. That independence can be better protected within the county, where we have a history of ensuring the work of our professionals is unbiased.

The leadership for public health in Snohomish County will not significantly change. Public Health Snohomish County will be led by a Department Director, and a Health Officer who is a medical doctor with expertise in health and science would continue to lead public health efforts. Along with a Health Officer and qualified, dedicated public health staff, Public Health Snohomish County will rely on guidance from a Board of Health and advisory groups. Public health decisions have been guided by experts in the field during the COVID pandemic, and that will continue to be the case.

Formal Process of Creating Public Health Snohomish County

We propose a four-step process to begin integrating Snohomish Health District and Snohomish County:

First, on May 20, 2022, the Snohomish Health District Administrative Officer and County Executive held an all-staff meeting with Snohomish Health District employees to talk about their commitments to public health and SHD employees.

Second, on May 25, 2022, the Snohomish County Council convenes during their General Legislative Session to discuss the memorandum from the County Executive about SHD and County integration.

Third, on May 31, 2022, the Board of Health of the Snohomish Health District would hold a Special Meeting to discuss the memorandum and consider a resolution to integrate with Snohomish County.

Fourth, June 8, 2022, the Snohomish County Council, meeting in General Legislative Session, would pass a Motion to leave the Snohomish Health District, beginning the formal process of integration and creating a Health Department.

With those four steps, an administrative process would be initiated. We expect the entire administrative process would take approximately six months to complete, with Public Health Snohomish County operating as a county Department of Health by January 1, 2023.

During the integration process, we would engage with SHD and County staff and ensure they understand each step in the process. We have committed to a transparent and open integration that minimizes disruptions and considers staff members' perspectives and needs. We would prioritize frequent and consistent two-way communications to ensure there are no surprises.

Conclusion

We believe the last few years, before and during the pandemic, have shown that an integrated public health department in Snohomish County would be in the best interests of our residents, as well as our public and environmental health capacity. As someone who benefitted from public health agencies and with family who are public health professionals, I am fully committed to ensuring that this change will strengthen public and environmental health in Snohomish County.