

WAPUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEM MONTHLY UPDATE

May 2026

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) works diligently with Local and Tribal Health Jurisdictions to improve the health and well-being of Washington residents. The WA State Public Health System Monthly Update provides an overview of the key health issues impacting Washington state, and the progress we are making in addressing them.



**Questions about the WA
State Public Health System
Monthly Update?**

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**Federal PHL
Investments**



**Healthy
Youth Survey**



**State Health
Improvement
Plan**





Federal Investments in Washington's Public Health Laboratory Protect the Public Health

Recent outbreaks across the globe, from measles to Ebola, demonstrate that infectious diseases can emerge quickly and cross borders rapidly. Sustained federal support for public health laboratory systems, epidemiologic workforce, and disease surveillance remains essential to ensuring Washington state can rapidly identify threats and coordinate response activities with local health jurisdictions and Tribes.

In Washington state, federal investment through [CDC's Epidemiologic and Laboratory Capacity \(ELC\)](#) cooperative agreement supports laboratory staffing, epidemiologists, disease surveillance systems, and testing capacity. ELC resources help maintain the specialized workforce and equipment needed to process specimens safely, coordinate testing plans, and support jurisdictions during outbreaks and health emergencies.



Figure 1: The Public Health Lab Team at a May Meeting

This spring, DOH has worked closely with LHJs and national partners to monitor several high-profile infectious disease threats. Most recently:

- CDC notified DOH that 6 Washington residents were exposed or potentially exposed to Andes hantavirus, associated with an outbreak linked to the MV Hondius cruise ship in South America. Washington residents identified as high-risk exposures are currently being monitored in coordination with CDC and local public health partners, while DOH's Washington Public Health Laboratory (PHL) coordinates specimen handling and testing preparedness.
- Separately, Chelan County recently identified a case of Sin Nombre hantavirus, the strain endemic to Washington and other western states. While Sin Nombre hantavirus does not spread person-to-person, these cases highlight the importance of maintaining strong epidemiologic surveillance and laboratory readiness for both endemic and emerging infectious diseases.
- Federal investments also support Washington's broader preparedness network. Should a patient in Washington develop illness associated with Andes hantavirus or another special pathogen, DOH would coordinate patient transport and care in partnership with the and the Region 10 Emerging Special Pathogens Treatment Center in Spokane.

Washington continues to strengthen its preparedness capacity through federal partnerships beyond laboratory funding alone.

- DOH continues to host two fellows through [CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service \(EIS\) program](#). Officers in this 2-year globally recognized applied epidemiology training program work alongside DOH subject matter experts and provide first-hand assistance with outbreak response, on-call support, and advanced data analyses. DOH has benefitted from the significant federal investment provided by these fellows, as they play an integral role in response and programmatic work.
- DOH is now an institutional member of the [World Health Organization's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network \(GOARN\)](#). Participation in GOARN provides access to information about health threats--not just communicable disease--that are emerging and ongoing around the world. In addition, DOH receives regular communication that we work to share within our Governmental Public Health System partners to improve our collective understanding global health issues that could have an impact in Washington State.



Figure 2: A Snapshot of PHL Work

These capabilities are increasingly important as Washington prepares to support major international events, including the upcoming FIFA World Cup matches in Seattle. Through ELC and related federal preparedness investments, DOH and local public health partners are coordinating surveillance, monitoring, and response planning efforts to help protect both Washington residents and international visitors.



Healthy Youth Survey Highlights Steady Progress in Youth Well-Being Across Washington

Newly released results from Washington's 2025 [Healthy Youth Survey \(HYS\)](#) provide encouraging insight into the health and well-being of young people across the state, with many indicators related to mental health, substance use, and school connectedness remaining stable or improving.

The Healthy Youth Survey, conducted every 2 years since 2002, is one of Washington state's most important tools for understanding the experiences, behaviors, and needs of youth in grades 6–12. More than 213,000 students participated in the 2025 survey, which is administered collaboratively by the Washington State Department of Health, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Health Care Authority, and Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board.

This year's results suggest that many of the trends observed following the COVID-19 pandemic

are stabilizing. Youth substance use continues to remain below pre-pandemic levels in many categories, while measures of adult support, school engagement, and community connectedness remain strong protective factors for Washington students.

