

CHILDREN'S 
FUNDING PROJECT

August 2023 | Early Childhood

Voters Say “Yes” to Whatcom’s Kids

By a razor-thin margin, advocates in Whatcom County, WA, won a ballot measure in 2022 that will provide \$10 million annually to fund services for infants, toddlers, and young children.

WHATCOM PROP 5
The Children's Initiative

Executive Summary

In 2022, voters in Whatcom County, WA, passed a property tax levy that will provide \$10 million annually to support early childhood well-being through investments in high-quality early learning and child care, mental health services for pregnant parents and young families, and housing supports to help prevent family homelessness. Specifically, the levy created the county’s Healthy Children’s Fund and is charged with expanding the number of available child care slots needed to ensure that every child in the county has a strong start in life. Fundable strategies include increasing child care subsidies to provide enough child care slots that meet the specific and unique needs of children and families in all parts of the county and recruiting, training, and retaining staff to create excellent programs. The fund contains

strict accountability measures to ensure the revenue remains dedicated to its stated goals. These measures include an external audit; a call for transparency and community input about how funds from the Healthy Children’s Fund are distributed; and oversight from a task force of community groups, family advocates, and county officials. Despite challenging economic and political conditions, the Healthy Children’s Fund campaign, called Yes for Whatcom Kids, won by a razor-thin margin. The resulting children’s fund it created will provide the community with sustainable funding dedicated to helping all children thrive.

Introduction

In 2017, a community-driven effort began to call attention to and address the most pressing issues

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facing children and families in Whatcom County. These meetings became a coalition called [Generations Forward](#). This collaborative of nearly 150 parents and community members elevated the county's lack of child care, affordable housing, and mental and behavioral health services as some of the most critical issues preventing young children from having a safe and healthy start in life. The county would later estimate that it needed more than 5,800 early learning and care slots to meet the existing needs of county families.¹ At the same time that Generations Forward convened, the Whatcom County Health Department completed its community health assessment and came to the same conclusion: lack of child care, mental and behavioral health supports, and safe and affordable housing for families were some of the most critical issues facing children and families in Whatcom County.²

The combined work of Generations Forward and the Whatcom County Health Department painted a bleak picture for the county's children and young families. Parents often remained stuck on numerous waitlists for child care with no sign of new openings. As a result of the persistent lack of child care options, only 50% of children were ready to enter kindergarten fully ready to learn, well below Washington state's target of 90%.³ Children from low-income families, in particular, lagged significantly behind their peers on metrics of kindergarten readiness. For instance, in 2019 only 30% of children from low-income families demonstrated kindergarten readiness, compared to more than 60% of their peers from moderate- and high-income families. The business of child care was fundamentally broken for providers as well. Most educators earned minimum wage, making it difficult for providers to retain and attract qualified educators. However, raising wages for educators would require raising prices for many families who simply could not afford it.

Community leaders also understood that for children experiencing housing instability or maltreatment, providing quality child care and early education alone was not enough. "We want kids to be safe, healthy, and whole and we know in order to do that we have to have families that are economically stable," said Meredith Hayes, a parent and community advocate. Many of Whatcom's existing social services that target homelessness and children at risk of experiencing physical or emotional harm focused on supporting families once they were in a crisis rather than preventing the conditions that could lead to a crisis in the first place. For instance, families on the verge of becoming homeless could not access certain

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Whatcom County, WA, Demographics

Population: 230,677

Percentage of Population Younger than 5 Years: 4.5%

Percentage of Population Younger than -18 Years: 18.3%

Median Annual Household Income: \$70,011

Percentage of Total Population Living in Poverty: 13%

Percentage of Children Younger than 18 Years Living in Poverty: 14.6%

Sources: "Quickfacts: Whatcom County, Washington," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/whatcomcountywashington>; "Whatcom County, Washington," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://data.census.gov/profile?g=050XX00US53073>.

programs and funding streams until they became unhoused. It was clear that the community needed to invest in programs and services to prevent child homelessness and maltreatment, and that these investments required dedicated, sustained funding.

