



**Draft Minutes of the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities**

**February 24, 2026**

Hybrid Meeting

Physical meeting at:

WA State Department of Health

Town Center 2 (TC2), Room 153

111 Israel Road SE, Tumwater, WA 98501

Online via Zoom

**Council members present:**

Victor Rodriguez (Chair)

Ashley Bennett  
(Alternate)

Courtney Cecale

Sarah Clifthorne

Malia D'Alio (Alternate)

Michelle Davis (Alternate)

Renee Fullerton

Jennifer Helseth

Annie Hetzel

Jessica Hernandez

Carrie Huie (Alternate)

Nicole Johnson

Frances Limtiaco  
(Alternate)

JanMarie Ward

(Alternate)

Jessica Zinda

**Council members absent:**

Kennly Asato (Alternate)

Linda Baggio

Willie Frank

Stephen Kutz

Kelly McLain (Alternate)

Millie Piazza (Alternate)

Vic Rodriguez (Alternate)

María Á. Sigüenza  
(Alternate)

Kendrick Stewart  
(Alternate)

**Staff present:**

Jasmine Alik, Engagement and  
Partnerships Coordinator

Judith Barba Perez, Engagement and  
Partnerships Coordinator

Yen Baynes, Lead Coordinator for  
Community Engagement and Tribal  
Relations

Marcus Dehart, State Board of Health  
Communications Specialist

Molly Dinardo, State Board of Health  
Policy Advisor

Anna Harris, State Board of Health  
Communications Specialist

Jo-Ann Huynh, Administrative Coordinator

LinhPhụng Huynh, Council Manager

Michelle Larson, State Board of Health  
Communications Manager

Crystal Ogle, State Board of Health  
Administrative Coordinator

**Additional participants (49)**

Cindy Gamble, American Indian Health  
Commission

Vicki Lowe, American Indian Health  
Commission

Deborah Gardner, Department of Health

Anne McHugh, Department of Health

Velma Veloria, King County International  
Airport Community Coalition

Elena Austin, University of Washington

Lisa Keating, LGBTQ Commission

Elizabeth Gordon, Governor's Committee  
on Disability Issues & Employment

Sierra Rotakhina, Environmental Justice  
Council

Lindsay Morgan Tracy, Economic Justice  
Alliance

Missy Yates, Health Care Authority

Christina Diego, Governor's Office of  
Indian Affairs  
Francesco Somaini, Department of Health  
Hannah Haag, State Board of Health  
Francoise Milinganyo, Congolese  
Integration Network  
Leticia  
Samantha

Collin, Nooksack High School  
Father Chad, Sumas A.C. Church  
Dulce, Community Action Skagit County  
Mayra, Mount Vernon School District  
Stacey  
Lacey, Whatcom Long-Term Recovery  
Group  
Monse

During the virtual meeting, approximately 49 members of the public joined. The Council thanks everyone who took time to join, listen in, and share their personal experiences and perspectives during the meeting.

Victor Rodriguez, Council Chair, called the public meeting to order at 10:38 a.m. and shared welcoming remarks. Judith Barba Perez and LinhPhung Huynh, Council staff, provided meeting orientation information.

Chair Rodriguez provided background information about the Council and how Council meetings work. Chair Rodriguez acknowledged that the Council's December meeting was cancelled due to devastating flooding that affected many communities. Chair Rodriguez said that this topic will be highlighted in today's meeting.

Chair Rodriguez invited Council Members and other participants to introduce themselves and share what brings them hope. Responses included:

- Ten days without rain in the upcoming forecast.
- Community, resilience in the face of odds, and people coming together to create spaces to help each other.
- Family, friends, community, and faith. Having connections to help feel less alone in struggle. Joy of having others around to share emotions and feelings with.
- Being an aunt for the first time and seeing the wonder in their new baby niece's eyes.
- Being grounded in the wisdom of ancestors. Seeing through the vision of youth, in a literal way, not a philosophical way, and the possibility of making these visions a reality.
- The resiliency in communities and movement towards health, justice, and equity. The determination to move forward and struggle towards the same vision despite challenges happening in the nation and world. Family and being a new grandmother.
- Struggling to find joy given the continued targeting and dehumanization of trans youth, but finding joy in a local treasure hunt honoring Lunar New Year.
- A daughter's strength and resilience while working towards a Master of Teaching to work in middle schools.
- Working with teens and seeing their passion, care, and ability to see beyond adult minds.
- Rhythms of nature (e.g., walking outside with dogs, being struck by sounds of birds that have returned). Becoming a godparent and seeing investment in the next generation, the child's journey to his new family, and a new sense of purpose in this responsibility.

