

**Group Health Foundation
Lessons Learned from Community Engagement**

**Whatcom Family & Community Network Presentation
Columbia Valley Community**

Background & History:

Our organization, Whatcom Family & Community Network (WFCN), envisions “A thriving community built on equity, social connection, participation and opportunities” (Vision, 2018). Our mission is to “promote the wellbeing of children, youth and families by convening and supporting communities to build their capacity” (2018).

Our earliest work in Columbia Valley, a unique Urban Growth Area (UGA) in Whatcom County, began in 2001. This geographic community is 45 minutes from the County’s urban area, Bellingham. It is a mountainous, forested area nestled beneath Mt. Baker Ski Resort in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. The school district covers over 530 square miles, has three elementary schools and one junior/senior high school campus. The Columbia Valley UGA is undeveloped in terms of service access for residents. No full service grocery, pharmacy, medical or dental clinic, or social services are in the area. At the time of upstart, food bank’s access was limited. Neighborhoods intended for summer/winter recreational land users, who never came in quantities expected, transitioned to affordable rentals via absent land owners who attracted immigrant families and those living in poverty. Many individuals prefer this area for a more isolated lifestyle, while others find their way here due to economic conditions based on limited housing options in the more populated areas of the county.

In this story, WFCN partnered with the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Division of Child Family Services (DCFS); the Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD); The Whatcom Opportunity Council (OC, our area’s community action program); and the Mount Baker School District (MBSD) to bring together a convening as part of the *Family to Family* model developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In that model, the effort focused to “create a collaborative relationship with communities where child protection referrals are high to support at-risk families and build stronger neighborhoods” (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, n.d.). WFCN participated as a co-facilitator of the community convening. The health and wellbeing of children and real and perceived negligence was rooted to some degree in poverty and lack of access to basic needs—food, housing, clothing, transportation and childcare. Cultural mores around discipline/corporal punishment and use of substances were other risk factors that set the scene for our purpose to convene. In 2014, DSHS/DCFS ended engagement in Family to Family and the meetings ceased.

However, the value of the relationships and the community building efforts did not cease. In 2016, WFCN, WCHD, OC, and MBSD—four of the original partners reconvened and initiated the Columbia Valley Community Connections Group (CVCC). CVCC focuses on changing the community narrative of isolation, poverty, scarcity, substance use and criminal activity to a story

of strength, gifts, assets, resources, health and wellbeing. CVCC has been meeting monthly or more often for special events. The purpose statement, written collectively by the group is:

“A welcoming place where all can gather and connect to build a stronger community. Our shared commitment is to support communication and local leadership. We work together to turn vision into reality, provide solutions to challenges, promote imaginative & inclusive activities and create a more engaged, resilient community for all.”

How have you engaged, convened, and maintained relationships with your community?

The effort convenes in the neighborhood at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRRC), the sole central gathering location in the UGA.

Partnerships were formed with entities and individuals interested in a mutual goal: Increase protective factors to increase the health, safety and wellbeing of children and families. The convening began with service providers with an interest to increase access to services for those who live in the area. Through intentional outreach and personal invitation, the effort began to attract individuals who reside in nearby housing tracks.

E-mail communication for the service providers was primary. Most returned eagerly to the community building process. To engage neighbors, personal invitation to known individuals who are natural community connectors was fruitful. In development, we have relied on online platforms—Facebook, agency webpages and NextDoor (a social networking service for neighborhoods).

One of the outgrowths of this work has been an increase in Community Meals and gatherings. In these spaces, face-to-face invitations to CVCC have been delivered. A “placemat” info graphic was created (see p. 6) to attract engagement from area families. Concurrently, the group added an evening convening—moving one meeting time per quarter to 6-7:30 p.m. rather than the 2-3:30 p.m. timeframe.

When individuals attend CVCC meetings, they sign in. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses are collected to maintain communication and make consistent invitation to all events/gatherings.

Additionally, we engage with participants personally and in a way that builds connections. We reach out either by phone, e-mail, or face-to-face to find out how they might like to be involved in the work of growing the community stronger. We identify talents, gifts, and passions through a variety of “getting to know” one another activities. We invite people to “be a part” of CVCC.

How have you co-designed or co-created solutions with your community?

This group is solution-focused. There is an “ordinary magic” (Masten, 2001) happening in this community that is grounded in the science of positive psychology and resilience building, and is aided by the increasing capacity to communicate all the resources, ideas and efforts more effectively. We have designed a process that calls out the participants’ hopes, dreams, and ideas for the community and identifies and celebrates its strengths, resources, and treasures. At each meeting a list of “What Do We See Growing Strong” is created along with a list of “What Do

We Hope to See Grow in CV”. Over the convening time we have seen numerous co-designed solutions:

- Cooking classes at EWRCC & Healthy nutrition taken home
- Better wood burning practices in community
- Mobile Food Pantry at EWRCC
- Better family relationships through parental support
- Stronger community engagement leads to less trash/furniture left on side of the road
- Opportunity for young families; Library, Play N Learn
- Parks District rooted and growing trees
- Trails – Feasibility / cost to fiscal budget
- Stewardship ordinance to require pharmacies to take back unwanted medication
- Farm to School & Farm to Pre-school Program
- New participants; community gathering meeting; pro action café
- meeting to catalyze ideas and support for them
- Parks & Rec districted passed
- MBSD staff and parents receive Resilience & Trauma Training
- Community meals
- YMCA “After School Adventures”
- Bus passes for Sheriff Deputy
- Local National Take Back Day Dispose of your unused, unwanted or expired medications.
- Project Neighborly Grants
- Trail planning funding approved
- Mt. Baker Community Coalition/Substance Use Prevention Work
- Boys & Girls Club 21st Century Grant and Programs
- Kendall Washington Elder Support Team (KWEST)
- Stewards of Children class, child sexual assault prevention training
- Welcome Neighbors Outreach Program due to start July 1, 2018

These happen through the community capacity building model by identifying assets, reflecting on possibility, identifying solutions and collective action, and emerging local leaders who have the skills, time and energy to lean into the project (see graphic below). WFCN and the other partners’ role is to support, encourage and guide the process, and continue to convene so communication occurs consistently.

How have you addressed systematic inequities that affect health (power differentials /racism) as part of your community engagement work?

The first strategy to address inequity was to use a Circle Process in our meetings. We use round tables, all pushed together into what looks like a flower. Every one of the co-conveners plays a small, but equal role in the meeting—taking turns. Everyone who attends gets an opportunity to be heard. The power and authority structures of traditional “top-down” meetings are removed intentionally. We hold space at the end of the meeting for “informal networking” and we begin some of the meetings with time to connect personally—human to human, rather than position to position.

We have ensured that many materials are available in Russian and Spanish languages. We have intentionally invited Spanish and Slavic religious leaders who can pave the way for others from these respective communities to attend. We have consistently provided no cost, supervised child play space so parents with young children may attend. We time the meetings to align as much as possible with public transportation schedules to assure individuals can arrive at some time during the meeting to get information, which is challenging due to limited routes.

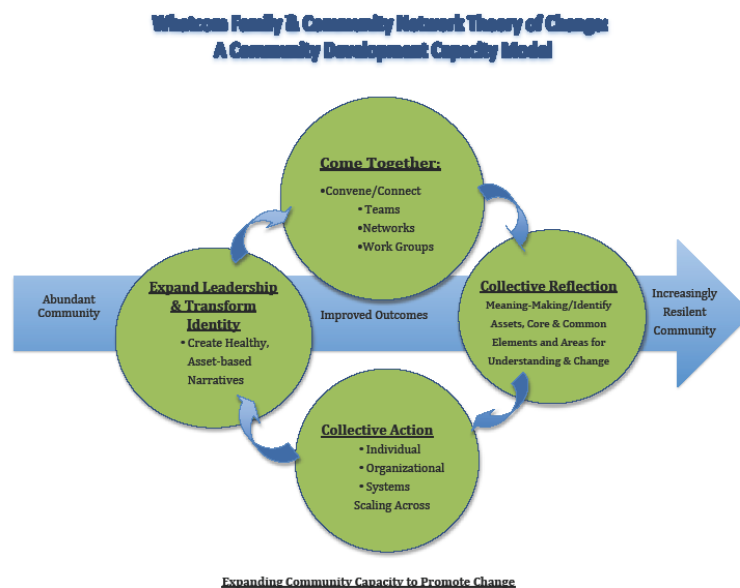
We have hosted/convened REACH training--Equity and Cultural Humility-- in the area to broaden the comfort of the residents to have conversations that matter on equity and inclusion. The trainings have been focused toward community members active in CVCC and the local Mt. Baker Community Coalition, which grew out of the CVCC effort. All trainings are open to community members, broadly as well.

Communication and outreach has had a focus around equity, as getting information to those who need it most can be a challenge in this community.

What about your organization’s way of working has made you successful?

We believe success begins with relationships, a heart for authentic connection and collaboration born from trust-building. Reliance on a community development capacity building theory of change is our way of working that has fostered success. Additionally, in convening, we use Art of Hosting/Participatory Leadership (Harvest Moon Consulting, 2016) facilitation techniques which value a living systems process for change.

The Power of Connection: Our work begins with getting to know one another and recognizing our common interests and our unique gifts. Getting to know one another and slowly build trust and see potential partnerships allows for true collaboration to root and grow. We work to build safety, trust and connection—to enjoy being together. We like to use the quote, “Change happens at the speed of trust,” (Covey, 2006).



To develop what we refer to as an “abundance” framework in initial convening, we intentionally set up a process framework that uses positive language and interdisciplinary theories. This simply means that we begin the process by naming our hopes and dreams for the change we wish to see and looking for all the gifts, talents, treasures, strengths and assets our community/neighborhood/family already has within it or within reach of it that may help us move toward what we want. We focus on solutions early and work to avoid spending too much time admiring problems, focusing on deficits or needs, or fearing scarcity. We acknowledge the challenges, but work to see them as opportunities for change. We identify that we have ENOUGH in order to begin to make change.