Aligning Efforts

Advocates for children turned their focus to finding mechanisms to solve the issues that Generations Forward and the county had identified. From 2017-2020, several groups worked in parallel to raise awareness about the needs of Whatcom's young children and families including the "Every Child" Sustainable Financing and Policy Committee, the Child and Family Well-Being Action Plan Committee, and Healthy Whatcom. Integrating these various efforts into a single initiative became key to securing the sustainable funding necessary to help the county's children thrive.

"Every Child" Sustainable Financing and Policy Committee

A group of foundations and local policymakers including the Chuckanut Health Foundation, Whatcom Community Foundation, and the United Way of Whatcom County, formed the "Every Child" Sustainable

Financing and Policy Committee. They began creating a [fiscal map](#) of the county's current investments in children and researching potential sources of new funding. Fiscal mapping is part of a process called [strategic public financing](#), where localities identify the current investments being made for children and youth, assign a cost to the community's goals, and identify ways to raise revenue to meet their goals.⁴

Part of aligning the multiple advocacy efforts in Whatcom included transitioning the "Every Child" Sustainable Financing and Policy Committee into a new group with a more expansive membership. This new group, known as the Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group, included grassroots groups, parents, community members, and funders. It focused on engaging parents, continuing the fiscal mapping work led by the Chuckanut Health Foundation, and convincing the Whatcom County Council to fund child care through a line item from the county's general fund. However, relying on an annual budget allocation funded through a modest increase in property taxes would leave the needed investment in children and families vulnerable to annual changes in priorities and revenue as well as transitions from elected officials. This uncertainty would likely prevent child care providers from expanding their programs since they could count on the increased funding for only a year at a time. Furthermore, there would be no way for community groups like Generations Forward to hold the county accountable for using the funding on the critical priorities they had identified. Several members of the Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group attended our Children's Funding Institute in 2019 in Denver, CO, to learn about how to secure dedicated public funding for children through a ballot measure campaign.

Child and Family Well-Being Action Plan Committee

Between 2018 and 2020, leaders from the Whatcom County Health Department, PeaceHealth health care system, and the Whatcom County Public Health Advisory Board brought together partners—including many from the Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group—to draft an action plan for county government to address child and family well-being. In early 2020, the committee wrote *Whatcom Working Toward Well-Being: An Action Plan for County Government* and successfully advocated for the Whatcom County Council to pass the plan.⁵

The action plan identified the county's commitments to improving its internal policies that impact children



and families, and helped formalize the efforts advocates already were pursuing to build support for dedicated sustainable funding for kids. The plan called on the county to "adopt a children and family first approach for county policy and funding decisions" and to "pursue new funding mechanisms to significantly increase local resources for well-being promotion and crisis prevention."⁶ Convincing the county council to commit to pursuing new funding mechanisms laid the groundwork for advocates to eventually win county councilors' support for a ballot measure for sustainable dedicated funding years later. The plan also instructed the county to create a fiscal map of county investments as well as create a Child and Family Well-Being Task Force to advise and hold the county responsible for prioritizing children's well-being.

In 2021 the Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group completed its fiscal map examining the county's investments in child care.⁷ The Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group fiscal map found that federal, state, local, and philanthropic investments in child care in Whatcom County totaled nearly \$18 million in 2019, and parents paid an additional \$17 million for child care. The analysis showed that it would take between \$9.5 million to \$21.5 million a year in public investment to provide affordable child care to the more than 5,000 children without child care slots in the county.

In 2022, the Child and Family Well-Being Task Force completed a complementary fiscal map, which examined a broader range of county investments in children including in housing stability, economic stability, and family and household strengthening programs.⁸ Both fiscal maps were created with help from Children’s Funding Project.

Healthy Whatcom

During the time that the Child and Family Well-Being Action Plan Committee and Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group were meeting, the Whatcom County Health Department organized Healthy Whatcom. This public-private collaboration embarked on an 18-month process to create [Whatcom’s Community Health Improvement Plan](#) to address the needs of young children and families that the health department previously identified in its community health assessments. The 120 community members involved in the project created the plan using the Results Based Accountability Framework with the Racial Equity Institute to focus the final plan on the structural and cultural causes of racial inequity and to offer a set of solutions focused on prevention efforts that build resilience.