- The Japanese American Internment Day of Remembrance on February 19, 2026, which was observed by the Washington State Legislature. Meeting young Japanese Americans who carry on that day of remembrance in Yakima. Lunar New Year events being celebrated around the state and seeing children and young people emceeding the events. The renewal of Spring and the need to continue mentorship so history is not forgotten.
- Having four youth ‘niblings’ and seeing their baseline of emotional intelligence.
- Relationships with community members and family members. Seeing a group of harbor seals that come to a favorite spot to sunbathe and wait for the sunset every evening. These seals have a community and they share with our human community.

Chair Rodriguez spoke about leaders in history who have stood up to resist and confront patriarchy and racism. Chair Rodriguez also spoke about ensuring young people are protected and can learn from history. Chair Rodriguez noted that the introductory prompt was open-ended, but many responses were about youth. Chair Rodriguez encouraged everyone to share the knowledge of youth. Chair Rodriguez spoke about their first exposure to government as a youth and how Christy Curwick Hoff, former Council Manager; Dr. Ben Danielson, former Council Chair; and JanMarie Ward, Council Member (American Indian Health Commission – AIHC), supported them.

#### 1. APPROVAL OF AGENDA—POSSIBLE ACTION

**Motion:** Approve February 24, 2026, agenda.

**Motion/Second:** Ward/Davis. Approved unanimously.

#### 2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES—POSSIBLE ACTION

**Motion:** Approve September 30, 2025, minutes.

**Motion/Second:** Ward/Davis. Member Annie Hetzel (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction – OSPI) was absent from the September 30, 2025, meeting and abstained. Approved unanimously.

#### 3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Rodriguez announced the Council was transitioning to the public comment period and read from a prepared statement (on file).

No one signed up for public comment.

#### 4. COUNCIL BUSINESS AND UPDATES —POSSIBLE ACTION

Chair Rodriguez introduced draft Resolution 05 to honor the work of Dr. Benjamin Danielson and their service to the Council as Chair.

- Chair Rodriguez shared remarks about Dr. Danielson’s mentorship, leadership, and ability to speak truth. Chair Rodriguez stated that during Dr. Danielson’s leadership, the Council reestablished racial justice and equity as the Council’s “North Star,” developed bold operating principles, and created a strong framework for the Council’s ability to speak its truth. Chair Rodriguez stated their respect for Dr. Danielson and opened the floor for additional thoughts.

- Member Ward stated their love for Dr. Danielson and how Dr. Danielson moves and shows up across spaces consistently with love, kindness, and passion. Member Ward said that Dr. Danielson's messages are intentional and carry forward their purpose to be inclusive and to break through obstacles for youth. Member Ward said that they have seen Dr. Danielson in action in many settings, including building the blueprint for the state Office of Equity.
- Jennifer Helseth, Council Member (Department of Children, Youth, and Families – DCYF), spoke about their experiences seeing Dr. Danielson as a keynote speaker prior to meeting them as the Council Chair. Member Helseth said that they were amazed with Dr. Danielson as a speaker, but that Dr. Danielson was even more impressive to work with on the Council.

**Motion:** The Council adopts Resolution 05 recognizing Benjamin Danielson for his service to the Council.

**Motion/Second:** Bennett/Hernandez. Approved unanimously.

Linh shared updates about Council business and key documents for this meeting.

- *Council bylaws regarding electing a Vice Chair.* Linh and Council Members congratulated Victor Rodriguez for being appointed as Council Chair in January and acknowledged Victor's prior contributions to the Council as Vice Chair. For the Council's now vacant Vice Chair position, Linh reviewed officer positions, duties, and election procedures in Article II, Officers and Committees, of the Council's bylaws. Linh added that the Vice Chair may be an Agency or Health Consumer Member, but the seat has traditionally been filled by a Health Consumer Member (a community member). Linh reviewed timeline options for holding a Vice Chair election, including delaying the vote until the Health Consumer Member seats are filled. Renee Fullerton, Council Member (Workforce Training & Education Coordinating Board – WTB), wanted to confirm that there are no health consumers on the Council since Chair Rodriguez (formerly in a Health Consumer representative role) is currently acting as Chair. Linh confirmed that the two Health Consumer representative seats are unfilled and added that Commission representatives also help provide community perspective on the Council.
- *Staff updates.* Linh welcomed back Yen Baynes, Council staff, from extended leave and let members know that Yen is reorienting to the team's work.
- *Council Member changes.* Linh welcomed new members Malia D'Alio, representing the Commission on Asia Pacific American Affairs (CAPAA); Sarah Clifthorne and Kennly Asato, representing the Department of Commerce; and Remeka Jones and Frances Limtiaco, representing the Department of Health. Linh acknowledged the departure of Lydia Faitalia from CAPAA and said that quorum for today's meeting is 8 members. Linh said the Council Member webpage will be updated to reflect these membership changes.
- *Health Impact Reviews.* Linh provided updates for the Health Impact Review (HIR) program. Linh shared that in November 2025, the HIR team lectured at the University of Washington, where they hold clinical faculty appointments. Linh spoke about the HIR team's efforts around Legislative Session, including their

