



Blooming Daffodils in Skagit Valley

A message from Secretary of Health Dennis E. Worsham

Thank you for your partnership in protecting and improving the health of all Washingtonians. As I begin my service as Secretary of Health, I want to introduce myself to you and your staff; share early themes emerging from my statewide listening tour; and invite candid, solutions-oriented conversations.

Early priorities and partnership opportunities

Priorities	What partnership could look like
Sustaining vaccine access and building community confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect stable investments in immunization infrastructure, including Section 317. • Support the workforce that delivers vaccines, supports local and Tribal partners, and responds to outbreaks.
Strengthening access to care and services—especially in rural communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance policies that stabilize Medicaid and health care capacity. • Align public health and health care so prevention services, including immunizations and sexually transmitted infection prevention (STI), can reach people where they are.
Preventing overdose deaths through data-driven, community-centered action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain support for evidence-informed overdose prevention and rapid response strategies that pair real-time data with community interventions.
Data sharing modernization that improves response speed for all and honors Tribal data sovereignty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support secure and interoperable public health data exchange. • Help remove barriers that slow responsible data-sharing. • Be ready to explore targeted statutory fixes if we reach impasses.

What I did and what I heard

I concluded a First 100-Day Listening and Learning Tour in December—meeting with DOH staff, local public health staff, Tribal health workers, health care workers, community partners, legislators, and others. Many people I spoke to said federal changes and their impacts on Washington state were top of mind.

- I traveled 8,000 miles and had more than 4,000 in-person interactions.
- Open, relationship-centered sessions from Sequim to Spokane—west to east—and communities in between.
- We talked about what is working, what is strained, and what we can improve together.

I approached each session with four lenses that continue to shape my One-Year Action Plan:

- Health justice
- Public health workforce
- Public health system
- Health care system

About me

A few quick points about my background:



- Washington native, raised in Othello; graduate of Eastern Washington University.
- More than 30 years in governmental public health; my commitment to health justice was shaped during the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- Former Deputy Secretary at WA DOH (2014–2016).
- Leadership roles in local public health, including Public Health—Seattle & King County during the COVID-19 response and most recently Director of the Snohomish County Health Department.
- I live in Seattle with my husband of 30 years and our two rescue dogs.

How I plan to move from listening to action

I will not do this alone. I plan to convene cross sector teams with partner involvement to co-create recommendations and shared action—alongside “momentum builders” we can improve quickly within DOH.

A practical lens for federal–state work

Public health and health care operate like two connected “houses”: (1) prevention, promotion, and protection on one side; and (2) quality, access, and affordability on the other. We face a convergence of funding and policy change, and sustained partnership matters.

- More than 40% of state public health funds come from the federal government.
- Washington is monitoring federal grant renewals, and abrupt disruptions can (and have) destabilize local capacity.
- Medicaid is foundational to Washington's health system, especially for children, births, disability services, and long-term care.

How to engage

I welcome opportunities to meet with you and your staff to discuss district-specific priorities, hear what your constituents are experiencing, and identify practical partnership opportunities.

Contact

Washington State Department of Health

Office of Government and Community Affairs:

Michael Ellsworth, Federal and Regulatory Affairs Director,
Michael.Ellsworth@doh.wa.gov | 360-867-8500