Drafting the Ordinance and Getting on the Ballot

Advocates from the Policy, Advocacy, and Funding group determined that pursuing a ballot measure was the best option for securing sustained funding for the community’s priorities for children and families. To pursue this path, they formed a new politically oriented Children’s Initiative group that consisted of various members from the iterations of previous organizations. The Children’s Initiative group began outlining an ordinance that could instruct how the county would use new revenue generated if voters decided to raise property taxes for 10 years through a ballot measure. The team also joined our children’s funding cohort, which is a group of communities working to establish dedicated public funding for kids via ballot measures that come together to share resources, exchange tools, and learn from experts.

The Children’s Initiative group looked at examples from around the country of funds dedicated to children’s services, also known as [voter-approved children’s funds](#); researched existing legal restrictions in Whatcom County; consulted experts on housing, county administration, and foster care; and relied on expertise from Margaret Brodtkin, founder and director of Funding the Next Generation, on crafting

an ordinance. (Children’s Funding Project is the fiscal sponsor for Funding the Next Generation.) In deciding how best to use new funding to increase child care access, the Children’s Initiative group also relied heavily on the strategies outlined in Whatcom’s Community Health Improvement Plan and recommendations from the Child and Family Well-Being Task Force, which both focused on expanding access to child care.

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– **Ray Deck III**, founding director, Skookum Kids

At the beginning of the drafting process, the Children’s Initiative group wrote prescriptive funding strategies into the ordinance, which specifically dictated how the current and future county administration could spend the revenue generated by the proposed tax levy. As advocates shared the plan with various policy experts, they received pushback on the rigid nature of the ordinance. Throughout a 10-year levy, a variety of conditions in the county and the child care system are likely to change. Too much specificity in the ordinance would limit the county’s ability to adapt to an evolving environment and major federal or state funding changes. So, the Children’s Initiative replaced rigid prescription with clear goals for the impact of the funding—increasing high-quality, affordable early learning; protecting children at risk of homelessness and child abuse; and helping children prepare for kindergarten—and built accountability measures into the ordinance to ensure the county made progress on those goals.

“Members of our community spent years identifying solutions to persistent problems,” said Hayes, who helped draft the ordinance. “It was important to honor that work, integrate it into the legislation, and ensure the plan can adapt to an evolving state and federal landscape.”

Rather than dictating exactly how much the county had to spend on each specific strategy, the ordinance stated its goals and prescribed the process through which the county would decide how to spend the revenue. The ordinance also provided general ranges for how much funding should go toward broad funding

areas, including between 55% to 68% of the revenue to early care and education and between 20% and 36% to targeted supports for vulnerable children.

“We can’t do the county’s homework and fill out their report card,” said Ray Deck III, founding director of Skookum Kids, a foster care nonprofit and one of the leaders in crafting the ordinance. “If they are going to be held accountable for accomplishing the objective, we need to not be prescribing how they go about it. We want them to be responsible for bringing their whole brain to the problem.”

The ordinance contained several accountability and transparency measures including (1) a section to ensure the funding would not be used for unintended purposes and (2) requirements around an external audit and an implementation plan. The implementation plan would detail how the county would use the funding for two years and would be drafted by the health department with input and collaboration from community members and the Child and Family Well-Being Task Force.