- outreach to Council Members on how to engage with HIRs during session. Linh said that so far, the HIR team has completed 6 HIRs, with topics ranging from housing assistance for youth who are in extended foster care, to pediatric transitional care services, to tobacco taxation policy. Linh said that completed HIRs are available [online](#). Linh said the HIR team testified in committee for some completed HIRs and shared information about HIRs at a meeting of the Senate Committee on Human Services. Finally, Linh said that the HIR team is continuing to do outreach and will be speaking with the Senate Republican Caucus soon.
- Key documents. Linh shared that Council staff updated the report titled “Health Inequities and Social Drivers: A baseline overview and look at Washington State,” which was completed in May 2025 and updated at the end of the year. Updates include pressing topics that communities have identified, including childcare and early learning, caregiving, immigration policy, and climate readiness, adaptation, and resilience. Linh said another document in today’s materials is a letter to the Governor’s Immigration Subcabinet titled “Lifting Up Community Concerns on Immigration-Related Issues.” Linh said that Council Members and staff have been hearing from communities about harms caused by immigration policies and enforcement, including escalated surveillance, racial profiling, and violent encounters. Linh said that at the Council’s September 2025 meeting, Council Members discussed the responsibility to amplify community voice, and the letter outlines what communities have shared with the Council. Linh encouraged Council Members to lift up these issues wherever they can. Chair Rodriguez noted that at a previous meeting, Vic Rodriguez, Alternate Council Member (Commission on Hispanic Affairs – CHA), had discussed the CHA’s [Rapid Response Hub](#) that can be shared with community members.

Chair Rodriguez opened the floor for Council Members to share updates.

- Carrie Huie, Council Member (CAPAA), shared information about CAPAA’s new leadership, Chair Kendall Kosai and First Vice Chair Kiana McKenna.
- Sarah Clifthorne, Council Member (Department of Commerce – Commerce), said the Community Services Division has been deeply impacted by recent and possible future cuts to state and federal funding, changes to federal policy and programs, and executive orders. Member Clifthorne said that, among other areas, these programs provide services that support poverty reduction and basic household needs, violence prevention, community re-integration after incarceration, disability justice, and social and economic equity for communities of color. Member Clifthorne shared that the Office of Tribal Relations is offering technical assistance to Tribes as federal programs and funding are reduced or eliminated. Member Clifthorne added that Federal shifts have also negatively affected Commerce programs that support Tribal efforts, particularly in energy development, broadband expansion, climate-related relocation, and wraparound services for housing and behavioral health.
- Annie Hetzel, Council Member (Office for the Superintendent of Public Instruction – OSPI), spoke about their recent conversations with school nurses, many of whom were not aware that state agencies took a 10 percent budget cut, and that there is not awareness among community that there is more limited capacity.

Member Hetzel said OSPI is monitoring the ongoing dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education and they are witnessing federal funding sources for migrant education, Native education, and special education disappear. Member Hetzel said that OSPI is meeting with school districts to answer questions and lessen confusion and fear. Member Hetzel said that OSPI's Special Education department is one of the few programs that have not had cuts, and that they are focusing on including students with disabilities in the classroom and eliminating restraint and isolation as key initiatives. Member Hetzel spoke about OSPI's efforts to expand Medicaid billing for schools for services that schools provide, given the context where children will have decreased or no access to healthcare. Member Hetzel said this is a multi-year effort in collaboration with the Health Care Authority and school districts. Member Hetzel said that at the federal level, Medicaid billing for schools is one of the few Medicaid pieces that has not been cut.

