SWISS Regional Partnership
Priorities and Outcomes Summary

Background

The regional partnership of San Juan County, Whatcom County, Island County, Snohomish County, and Skagit County (SWISS) is comprised of elected county executives and officials. The mission of the SWISS Regional Partnership is to identify and advance shared priorities that will improve the quality of life of the people who live, work, and play there.

The purpose of SWISS is to:

1. Provide a forum for the discussion and review of issues consistent with the SWISS mission statement, and identify those issues where there is a shared mutual interest;
2. Create a unified, clear, and concise regional voice to our state and federal legislators and governmental agencies;
3. Be an advocate for our region as a whole in dealings with legislative, governmental and private entities upon those issues that SWISS selects;
4. Assist partner organizations with their legislative advocacy on issues that align with SWISS priorities.

In 2022, SWISS contracted with the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) to deliver administrative and management support for:

- Meeting management and coordination; and
- Partnership management and coalition building.

WSAC activity summary

To begin the work necessary to support and facilitate SWISS, WSAC staff met with members from each county. The meetings were either in person or virtual via zoom. The intent of these meetings was to gain a working knowledge of regional issues identified by SWISS members (behavioral health, broadband, and transportation) and a clear understanding of each county's expectations of WSAC and group governance. Meeting attendees were asked questions related to the priority issues and group governance:

Priority issues
1. What do each of the three priority issues look like in your county and what are the impacts on the community?
2. What does regional success look like to you?

Governance

1. Which parts of the SWISS Charter have worked well and which areas do you see needing improvement?
2. Is there anything missing from the SWISS Charter?

WSAC met with the following representatives from each of the SWISS Regional Partnership counties:
- Snohomish County
  - Councilmember Nate Nehring, Russel Wiita, Angela Ewert (7/21/2022)
  - County Executive Dave Somers, Councilmember Megan Dunn, Executive Operations Director Josh Dougan, Chief of Staff Alessandra Durham (7/27/2022 - virtual)
- Whatcom County
  - Councilmembers Kaylee Galloway, Carol Frazey, and Barry Buchanan (7/21/2022)
  - County Executive Satpal Sidhu (7/28/2022)
- Island County
  - Commissioners Melanie Bacon, Janet St. Clair, and Jill Johnson (8/03/2022)
- San Juan County
  - Councilmembers Christine Minney, Cindy Wolf, and Jamie Stephens (7/29/2022 – virtual)
- Skagit County
  - Commissioners Lisa Janicki and Ron Wesen, County Administrator Trish Logue (7/27/2022)

SWISS Priority Topics

The following portions of this report are a synopsis of the information we heard while meeting with each county. It includes commonly reported issues and concerns that were expressed across the region as well as unique issues that were specific to or at least expressed by one county.

1. Regional Awareness and Collaboration

Regional Issue Summary

County Councilmembers, Commissioners, Executives, and staff have limited time and capacity to consistently engage with neighboring counties to collaborate and share information. This limits the ability to create regional plans or approaches to an issue that may benefit from economies of scale. Instead, counties must prioritize resources and solutions which benefit their own communities. This often places counties at odds and can lead to inefficient use of funds, inequitable distribution of resources, and solutions that do not work across county borders.

What success from a regional perspective might look like

The SWISS regional partnership achieves successful outcomes that address shared regional issues while respecting the independent characteristics, cultures, and needs of each county. This may be achieved by focusing on sharing information, creating a unified voice when engaging jointly in efforts, developing position statements, and protecting the capacity and workload of county Councilmembers, Commissioners, and Executives. Success might be achieved when:

Sharing information

There is a system or process allowing counties to share timely information and knowledge related to priority issues. Information shared could include legislative updates, funding opportunities, upcoming projects, lessons learned, and benchmarking against other jurisdictions.

Collaboration

Funding and resources are maximized by applying them to actions that achieve SWISS-wide benefit. This will require SWISS members to communicate intentionally and transparently about individual county goals, culture, and willingness to support SWISS goals. It may also require criteria to identify when collaboration on action is or is not the best approach.

SWISS actions focus on outcomes that maintain the current responsibilities of counties and partnering organizations. To support this, all appropriate agencies are engaged in identifying gaps or solutions, such as the BH-ASO or public utility agencies.

Capacity

WSAC and SWISS members respect the priorities and capacity of the SWISS membership by maintaining a consistent and balanced meeting schedule.

2. Behavioral Health

Regional Issue Summary

SWISS county residents do not have consistent and easily accessible quality behavioral healthcare services that achieve enduring outcomes for individuals and the community. This is particularly true for crisis stabilization, substance use disorder support, long-term care, and youth-focused care. This results in individuals continuously cycling through services without long-term care or improvements and leads to regional impacts like increases density in local jails or detention facilities and lengthy delays in bed availability in care facilities. The primary barriers to creating quality care in SWISS counties fall into three categories; inadequate funding to develop and sustain quality programs staffed by skilled professionals, access to timely services, and a lack of common definitions for effective strategies and outcomes.