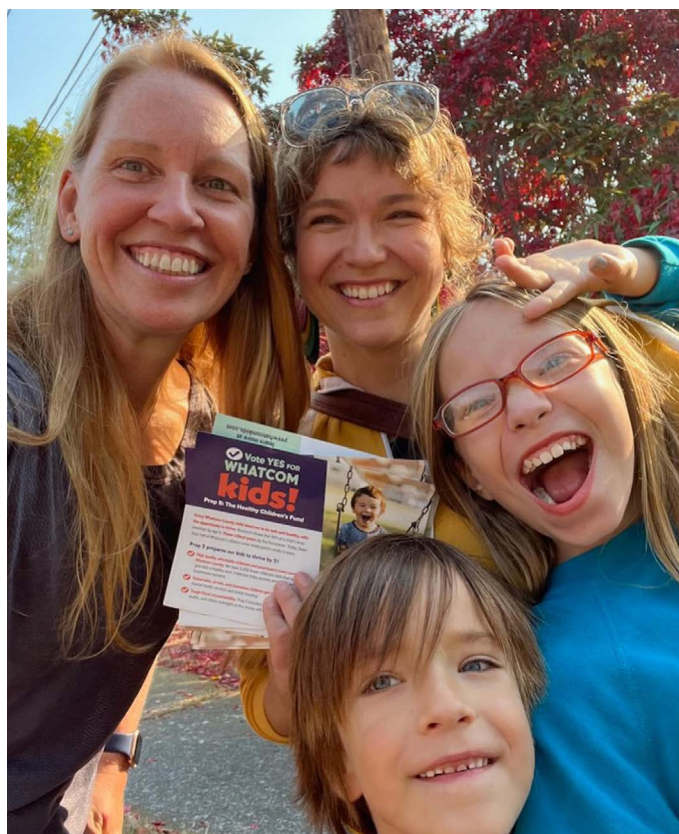
The Children’s Initiative group received and integrated feedback about the ordinance from various local children’s organizations including the Child and Family Well-Being Task Force, child care operators, school leaders, service providers, parents, and caregivers.

Finally, the leaders presented the ordinance and ballot language to the county council at several committee meetings. Councilmembers Barry Buchanan and Todd Donovan sponsored the introduction of the ordinance, which led to two public hearings. Throughout the entire process, the ordinance drafting team and advocates met with members of the county council individually to share the details, intentions, and goals of the ordinance and to answer their questions. The ordinance and ultimate ballot measure that would raise dedicated public revenue was already well positioned to be the logical next step of honoring the commitments of the child and family well-being action plan, which the county council passed in 2020 and called on the county to “pursue new funding mechanisms” to support children and families.⁹ On June 7, 2022, the county council passed the ordinance and sent a ballot initiative to create the Healthy Children’s Fund to the voters for the November 2022 election.¹⁰

The Campaign

On September 7, 2022, the Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign officially launched with a well-attended kick-off event to support the Healthy Children’s Fund at the ballot. The campaign initially focused on building a coalition of supporters, fundraising, and neutralizing potential opposition. Campaign leaders reached out to and met with various formal and informal leaders in Whatcom County to build support. They met with rotary clubs, nonprofit boards, service clubs, the chamber of commerce, social and policy groups, small business owners, realtor groups, and others. The campaign asked these leaders to donate to the campaign, publicly endorse the measure, connect campaign leaders with other influential community leaders and groups, send out information about the Healthy Children’s Fund to their group’s members, or simply not publicly oppose the measure.

Campaign leaders continuously refined their messaging and made sure they had talking points that would resonate with different audiences. With help from Blue Spruce Strategies, a political strategy and communications firm based in Washington state, campaign leaders took the language from the ordinance and translated it into language that the public could easily digest. They also used polling to determine which arguments in support of the effort members of the public would find most convincing and refined their messages depending on the kinds of people they met. For instance, campaign spokespeople highlighted how supporting child care, mental health,



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and housing would help address the underlying causes of crime to connect with voters concerned about community safety. Meanwhile, they explained how investing in child care would bring more people into the workforce and improve employee retention to appeal to business owners. Having trusted messengers who could build relationships and influence different segments of the community was critical to win support. Consequently, leaders of the campaign used a wide array of trusted community members as spokespeople for the campaign including well-respected business leaders, a physician, a prosecutor, and a police chief. The campaign won endorsements from various groups as well including the Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce; Boys & Girls Clubs; YMCA; United Way; League of Women Voters; Bellingham Public Schools Foundation; Whatcom Democrats; a handful of local unions; and dozens of physicians, elected leaders, and business leaders.¹¹

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– **Heather Flaherty**, executive director, Chuckanut Health Foundation and Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign leader

However, the economic challenges the community faced at the time, including high inflation and surging housing costs, made it difficult to connect with some voters. Many elderly voters were struggling financially and voters who didn't have young children were especially difficult to convince to support the measure. Campaign spokespeople tried to respond with humility about the difficult financial situation people faced. They also emphasized how the effort represented an investment in the future of the community that would pay off through lower incarceration rates and lower rates of community members using expensive social services in the future.