- In response to Member Hetzel, Chair Rodriguez mentioned current legislative efforts to change the tax structure to generate funds for education. Chair Rodriguez said the Council spoke about the importance of young people during introductions, and that many Council Members work with children and families. Chair Rodriguez said this is a strategic and important place to do work, with opportunities for prevention and money-saving. Chair Rodriguez said that one of the pillars of a healthy community is making sure youth have safe, stable, and nurturing environments, and asked how we can make sure children are not exposed to more traumatic events.
- Member Fullerton shared the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) is recruiting a new director. Member Fullerton said federal policy changes to work requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program have increased customer volumes at local WorkSource centers, which support job seekers with skills training, resumés, and other services. Member Fullerton said this surge strains agency capacity and will likely continue as additional work requirements for Medicaid are phased in, making partner coordination even more important. Member Fullerton said workforce partners are working quickly to roll out a Workforce Pell grant, a new type of Pell grant created through H.R. 1. Member Fullerton shared that the Workforce Board is monitoring impacts of H.R. 1 on the federal student financial aid system, such as greatly reduced access to loans for graduate and professional students, which may have a larger effect on people with low income. Member Fullerton said that in July 2026, funding for Grad PLUS loans will end and the Workforce Board will be keep an eye on who matriculates to graduate school this fall. Member Fullerton spoke about the importance of having representation of students who are first-generation and have low-income and said the health workforce has observed improved health outcomes with a more diverse workforce. Member Fullerton then talked about issues related to artificial intelligence influencing larger market forces and there being economic growth without job growth. Member Fullerton related this to workforce demographic changes, with a reducing population of younger people and a growing population of seniors. Member Fullerton then spoke about immigration enforcement, saying that many

people are afraid to go to work and this is impactful across many sectors of the economy.

- In response to Member Fullerton, Chair Rodriguez highlighted the expansion of Pell grants for short-term credentials as a silver lining. Chair Rodriguez asked if there may be new funding opportunities around apprenticeships and alternate pathways to education. Member Fullerton said the federal government is very focused on apprenticeships as an entry point and Washington State has a well-regulated apprenticeship system that is just starting, but many people in the trades are being laid off. Member Fullerton spoke about the integration of apprenticeship programs at colleges and shared examples such as Licensed Practical Nurse degrees and a new special education-focused teacher apprenticeship, which may be especially intriguing for rural communities where people may not be able to leave to seek out higher education. On this topic, Member Helseth (DCYF) added that many state agencies are removing education requirements so that experience counts towards job qualification requirements.
- Jessica Zinda, Council Member (Department of Social and Health Services – DSHS), shared about DSHS's new Secretary, Angela Ramirez. Member Zinda spoke about the DSHS Economic Services Administration's role as one of the primary monitors and responders to H.R. 1. Member Zinda touched on DSHS' participation in the Governor's Immigration Subcabinet, with staff participating in various leadership capacities. Member Zinda then spoke about the significant reorganization happening at DSHS, with some divisions merging.
- Member Ward (AIHC) spoke about one of AIHC's priority bills, House Bill 2685, known as the data sovereignty bill. Member Ward explained that this bill requires state agencies to use and share Tribal data in a manner that is consistent with Tribal data sovereignty principles. Member Ward said this bill additionally directs the State Board of Health to adopt rules requiring healthcare providers, facilities, and labs to report notifiable conditions to Tribal health jurisdictions, and exempts Tribal data held by certain state agencies or by local health jurisdictions from public disclosure. Member Ward said the bill died this year, but it will come back, and once passed it will have impacts on many state agencies.

## **5. 2025 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT —POSSIBLE ACTION**

Jasmine Alik and Judith Barba Perez, Council staff, introduced the draft Community Engagement Report (on file). They shared the main lessons, general themes, and additions to the report since the first draft. They said the Council can consider a vote to approve the report as presented today, which would allow staff to finalize and distribute the report on behalf of the Council.

Judith encouraged community members to be frank with their feedback. Judith referenced parts of the report that highlight the fear and trauma communities are experiencing related to family separation and immigration enforcement, as well as difficulties navigating governmental spaces which creates barriers to civic engagement. Judith also mentioned a theme of integrating multigenerational learning, with family

being a key driver for community members. Judith said that many community members who participated were youth, and that young people are not given enough opportunities for this type of engagement.

Member Ward said that they were happy root causes were more deeply addressed.

Jasmine shared that community members did not hold back during their interviews and that the team chose not to tone down the messages they shared. Community members shared that civic engagement is an important protective factor for health access and prevention. Jasmine spoke about state agencies' responsibility to implement community engagement plans. Jasmine said that these efforts are currently too fragmented and they intersect chaotically rather than helpfully at the community level. Jasmine said that the Council's Community Engagement team could potentially help form alignment and develop maturity in community engagement practices across agencies.

Frances Limtiaco, Council Member (Department of Health – DOH), shared appreciation for the Community Engagement team bringing these issues together. Member Limtiaco said that community members have offered insights and are demanding tangible changes from government.

Linh said that it would be great for the Council to assign contacts in their state agencies to reach out to regarding this report and asked Council Members for a vote.

**Motion:** The Council approves the concepts in the draft 2025 community engagement report as presented today. The Council directs staff to work with the Council's Chair to finalize and distribute the report.

**Motion/Second:** Helseth/Hetzel. Approved unanimously.

The Council took a lunch break at 12:57 p.m. and reconvened at 1:20 p.m.