Funding

Counties and behavioral health organizations lack the funding necessary to build, operate, and maintain care facilities to meet the demand for services. Funding that has been provided to counties by the state or federal government has been inconsistent, inequitably distributed, and insufficient to meet capacity needs. Also, the funding provided to counties has historically focused primarily on building facilities. The lack of funding for operating expenses restricts the ability to provide wages that retain or attract enough trained staff to ensure existing facilities meet operation and qualification requirements.

More broadly, the Medicaid and insurance providers have added greater stress on behavioral health systems. Lengthy reimbursement processes and incomplete payments leave providers without operating and maintenance funding. Private behavioral health care

professionals are increasingly opting out of providing treatment to Medicaid patients, or patients with insurance coverage altogether, further reducing access to care for all.

Accessibility

In addition to shortages in capacity due to funding, barriers exist from start to finish along a patient's ability to meaningfully engage in a continuum of care. Initial responders to a mental health crisis cannot always identify an individual's treatment history and promptly identify the correct action to take. In cases where the correct response can be identified quickly, the shortage of capacity mentioned above likely means immediate care is unavailable. Whether waiting for identified next steps or a bed in a facility, patients are often held in jails, emergency rooms, or other facilities until appropriate care can be provided.

Other delays to initial care are backlogs in the court system, absence of care outside of urban and dense populations, limitations on transporting patients to appropriate care, complex intake paperwork, and requirements for the type of on-site care providers who engage with new patients.

Lastly, there is a lack of long-term solutions and care, such as supervised living opportunities and affordable housing for those individuals who exit care.

Definitions and Knowledge

Depending on experiences and priorities, there may be variations in definitions for successful behavioral healthcare outcomes among cooperating organizations and municipalities. Additionally, there are gaps in the awareness and knowledge of what local or national strategies have achieved positive outcomes. These two challenges prevent the ability to coordinate to identify and implement strategies effectively and efficiently.

What success from a regional perspective might look like

SWISS county residents have access to an accountable regional behavioral health care system that creates a humane and meaningful continuum of care from a patient's initial moment of need to a long-term, safe solution. Success might be achieved by:

Funding

Stable funding is available to build, operate, and maintain behavioral health facilities throughout the region to meet the demand for care. This includes recent funding available after a state settlement with opioid manufacturers. Adequate funding creates the ability to attract and retain trained staff, develop workforce pipelines, the capacity to provide age-appropriate care, and the ability to connect individuals with the proper care in a timely manner.

Accessibility

Patients have access to timely and appropriate care without negatively impacting jails, emergency rooms, or other services and facilities that are critical to public health and public safety.

Coordination

SWISS counties support each other in the pursuit of a universal solution to the behavioral healthcare crisis. When possible, they will successfully pursue solutions to regional issues through a focused, unified voice. These regional solutions align with and support the goals and functions of the BH-ASO. Counties are also successful in pursuing issues that fall outside of the BH-ASO's functions, such as long-term and affordable housing.

Definitions and Knowledge

All organizations working to achieve progress in addressing behavioral health share common definitions for what success looks like across the entire continuum of care and share knowledge gained from implementing certain strategies and the outcomes of those experiences.

3. Broadband

Regional Issue Summary

Large portions of SWISS County communities do not have reasonable access to affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband services. This is especially true in rural and small communities and low-income neighborhoods. This gap in what has rapidly become an essential utility prevents a community's access to quality education, physical and behavioral health care, employment opportunities, economic growth, agricultural productivity, social connections, and other vital services which protect, inform, and empower residents.

Funding

The primary focus of investments and financial incentives has been on developing broadband infrastructure in areas with high-density populations. Funding from state sources has often been for dedicated lines in dense, urban areas, and can be exclusive of other counties' ability to access. Also, there is little incentive for private companies to invest in rural or small community systems or complete system upgrades that would improve speeds.

Infrastructure

Because of the focus on high-density areas, deployment of broadband infrastructure has been slow to reach rural communities. Counties, towns, neighborhoods, or individual households are often required to coordinate and fund the middle-mile and final-mile of the system themselves. In some cases, households have had to dig their own trenches or pay up to 25,000 each to address this gap.

The approach to deploying broadband infrastructure has also been fragmented. With the deployment of multiple types of systems (DSL, cable, fiber, and wireless) being completed

by multiple agencies and agreements (private companies, state and federal boards, or PUDs), systems are not always compatible with each other or available for other counties to connect with. This will create disconnected, expensive, and unique infrastructure rather than a connected and resilient system that is cost-effective and less vulnerable to system outages.

Lastly, broadband access assessments have been inaccurate in determining the gaps and potential funding focus in broadband services. While access may be available through wireless, DSL, or cable connections, the quality of broadband speeds via fiber-optic lines is the most consistent and capable of supporting work, school, and communication.

Policy
Providing exclusive provider access to a region reduces the opportunity for rural and small communities to create alternative solutions that make the most sense for their communities. It also reduces redundancies in the system which would make it more resilient.

Considerations around broadband deployment, such as pole access and digging in the right of way, complicate the ability of service providers and communities to develop infrastructure in a cost-effective way. This has caused tension between providers and local jurisdictions around how best to accelerate broadband deployment within the right-of-way while maintaining the integrity of the existing infrastructure and existing permit processes.

