



October 21, 2024

Whatcom County Health and Community Services (WCHCS) will repeat their role as the primary operator and responsible entity to provide severe weather shelter overnight in downtown Bellingham for the winter of 2024-25. The following overview is provided to give context and set expectations ahead of the seasonal operations for this coming winter and offer a comparison with the previous winter.

Looking Back

In summer of 2023, WCHCS published an RFP in attempt to recruit a shelter operator that would provide either a nightly shelter for the season or a severe weather shelter that would operate under certain conditions. An application was received from the Road2Home organization, which was transferred administratively to City of Bellingham staff, who provided oversight and management of that contract. The County made a financial contribution of \$250,000 to assist that effort. With no applicants interested in a severe weather shelter, the county hired temporary staff to increase workforce capacity, located and leased a vacant building, and operated a shelter for 20 of the coldest nights of the year at a cost of just over \$400,000. Each shelter was planned to accommodate 45-50 individual adults, but additional guests were accommodated for several nights during the record-breaking cold snap in January, 2024.

In early fall of 2023, WCHCS coordinated a network of providers to utilize motel rooms as emergency shelter for families with children who would otherwise be unsheltered in Whatcom County. Opportunity Council, YWCA, Lydia Place, and DVSAS each supported additional families for the duration of the winter. Approximately 60 families were sheltered for three months at a cost of approximately \$650,000.

Current Status

In summer of 2024, WCHS published an RFP for housing-related services but did not receive applications for severe weather or seasonal winter shelters. Road2Home declined to take on this work again. Both of last year's locations are now unavailable, and although additional sites are being explored, a site has not yet been secured at time of writing. Regardless, WCHCS is committed to operating an overnight severe weather shelter to serve individual adults over the winter of 2024-25 and has budgeted \$450,000 for this purpose. Our goal is to serve at least 50 adults, but final capacity will be determined upon the identification of a site. The loss of the Road2Home facility is mitigated by additional beds becoming available at the new Base Camp facility, but a 50-bed shelter operated by WCHCS would leave a gap of approximately 30 beds. WCHCS may be able to increase capacity beyond 50 beds, but would require additional funding to maintain appropriate staff levels.

The network of providers supporting families with children in motel rooms is engaged and funded to repeat operational capacity at the same level as last winter.

The September Housing Pool report lists 250 unsheltered households without children (comprised of 279 individuals) and 100 households with children (comprised of 291 individuals), which substantially exceeds projected shelter capacity for the winter of 2024-25.