## 6. PUBLIC COMMENT

Chair Rodriguez announced the Council was transitioning to the public comment period and read from a prepared statement (on file).

No one signed up for public comment.

## 7. PRESENTATION: MATERNAL AND FAMILY HEALTH

Chair Rodriguez introduced the item and welcomed guest speakers.

Deborah Gardner and Anne McHugh, Department of Health, gave a presentation about the Washington State Maternal Mortality Review Panel's (MMRP's) 2025 Report ([on file](#)). They shared background on the MMRP, including its legislative mandate, review process, and priorities. They said the Panel found that maternal deaths rose in 2021-2022 and 82% of pregnancy-related deaths were preventable. They shared that in addition to factors like financial barriers and limited healthcare access, the Panel identified discrimination, bias, interpersonal racism, or structural racism in 76% of

preventable pregnancy-related deaths during that time. Presenters said the Panel issued over 80 recommendations to various audiences, including the legislature, health systems and providers, state and local agencies, and more. Presenters highlighted that recommendations include improving access to high-quality healthcare, including mental health care, substance use disorder treatment, and preventive care for pregnant and postpartum people. They spoke about current and emerging issues that may make implementation of the MMRP's recommendations more challenging and important, such as Medicaid cuts, rural maternity care shortages, and continued threats to immigrant, BIPOC, and LGBTQ+ communities. They stressed the need to protect Medicaid funding, expand paid leave, and make sure families have access to housing, transportation, and community-based support.

Member Ward, alongside Cindy Gamble and Vicki Lowe (American Indian Health Commission), presented a Native-led addendum to the MMRP's report ([on file](#)). They shared AIHC's background and mission as a Tribally driven non-profit organization and spoke about AIHC's Maternal and Infant Health (MIH) strategy. They focused on the significance of maternal and infant health, pointing out the lasting harms caused by colonization and the need to fully eliminate maternal deaths. They said, according to the last three MMRP reports, American Indian/Alaska Native communities had the highest rate of pregnancy-associated and pregnancy-related deaths. They spoke about their work with the state Department of Health to change the review process for pregnancy-associated deaths and increase participation opportunities for community members and organizations. Presenters shared their process of conducting a Maternal, Infant, Child, and Adolescent Health needs assessments as a part of the Maternal Child Health Block Grant. For these assessments, they stated that they held several gatherings across different formats, engaged 110 participants, and collected over 1500 individual responses around issues and recommendations. They spoke about the major policy and systems recommendations from their MICAH report and the work they are doing to implement those recommendations.

Cindy shared the significance of cultural and traditional healing and encouraging bonding between infants and parents. Cindy said the implications on a child and a family who loses a mother are not well understood, which is an area that AIHC calls out in its reports. Cindy stated that our society does not prioritize any women and children, let alone BIPOC women and children. Cindy touched on the financial implications and pointed to the Nest program piloted by Hummingbird Indigenous Family Services, which aims to provide guaranteed monthly income to Indigenous pregnant people. Cindy spoke about the costs of paying for long-term problems and the possible savings that could result from investing in prevention at all levels.

Presenters and Council Members discussed the need for prevention, focus on equity and social drivers of health, disaggregated data to identify inequities, long-term planning, and investing early in mothers and babies to improve health and use resources wisely.

## 8. COMMUNITY EDUCATION: KEEPING YOUR FAMILY SAFE—LEAD IN AVIATION FUEL

Velma Veloria, King County International Airport Community Coalition, and Dr. Elena Austin, University of Washington (UW), gave a presentation on the negative health effects from airport pollution in South King County and some resources communities have access to.

Velma shared background about the King County International Airport (KCIA) Community Coalition (Coalition). Velma said the Coalition began in 2020 because of the impact of noise and air pollution on communities in Georgetown, South Park, Beacon Hill, and Tukwila. Velma said that in trying to understand the impact of pollution on communities of color, the Coalition approached Dr. Austin due to her academic work on the airport's impacts. Velma said that KCIA still has planes using leaded gas and the Coalition asked Dr. Austin to assist with a study about these impacts.

Dr. Austin provided context about why aviation matters in public health. Dr. Austin explained that aviation generates a range of air pollutants with established health effects, with the two major fuel types of concern being avgas (leaded aviation gasoline) and jet A fuel. Dr. Austin said that living and working near airports results in higher exposure to lead, ultrafine particles, nitrogen oxides, and other pollutants, and KCIA has multiple airports close to residential areas, schools, and community spaces. Dr. Austin said they have worked with the Coalition and other organizations to identify which schools are impacted.