“It's a property tax, and if you live here and have property here you want the future of the community to be bright. This is an investment in the future of your community,” said Heather Flaherty, executive director of the Chuckanut Health Foundation and one of the campaign leaders. “The problems that children face are too big for any one sector to fix and it will take a community-wide investment to solve.”

The Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign also reached out to many voters in Whatcom County who mistrusted the government and didn't believe county officials were spending their taxes efficiently. The flexible nature of the ordinance became a campaign liability, especially for voters who already mistrusted the government. Campaign spokespeople couldn't tell voters specifically what service providers the revenue would fund or how many child care spots it would create. When members of the Children's Initiative group drafted the ordinance, they knew that the flexible structure they created would make the ballot campaign more difficult; however, the drafters decided the compromise would create a more effective policy. In response, the campaign's messaging focused heavily on the unique ways that the measure emphasized accountability, oversight, transparency, and evaluation. Campaign spokespeople emphasized that the ordinance offered a new model for government accountability in Whatcom County. The funding would not go into the county's general fund but rather be put toward the goals outlined in the ordinance with strict requirements for transparency, oversight from the Child and Family Well-Being Task Force, an external audit, and community input in how the funding was implemented.

As Election Day approached, the Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign focused its efforts on voter outreach. The campaign's get-out-the-vote strategies included a television commercial, radio and digital advertisements, yard signs, a website, social media outreach through Facebook and Instagram, and letters to the editor in local news publications. For Halloween, campaign volunteers distributed hundreds of candy bars with “Yes for Whatcom Kids” stickers on them. Volunteers knocked on thousands of doors, made phone calls, and texted potential voters.

By the end of election night on November 8, 2022, the Healthy Children's Fund was losing 48.3% to 51.7%, trailing by more than 2,000 votes. Many believed that the election was over despite there being thousands of votes left to count. During the next few days, election officials counted more than 10,000 votes, narrowing the deficit to a mere 293 votes, with 700 votes left to count. Meanwhile, election officials had rejected 950 ballots due to missing or unverified signatures. In Whatcom County, voting takes place almost completely through the mail and county election officials often reject mail-in ballots if the voter forgets to sign the ballot or the signature does not match the signature on file with the county. The Yes for Whatcom

Kids campaign decided to launch an effort to cure ballots—a process of informing voters that their ballots had been rejected and helping them complete the documentation necessary to confirm their identities so the county could count their votes. People whose votes had been rejected often were from marginalized communities: immigrants, the elderly, Native Americans, people who are transgender, first-time voters, and students.¹² Many voters had changed their names, forgotten how they signed their voter registration forms, or simply forgot to sign their ballots before mailing them.

The campaign hired a coordinator to oversee the ballot curing effort and enlisted dozens of volunteers to reach out to hundreds of voters. Several opponents of the ballot measure were also curing ballots by focusing on rejected ballots from voters they believed had voted against the measure. By November 21, the number of votes by which the Healthy Children’s Fund was trailing had tightened even further. The fund was losing by only 93 votes with one week left until the final deadline to turn in ballots. Volunteers were able to continue to work through the week despite the Thanksgiving holiday, and dozens of previously rejected ballots were able to be counted with verified signatures. The final results of the election were released on November 28 and the Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign won by only 20 votes.

