

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE — November 25, 2024

There is No Justice Without Language Justice

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Bellingham, WASH. — Whatcom County saw its first Language Justice Convening on November 4th. This event was underlined by the rising need to discuss, better understand and address language access in healthcare and educational settings in Whatcom County.

This was a collaborative effort by Whatcom Center for Early Learning, The Opportunity Council, Whatcom County Health and Community Services and North Sound Leap. The event took place at the Squalicum Boathouse with 69 representatives of various organizations coming together to focus on ensuring equitable care and inclusive programs through the development of language access plans and provision of interpreters.

Within Whatcom County, language access needs in referrals for children ages 0-to-3 services have doubled in the last 3 years*. Non-English language communities in Whatcom County include, but are not limited to, Spanish, Ukrainian, Punjabi, Russian, American Sign Language and Japanese. Discussion at the convening was focused on Indigenous and lesser-diffused languages, such as Mixteco and Aguacateco, regional dialects of Spanish.

A shortage of certified medical interpreters for languages of lesser-diffusion and a lack of clear pathways to certification through the Washington state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) were considered as major barriers to providing language access by attendees of the convening. This shortage and lack of good systems on language access, create a serious health equity issue in our community.

The session featured an overview of language access in Whatcom County, a presentation by guest speaker Puma Tzoc of Pueblo Unido, an open space facilitation discussion activity, an overview of language access planning and firsthand accounts of interpreter services through recorded interviews.

“Without an interpreter, language barriers lead to confusion and guesswork, making it difficult to understand critical information,” said a Punjabi-speaking interviewee. “With an interpreter, communication is clear and effective, simplifying the process for everyone involved.”

One result of the convening is a multi-agency letter to the Washington DSHS Language and Testing Certification program to urge the state to offer a medical interpretation certification pathway for speakers of Indigenous languages such as Mixteco. A second convening is to be held in 2025 to carry forward this important work.

This convening was made possible by a grant awarded by the Mount Baker Foundation to Whatcom Center for Early Learning in 2024 to support language access.



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For more information on language access visit <https://www.wcel.net/language-justice-convening>.

Whatcom Center for Early Learning's (WCEL) mission is to partner with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities.

Our vision is an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs.

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