Dr. Austin said that understanding local emission sources and exposures is critical for assessing public health impacts. Dr. Austin said that a 2023 Environmental Protection Agency study showed that aviation emissions harm neurological, cardiovascular, and respiratory health. Dr. Austin reviewed a map developed by the state Department of Health and UW showing the environmental health disparities among communities near airports. Dr. Austin said the map shows that the locations of King County airports align with census tracts that are already bearing disproportionate impacts of environmental health exposures and inequities.

Dr. Austin said multiple studies show elevated blood lead levels increase with proximity to flight paths going in/out of regional airports and downwind of airports. Dr. Austin said that any lead exposure in the environment is harmful and King County International Airport is responsible for 70% of airborne lead emissions in the county.

Dr. Austin then spoke about mitigation strategies, including environmental monitoring (e.g., expanding measurements of pollutants), health monitoring (e.g., focused blood testing for children living near airports), and community engagement (e.g., partnering with local organizations to strengthen public understanding and supporting voluntary testing). Dr. Austin also spoke about requiring the use of unleaded aviation gas, adjusting ground operations, and implementation of interventions (e.g., HEPA filtration).

Velma said that the Coalition needs help expanding education and community engagement at the regional level, since Renton and Auburn are also experiencing these issues. Velma said House Bill 1554 (Reducing public health and environmental impacts from lead) was introduced during the 2023 Legislative Session and sought to address some of these issues, but the bill did not pass. Velma said the Coalition is also seeking help doing education work around volunteer testing.

Chair Rodriguez asked about the demographics of the people driving the demand for flights, such as flights using smaller planes. Dr. Austin said they have not been thinking about the issue in this way. Dr. Austin said people disproportionately impacted are people of color, who primarily live in south King County and are mostly workers. Velma said that the Coalition is driving the demand for this information since members are living and experiencing the impacts. Chair Rodriguez noted that perhaps on a global scale, the largest contributors to environmental impacts are people with more money and that this is a class issue. Chair Rodriguez suggested that global trends are playing out locally and that it is important to have a global context for understanding this issue. Chair Rodriguez noticed there is an effort to increase these flights and Velma shared their concern about the impacts of increased travel due to the FIFA World Cup 2026. Member Hetzel shared in the chat that they reside in that region and frequently see private jets flying in and out of one of the airports.

Chair Rodriguez thanked Velma and Dr. Austin and said they wanted to weave in the threads from today's presentations. Chair Rodriguez said the AIHC presented about maternal mortality rates, which has a strong connection to histories of trauma and colonization. Chair Rodriguez said that issues in King County relate to redlining, which organizes demographics to be the way they are. Chair Rodriguez said that it is not by accident that there is a disproportionate amount of BIPOC communities and communities with low income around an airport. Chair Rodriguez said that these are all symptoms of systemic racism and histories of colonization, and that these forces play out as disproportionate health outcomes. Chair Rodriguez said that this is an important framework for the Council to provide in recommendations to the Governor and legislature.

Velma asked if they could tap the Council for support in the future with outreach, funding, or support with legislative activities. Linh said the Council has limitations due to its non-partisan and advisory role, but could help with agency navigation and sharing educational information with agency staff. Linh noted that there are participants in today's meeting who work in environmental public health or are working to implement the Healthy Environment for All (HEAL) Act and suggested brainstorming ideas together.

The Council took a break at 3:15 p.m. and reconvened at 3:21 p.m.

## **9. COMMUNITY CONVERSATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES AFTER THE DECEMBER FLOODS**

Chair Rodriguez stated that part of public health is identifying inequities and this Community Conversation is a tool to do that. Chair Rodriguez asked how we can make sure that communities have proper structures to deal with climate change and extreme weather events. Chair Rodriguez said that this is not just an issue for those experiencing disparities, but for everyone, and that this is an issue of our survival. Chair Rodriguez said that the Council has heard reports from communities, such as those of farmworkers, being disproportionately affected by floods and shared their family background and connection to the flooding.

Judith and Jasmine said that the Community Conversation will be fully bilingual in Spanish and English. They shared the purpose of this Community Conversation is to elevate what happened during the catastrophic flooding in December 2025 and to create space for community members, leaders, and organizations to share their experiences. They shared that through this conversation, meeting attendees can understand how the flooding impacted people's daily lives, including access to resources, work, health, and overall well-being. They also emphasized that community voices can help highlight experiences not reflected in data or media coverage, identify gaps in emergency response and recovery efforts, and inform ongoing interagency learning and improvement. They noted that this conversation will not result in immediate policy change but can help form future policy. They introduced the moderator, Leticia, as a resident of Mount Vernon, a social advocate, and mother of three.

Leticia shared about the experience of having to leave their home without notice, with their family and taking everything important with them in their cars. Leticia then invited additional participants to speak about their experiences.