Public Levy Hearing

A week before Election Day, campaign leaders received word that if the ballot measure passed, the county executive’s office would attempt to reduce the amount of property tax collected, from 19 cents to about 16 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Despite the ballot measure language clearly stating that the county would collect an additional 19 cents of property tax, the ordinance also stated that the additional tax revenue would raise “approximately \$8.2 million annually.” Just before the election, property assessments rose in Whatcom County, meaning that a 19-cent increase in property taxes would raise around \$10 million a year instead of the previously estimated \$8.2 million. It was too late to update the ballot question, so the county executive’s office argued that voters would only approve a 16-cent levy generating \$8.2 million.

A few days after the election results had been certified, the county council announced a public hearing to set the property tax rate so it would raise only \$8.2

million. The Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign attorney researched whether the action the council was taking was legal and wrote a memo stating that taking a lower property tax rate than the voters had approved could open the council up to legal risk. The county’s legal team advised that the county council did in fact have the legal authority to change the levy amount because the county council had placed the measure on the ballot.

Campaign leaders still felt strongly that if the county council voted to pass the reduced tax rate, it would be ignoring the will of the voters—setting an undesirable precedent for the other accountability mechanisms—and weaken the Healthy Children’s Fund only days after it had passed. The leaders of the campaign had spent months telling voters that they would stay engaged after the campaign to ensure accountability and adherence to the new law. The campaign reached out to its supporters, calling on them to contact their council members, show up to the public hearing in support of the initiative, and demand the council abide by the will of the voters. Council members received hundreds of emails and phone calls in support of fully funding the Healthy Children’s Fund and more than 100 people attended the council meeting to provide more than two hours of public comments that predominantly favored fully funding the Healthy Children’s Fund. The county council voted 4–2 to fully fund the Healthy Children’s Fund and raise \$10 million a year to help ensure that every child in Whatcom County has a safe and healthy start in life.

“This campaign painstakingly illustrates that every single door knocked actually really mattered. Every single person really mattered in this community to make this happen.”

– **Heather Flaherty**, executive director, Chuckanut Health Foundation and Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign leader

Lessons Learned

In a close election, every action matters. The Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign won by only 20 votes in an election with more than 100,000 votes cast. Every door that volunteers knocked on, every social media post, every campaign house party, every yard sign, and every conversation with voters could have meant the difference between winning and losing. The dedication of the campaign leaders and hundreds of volunteers

was critical in pushing the measure over the finish line and ensuring that kids in Whatcom County will have a healthy start in life. “This campaign painstakingly illustrates that every single door knocked actually really mattered,” said Flaherty of the Chuckanut Health Foundation. “Every single person really mattered in this community to make this happen.”

Accountability and oversight measures create programs that voters can trust. A key focus in drafting the ordinance was to ensure that the county would spend tax dollars effectively toward the goals of the fund. The ordinance contains evaluation measures so that the county demonstrates the fund’s impact and an implementation process that allows the community to give feedback on how the funds are invested. The Healthy Children’s Fund created a new model for how the county interacts with and is held accountable by the community. “What sets up the difference between an efficient, effective government program and an inefficient, ineffective one is accountability,” said Deck, one of the leaders of drafting the ordinance. “When citizens show up and insist that government be better, the government is better.”

Collaboration is key. The Whatcom County effort was highly collaborative throughout the entire process from identifying community needs, elevating strategies, and drafting the ordinance to putting the measure on the ballot and running a winning campaign. The campaign leaders brought together nonprofits, community groups, providers, elected officials, and business leaders so that every sector of the county was represented. Aligning everyone’s interests throughout the process and ensuring everyone’s voice was heard was lengthy and challenging. However, the effort resulted in an ordinance driven by the community that will allow community leaders to work with the county to achieve the ordinance’s goals.

Acknowledgements

Children’s Funding Project thanks the following individuals for their contributions to this case study:

Heather Flaherty, executive director of the Chuckanut Health Foundation

Meredith Hayes, project manager at the Chuckanut Health Foundation, convener of the Child Care Coalition, parent, and community advocate

Emily O’Connor, executive director of Lydia Place

Ray Deck III, founding director of Skookum Kids

Featured photos provided by the Yes for Whatcom Kids campaign.



Endnotes

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