As we progress toward goals and meet challenges, we recognize the need for additional resources. Then, we commit to learn together how to better network to identify how to access or connect to these resources (human, financial, geographic, time, life energy, etc.) OR we find alternative ways to move forward, around, under or over barriers or circumstances to address areas for growth in wellbeing. We identify our protective and resilience factors as a group through a positive lens that speaks to our resilience in the face of risk, adversity, trauma or challenge.

We rely heavily on the work of Dr. John McKnight and Peter Block, “*The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*” (2012). Additionally, we lean foundationally on the understanding the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACEs) Study (Felitti & Anda et. al, 1998) of population level health and wellbeing risks and on Hope Theory (Snyder, 1994) as it pertains to the positive psychology required for goal attainment and its correlation to child, adult and organizational hope and thriving that will soon be outlined in Gwinn & Hellman’s book, *Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life* (2019).

How has your organizational culture or structure changed to allow for authentic community relationships? Include examples of how staff/board contributed to the culture and values that enabled success).

WFCN and WCHD have invested professional development in Art of Hosting Facilitation training. Many community members are trained to lead participatory conversations that matter, in engaging formats, such as World Café, Pro-Action Café, Circle Process, and Open Space Technology. We challenge limiting beliefs, based on the work of Byron Katie. These techniques build opportunity to develop trust—to be heard, to listen to understand, to ask thoughtful questions and challenge bias. They create safer spaces where participants can be vulnerable together, risk sharing ideas, seek help and guidance, and realize we are better together.

In our work as a staff and board, we have developed what we call a “Full Value Agreement”—it outlines how we want to work together. (See appendix). We model this in our community processes and extend its values in all the work we do.

What have been most significant challenges, obstacles and missteps?

We are working through questions about how to engage more residents in the community--especially our neighbors whose culture, language, religion, and lifestyles are traditionally

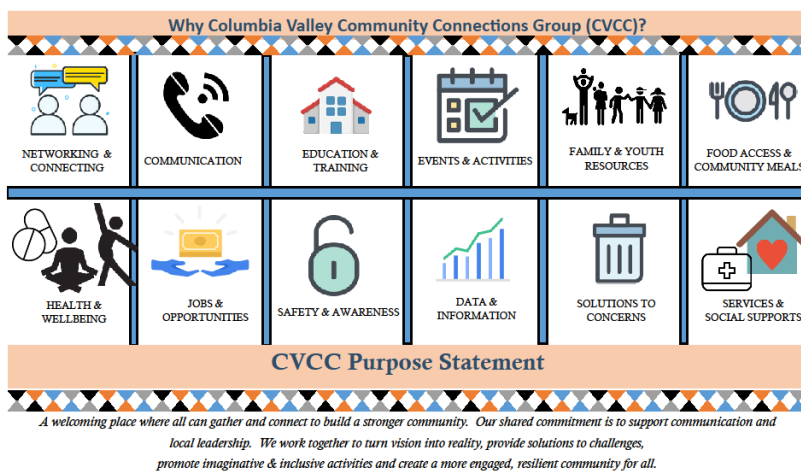
marginalized. We have had some success, and find that our largest opportunities remain with the population of Slavic community members, our local tribal members, and Spanish speaking families. We have and will continue to reach out to churches and community leaders, extending consistent invitation. Opportunity for increased translation of materials into other languages exists.

Communication systems are an area for development. Current limitations include no local print newspaper and limited radio coverage, e-mail access, and cell phone reception. Spaces between people can be large with limited walking and gathering space.

The positive psychology and language we use rubs some people the wrong way initially. They wonder if and/or what we are trying to pull over on them. We recognize the mistrust, rather than hopeful nature, and work to meet it with compassionate and trauma-informed responses. The most resistant members of our community tend to admire a problem and expect someone else to fix it rather than adopt an abundance framework and join in solution making. When these personalities participate, a lot of patience and attending to their training is required. Eventually, they either adapt or they stop attending. We however never stop inviting! Their voice and perspective is welcome; we do not cease in asking for their ideas for solutions and how they wish to be involved.

What changes have you seen that give you hope about a future that is more equitable?

We are seeing individuals who seek and require equity participating in identifying solutions to community issues and challenges. We believe that when that happens, many factors shift—including power, cultural relevancy, inclusive perspectives contributing to the selected strategies. We are seeing diverse people working together well, dreaming and hoping aloud and helping one another put the puzzle pieces of community building together. There is increased action of the people for the people—an energy of collaboration and celebration, gratitude for the many positive aspects of the community.



CVCC Outreach Placemat & Infographic:

Left: The front side of the communication tool we call the “placemat”, which is used at community meals, distributed at food banks and community events. The back side lists meeting dates, a list of regular attendees, and community hopes and new efforts that are growing in the area.

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