- Collin, principal at Nooksack High School, and Father Chad, Sumas A.C. Church, said they both lost their homes in the floods. They said that there are devastating effects on community members, especially people who have low-income and do not have resources to raise new homes and prevent future damage. They reported that many people have moved out of the town. Father Chad shared demographic information for 840 local families who were affected by the floods; half have a median income of less than 80 percent of the federal poverty level, and the majority do not speak English or speak limited English. Father Chad said that half of the town is currently unhoused and that both speakers' homes were flooded for the second time in recent years.
- Dulce, Community Action Skagit County (CASC), said they provide services to people with income that is 200 percent below the federal poverty level. Dulce spoke about their experience providing support to communities after the flood and said that major public health organizations did not seem prepared with language interpretation services for Spanish-speaking communities (e.g., CASC staff were asked if they could help interpret). Dulce spoke about how CASC reflected on the role they play in crisis response as they wanted to make themselves available, but do not operate 24/7. Dulce said that they noticed folks on the Eastside of Skagit County are having a harder time accessing services and asked how folks can access services when they are not in town.

- Mayra, Mount Vernon School District, introduced themselves as the Director of Equity and Family Engagement for the school district. Mayra said that many people were impacted by the floods and there was a huge lack of support for language access. Mayra said that without the school district's staff and family liaison, the Red Cross could not have provided services. Mayra said that school district staff were running the shelter while it was understaffed, and that their staff also had to consider their role in crisis response since many were working 24/7 in response to the flood. Mayra also spoke about the bureaucratic barriers their staff faced, including not being able to serve food and water they had purchased at the shelter since they were not purchased through the Red Cross. Mayra said that they were proud of how their staff came together to provide support for people in shelters.

Leticia asked what type of support was most difficult to get and what support participants wished could have been available. Leticia shared that it was hardest for them to get food and water as stores, businesses, and major roads were closed from the flooding.

- Mayra reiterated the bureaucratic barriers their staff faced. Mayra added that they were unable to cook for folks, even though school district staff had food handler permits.
- Samantha stated that they live and work in Sumas, and that this is the fourth flood they have faced in the last ten years. Samantha said that they work in a pharmacy and have seen the number of people on anti-anxiety and anti-depression medication spike. Samantha spoke about elementary-aged children being severely impacted by being displaced from their homes. Samantha said that as it is more affordable to live in Sumas, where there are lots of families with lower-income. Samantha said that it is difficult to pour your entire life savings into a home and have it flood repeatedly. Samantha said that while Sumas is getting better at providing services to support flood victims, there is still a huge impact. Samantha said that many homes are sold after a flood and new people moving in are unaware of the regular flooding or think it will not happen again. Samantha said that folks in bureaucracy tell the public it will get better and it is not getting better. Samantha said that everyone is being impacted severely by the lack of action and continued flooding.
- Leticia spoke about how this issue has affected the Latinx community, who have been afraid to ask for help and leave their homes for fear of interacting with immigration enforcement authorities. Leticia said that many people have not left their homes for weeks because of this fear. Leticia said that when the floods came, many families did not have basic necessities and the only stores open were those with the highest prices. Leticia spoke about the frustration of losing things. Leticia said that many houses were affected, and families did not have home insurance and had to start over with nothing. Leticia said that they lost everything, and that people in their neighborhood are still living with the consequences. Leticia said that they still do not have insulation and that there are empty houses in their neighborhood because people have not returned.

- Leticia said that people in their neighborhood had to share to be able to live and are even sharing mobile homes and RVs while trying to remodel their houses.
- Stacey, a resident of Whatcom County, said that the December flood was their third flood in five years. Stacey said that the floods do more than just rob people of their possessions, they also bring toxins that settle into the sediment left behind. Stacey shared a story of helping someone fix their home and inhaling dust that led to a major sinus infection requiring extensive treatment and surgery. Stacey said they are still injured and during the recovery process, they could not walk some days. Stacey said that the floods have robbed them of years of health and ability to show up for their children. Stacey said that they have been involved in the community and that there is so much unprocessed PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and trauma. Stacey shared about their first flooding experience in 2020, then in 2021, and witnessing their children react when nobody came to rescue them. Stacey said that their community is hurting and there is no solution right now. Stacey shared thanks for the time and space.
  - Leticia thanked Stacey for sharing and spoke about their own difficulties explaining what was happening to their child who has autism. Leticia said they see many children living in mobile homes and that every family has their own story.

Leticia asked if there were any experiences that were not shared in the media that participants would like to share. Leticia said that many people saw what happened at the moment of the floods or within the first few days after, but people are not aware of the full aftermath. Leticia said they still do not have heat and that many people are desperate to survive.