The survey collects statewide and local data on a broad range of issues affecting youth health and development, including:

- Mental and behavioral health
- Substance use and prevention
- School climate and safety
- Bullying and violence
- Physical activity and nutrition
- Protective factors such as trusted adults and community support

The value of the HYS extends far beyond data collection. The survey serves as a foundational evidence base used by state agencies, local health jurisdictions, school districts, Tribal partners, and community organizations to guide policy decisions, target prevention resources, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.

For example, HYS data informs:

- Behavioral health and suicide prevention strategies
- Federal and state grant applications
- School-based prevention and intervention programs
- Youth substance use prevention initiatives
- Community health assessments and improvement plans
- Legislative and budget discussions related to youth services

Since the survey provides comparable trend data over time and across regions, it allows policymakers and public health leaders to identify emerging concerns early and direct resources where they are needed most. The survey also helps ensure that youth-serving programs are grounded in real-time community needs and measurable outcomes.

As Washington continues to focus on youth behavioral health and prevention, the HYS remains an essential public health surveillance and policy tool — helping state and local leaders make informed, data-driven decisions that support healthier futures for Washington’s young people.



State Health Improvement Plan

Washington State is advancing a new statewide roadmap to improve health outcomes and reduce long-standing disparities through the Washington State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). Developed through extensive collaboration among state agencies, Tribal governments, local public health, health systems, community organizations, and residents, the SHIP establishes a shared framework for improving the conditions that shape health across communities statewide.

This year's SHIP centers on 2 foundational priorities: **improving access to care and strengthening mental and behavioral health systems**. The plan recognizes that Washington's most pressing health challenges cannot be solved by any one sector alone. Instead, it calls for coordinated action across health care, public health, transportation, education, housing, workforce development, and community-based services.

The SHIP serves several critical functions for Washington state. First, it provides a statewide strategic direction that aligns local and regional health improvement efforts around shared goals and measurable outcomes. Second, it helps identify policy and systems-level barriers contributing to inequities in health access and outcomes. Finally, it creates a structure for accountability, data tracking, and partnership coordination that can support long-term federal, state, Tribal, and local investments.

The Access to Care priority focuses on the growing challenges Washington residents face in obtaining timely, affordable, and culturally responsive care. Community health needs assessments and statewide policy reviews identified persistent barriers including provider shortages, rural hospital instability, transportation limitations, workforce shortages, digital access gaps, and affordability concerns, which were all confirmed and expanded upon in the community and subject matter expert convenings.

Strategies for addressing this priority include strengthening Medicaid provider participation, preserving telehealth reimbursement equity, stabilizing rural hospitals, improving transportation coordination, expanding community-based navigation services, and developing a statewide access dashboard to better monitor workforce and coverage gaps. The plan also elevates Tribal health sovereignty and governance, including support for Tribal Health jurisdiction recognition and Tribal data sovereignty initiatives.

The Mental and Behavioral Health priority reflects continued statewide concern over increasing behavioral health needs, workforce shortages, substance use challenges, youth mental health trends, and the strain placed on crisis response systems. The SHIP emphasizes prevention, early intervention, integrated care models, workforce expansion, and community-based supports that improve continuity of care and reduce inequities in behavioral health outcomes. Focus areas include strengthening upstream prevention efforts, improving behavioral health access in rural

and underserved communities, and integrating behavioral health more effectively into primary care and community settings.

The SHIP is designed as a multi-year implementation framework with phased timelines for policy development, systems coordination, data infrastructure, and community engagement. Early implementation efforts are focused on building shared accountability structures, refining performance indicators, and identifying opportunities for alignment with existing state and federal initiatives. Upcoming work also includes continued engagement with partners to prioritize strategies and support implementation planning.

Federal partnership remains essential to the success of these efforts. Many proposed strategies rely on stable federal investments in Medicaid, behavioral health infrastructure, public health capacity, rural health systems, telehealth, maternal health, and workforce development. Federal flexibility and sustained partnership will also be critical as Washington works to modernize care delivery systems and address persistent inequities that disproportionately impact rural communities, Tribal nations, communities of color, and individuals with lower incomes.

The SHIP reflects Washington’s broader commitment to building a more coordinated, equitable, and resilient public health and health care system. By aligning partners around shared priorities and measurable outcomes, the state hopes to improve access to services, strengthen behavioral health supports, reduce preventable disparities, and create healthier communities across Washington for years to come.

Additional information on the Washington State Health Improvement Plan is available through the [Washington State Department of Health SHIP StoryMap](#).

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