What success from a regional perspective might look like
SWISS Counties have equitable, affordable access to quality, reliable, high-speed broadband internet, especially in underserved and unserved areas. This may be accomplished when:

Coordination
SWISS counties develop a coordinated broadband strategic plan that identifies and prioritizes funding opportunities, opportunities for joint applications for resources, policy changes, and technical solutions. This plan will focus on, among other outcomes, connecting fiber cable runs, pursuing grants, and attracting investments from ISPs.

There is a system or process allowing counties to share timely information related to broadband, such as gap analysis studies, staff time and skills, and contracts, to reduce redundancy and costs related to studies and planning.

Policy
SWISS counties advocate for rural and small-community, open access broadband infrastructure development requirements, which would incentivize private ISP investments outside of high-density urban areas. SWISS counties also advocate for greater local authority to deploy broadband infrastructure in a way that reflects the needs and culture of the region, such as county franchise authority.

4. Transportation

Regional Issue Summary

SWISS counties lack transportation options that are reliable, affordable, resilient, and environmentally sound. Mobility is restricted by insufficient public transportation, reduced and unreliable ferry service, aging and undersized infrastructure, and inadequate resources to develop modern transportation options. This negatively impacts people's ability to work and commute, seek healthcare, engage in tourism, access healthy foods, engage in the regional economy, and recreation, transport goods and supplies, and do so in an environmentally sustainable manner. Lastly, many transportation systems in the SWISS region have single points of failure, threatening the reliability and durability of these systems in the face of flooding, earthquakes, or other disasters.

The causes identified fall into three categories – infrastructure, funding, and policy.

Infrastructure

Transportation in and around SWISS counties has a unique set of challenges, being comprised of both islands and coastlines that place constraints on development. In addition to regular maintenance of aging infrastructure, counties must also maintain marine transportation structures, upgrade fish culverts, and implement managed retreat in coastal areas.

The ferry system in the Puget Sound region is a critical piece of Washington's transportation system as it offers limited and strained points of access to and from the mainland for 25 million annual users. This is, in part, the result of the high costs of fleet maintenance and replacement, requirements limiting the variety and origin of new boats, and unforeseen accidents or emergencies further stressing an overwhelmed system. Additionally, public transportation options to and from ferry terminals are limited in both capacity and availability on evening or weekends.

Counties also recognize the importance of alternative-fuel vehicles and keeping up with the demand for systems that support them, such as EV charging stations. Like broadband, the deployment of EV charging systems in small and rural communities has been hampered by a focus on high-density, urban areas and a fractured approach with different brands, companies, and public boards and agencies all working independently.

Funding

Access to transportation funding for counties has been inconsistent and, at times, not prioritized based on need. Some SWISS counties have few or no state routes, limiting access to state road maintenance funds. Other funding sources for counties have been unavailable, inconsistently prioritized, or difficult to obtain, such as the Public Works Trust Fund, federal funding, and grants.

Additionally, not all existing transportation funding is guaranteed or protected and may be subject to diversions. Only the motor vehicle fuel tax is constitutionally protected.

Policy
State ferry purchasing requirements exclude passenger-only ferries and ferries built outside of Washington from being added to the fleet. This prohibits increasing the number and variety of boats in the fleet and creates higher costs and longer order times to increase service or replace damaged boats.

Lastly, the prioritization of state transportation funds does not always consider the heavy reliance SWISS counties have on a vulnerable and strained system. Funds should be prioritized to support core transportation needs and ensure basic mobility in the event of a disaster.

What success from a regional perspective might look like
SWISS Counties have access to suitable, dependable, and timely transportation and mobility options which enable people to access work, recreation, healthcare, and other services and opportunities. This may be accomplished when:

Funding
SWISS counties collaboratively advocate for state funding to focus on their region's transportation challenges and ensure a presence at the decision-making table.   New funding sources will augment existing funds, such as state shared revenue or county road funds, and are applied to regional transportation solutions.

Ferries
The ferry system in the SWISS region uses a mix of vehicle and passenger ferries to provide ferry travel services for work, recreation, and other needs.

In support of the ferry system, public transportation options at access points meet the needs of people traveling daily, during evenings, and on weekends.

Coordination
SWISS counties develop or engage in a regional transportation organization that would coordinate advocating for a more diverse ferry fleet and a more robust public transportation connection system, pursuing grants and other funding for infrastructure maintenance and upgrades, and attracting investments from electric vehicle charging companies.

5. Additional topics
   Additional Regional Issues
   In addition to behavioral health, broadband, and transportation, multiple counties mentioned the following issues as potential regional topics to work on:
   - Public safety
     - Drug addiction and enforcement related to the Blake decision.
     - Juvenile crime and detention

- o   Support for forensics backlogs
- o   Food security and local agriculture (regional food hubs)
- Affordable housing and homelessness
- Environmental and Natural Disaster
  - o   Fish recovery planning
  - o   Planning for climate change responses and adaptations, including increases in catastrophic flooding and coastal shoreline change.
  - o   Wetlands protection and restoration
  - o   Earthquakes
- Sharing awareness around ARPA fund usage