- Collin said that the long-term health of community members is an unwritten story. Collin spoke about the toxins in the sediment and the mold that gets into buildings that cannot get rebuilt in time. Collin spoke about the shared trauma of the community's children and said that every time it rains, kids get nervous.
- Leticia said their community has been analyzing the services and help that people still need, such as rent, electricity, and food. Leticia said the general public is not talking about this anymore because the flood is over. Leticia said they hope this forum could be an opportunity to share the stories of people in their communities, and that hopefully it will not be the last.

Leticia asked what the community needs to be prepared for future disasters. In addition to better water filtration, Leticia suggested forming a committee with the city to help with community education.

- Collin talked about river management and said that studies have been done in Whatcom County. Collin said addressing the issue is a matter of political will. Collin said that a comprehensive solution requires local, state, and federal government involvement. Collin said they formed a non-profit, Whatcom Long-Term Recovery Group, after the 2021 flood and have raised houses over the last four years. Collin said that participants can reach out to them for support with recovery and preparedness. Collin said that rural communities have their own unique challenges and it takes creative strategies to provide the services they do.

- Dulce said that this is not the first time flooding has happened and it will not be the last. Dulce spoke about having a framework to look to. Dulce said Community Action Skagit County had a flood response webpage up the day after the 2021 flood and posted resources in English and Spanish. Dulce said that they know there is a need and there is an opportunity to improve. Dulce said that Skagit County should look further into their partners in Whatcom and develop something like Whatcom Long-Term Recovery Group.
- Mayra said that it would be helpful for school districts to know if, when, and how they should partner with governmental agencies.
- Lacey, a case manager with Whatcom Long-Term Recovery Group, said their disaster relief efforts are about creating community and they have learned not to wait for government. Lacey said that funding assistance for disaster relief this time is significantly different than in 2020 and it has taken a long time for funding support to come from the government. Lacey said they have a caseload of over 600 households and their organization is helping folks from getting access to birth certificates to home repairs. Lacey said that the state is currently only offering a “needs grant” and rental assistance, but no funding for home repairs. Lacey said that those who do not have flood insurance require their organization’s support, but their organization does not have the funding to support that need. Lacey said it would be nice to get acknowledgement from anyone higher up in government that their small town has gone through its third disaster in five years and that the emotional and physical turmoil they are experiencing is coming to a head.

Leticia thanked everyone for sharing. Leticia said that for members of the community who do not speak English, it is hard to access information, and many people are afraid to seek or share information. Leticia echoed Lacey’s sentiment of wishing not to be forgotten. Leticia spoke about a friend who was not expecting to be affected by the floods and did not have flood insurance, but had to leave their house and car, and their car broke down as a result.

Chair Rodriguez asked if participants knew how elders were affected by the floods. Collin shared the story of an elderly woman who lived by herself and whose house had also been flooded four years ago, but nobody gutted her house at that point. Collin said that she was living in squalid conditions and that it was a very emotional experience to talk to her. Collin said that this was just one story, but there are likely many stories like that.

Monse, a student from Mount Vernon High School, said it really impacted them to see their family go through challenges. Monse said that they could not help most of their family members and that there should have been more open doors for families. Monse said some of their friends had to miss weeks of school and failed classes because they could not get caught up.

Leticia thanked Judith for opening a space for the community to speak about this topic.

## 10. 2026 REGULAR MEETING SCHEDULE

### —POSSIBLE ACTION

Linh shared the proposed 2026 schedule for regular public meetings.

- Tuesday, February 24, 2026
- Date options: May 12, 13, 14 or May 20, 21 or June 23, 24,
- Tuesday, September 15, 2026
- Tuesday, December 15, 2026

Linh noted date options for the second meeting and said the meeting could be accompanied by an additional event the day before, co-hosted with key partners.

Members gave feedback on their availability for these dates. Linh noted that staff are still working with partners on schedules for the year and requested flexibility from Council Members. Member Helseth amended the motion language to expressly allow staff to narrow down and change meeting dates as needed.

Linh asked the Council for feedback on the idea of a joint convening with the Environmental Justice Council and the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee. Members Fullerton and Helseth and Chair Rodriguez expressed their support.

**Motion:** The Council approves the 2026 regular meeting schedule. As needed, Council staff may work with the Chair to change meeting dates.

**Motion/Second:** Helseth/Hetzel. Approved unanimously.

## 11. ANNOUNCEMENTS, FEEDBACK, AND REFLECTIONS

This item was skipped for time.

## ADJOURNMENT

Chair Rodriguez adjourned the meeting at 4:47 p.m.

## GOVERNOR'S INTERAGENCY COUNCIL ON HEALTH DISPARITIES

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Victor Rodriguez, Chair

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