

# Clallam County Community Health Assessment *Forces of Change and Local Public Health Systems Assessments*



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## What Factors Most Affect Health in Clallam County?

The *Forces of Change* and *Local Public Health Systems* are two of four assessments conducted by the Clallam County Community Health Assessment (CHA) Steering Committee<sup>1</sup> as a part of a comprehensive CHA process. The Steering Committee followed the Mobilizing for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) process for its CHA. MAPP is a community-driven strategic planning framework used in community health improvement throughout the country. This framework assists communities to prioritize public health issues and create a platform to develop and implement efforts to address them.

The Public Health Centers for Excellence conducted focus groups with key community leaders to collect information for these two assessments. The intent is to take a closer look at what factors may affect Clallam County residents' health:

- *Forces of Change* – Identify past, present and future changes that affect community health.
- *Local Public Health Systems* – Determine the activities, competencies and capacities of the local public health system.

Key leaders within three regions of Clallam County (West, Central and East) identified the following factors that most affect community health:

Forces of Change	Affect (Past/Present/Future)
Increase in housing costs	Past, Present and Future
Opioid epidemic - specifically a "surge in opioid-related deaths."	Past
Diminished living wage jobs	Past
Cuts to education funding	Past, Present and Future
ACA repeal and replace	Future
Climate change	Past, Present and Future
More stringent environmental regulations	Past, Present and Future
Response to homelessness	Past
Immigration legislation	Future

In addition, key leaders agreed that gaps exist in the following local public health systems: mental health services; emergency medical care; policies that support affordable housing and job creation; and, there exists a regional provider shortage. The results from this assessment will be synthesized into the overall Clallam County CHA to inform priorities and actionable results.

## How Did We Conduct This Assessment?

We conducted three focus groups with key leaders from three regions of Clallam County – Forks, Port Angeles, and Sequim. Each focus group included four to eight participants and was 90 minutes in length. We provided participants a

<sup>1</sup> The Steering Committee includes representatives from Clallam County Health and Human Services, Olympic Medical Center, Jamestown S'Klallam Health Clinic, Peninsula Behavioral Health, Olympic Peninsula Health Community Coalition, Volunteers in Medicine of the Olympics, Forks Hospital, and the North Olympic Healthcare Network.

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background of the project and asked the same questions. This prompted a group discussion. All participants consented to audio recording and confidentiality. We provided participants a \$10 Starbucks gift card and lunch during the meeting.

We analyzed focus group data using thematic analysis. This means we assigned codes to units of meaning within textual responses, then examined them for patterns or common themes. Themes were deemed common if two or more focus groups discussed the issue at length and prioritized it as a key concern. The common themes were then shared with participants who were given the opportunity to accept the findings; this helped ensure we captured their discussion and experiences accurately.

## **Forces of Change Assessment Questions**

- I. What has occurred in the past year that is affecting (or may affect) the health of our community?  
What threats (challenges) and opportunities are generated by these occurrences?
- II. What may occur in the future to affect the health of our community?  
What threats (challenges) and opportunities are generated by these occurrences?

## **Local Public Health System Assessment Question**

- I. Where are there gaps in public health services in Clallam County?
  - a. Are there laws to ensure everyone's safety? Do we have competent health care staff? Are policies being developed to support community health?

## **Forces of Change: Common Themes**

### **1. Increase in Housing Costs**

Participants from all three focus groups commented on the increase of housing costs in the county, which poses both opportunities and threats to the health of the community. Some attributed the increase to economic growth in the region, and people relocating from the city – which they agreed has the potential to strengthen the local economy and increase tourism. Participants referenced that approximately, *“70% of housing is owner-occupied,”* in Clallam County, resulting in a lack of rentals and low-income housing. Two groups also commented on the impact this has on the college to attract students into their *“allied health”* fields with little housing available.

### **2. Opioid Epidemic - specifically a “surge in opioid-related deaths.”**

All three focus groups discussed the affect opioid addiction has had on the community in the past year. Participants agreed the opioid epidemic continues to pose threats to community health through: 1) a rise in childhood trauma related to parent's substance abuse (for ex. suicide ideation among 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders), 2) an increase in overdoses and deaths, and 3) an increase in property crime and petty theft.

Two groups commented on the opportunities this change has created including improved collaboration among residents, service providers, and law enforcement to share resources, information and expertise (for ex. Mental health professionals and law enforcement are now co-responding to cases). Harm reduction models have also become more embraced by these partners, and there is opportunity for more medication-assisted treatment.

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“... [The opioid epidemic] used to seem insurmountable and now has positive solutions - either being implemented or in the works. The difference is a coordinated community response by all partners, coming together with open minds.”

### 3. Diminished Living Wage Jobs

According to key leaders in all three focus groups, living wage jobs have diminished over the past year in Clallam County, resulting in higher unemployment and poverty. The jobs that are available, especially in healthcare, are difficult to fill and have resulted in a regional provider shortage. Participants discussed how new residents do not stay long, especially if they can seek more competitive salaries outside the region:

“People won’t put down roots in Forks because of the economy...”  
“Spouses can’t find a job, once someone is recruited to the community.”

Key leaders agreed that this poses a unique opportunity for existing residents to help new employees/families transition to the area to support retention.

### 4. Cuts to Education Funding – ex. McCleary decision. (Past and Future)

Two focus groups discussed how State cuts to education funding have led to less trade-school/post-secondary education options for students locally. Peninsula College did not receive funding to build dorms, making it difficult to attract new students without affordable housing options. Participants saw this force of change as something that could continue to affect the lives of County residents in the future under current legislation. (Groups did not present specific opportunities for this issue).

### 5. ACA repeal and replace. (Future)

Key leaders from all focus groups agreed Clallam County has the potential to be heavily affected by a repeal and/or replace of the Affordable Care Act due to the percentage of the population on Medicare and Medicaid and the potential loss of funding for social services (e.g. 2/3 of Makah Tribe members are on Medicaid). Participants in one group discussed how the current uncertainty is stressful for senior citizens and affecting their mental health. (Groups did not present specific opportunities for this issue).

### 6. Climate change. (Past and Future)

Two focus groups discussed climate change and its past and future affect on health, safety and the fishing industry in Clallam County. Key leaders specifically discussed how ocean acidification is affecting fish species, and how the weather this year delayed the fishing season entirely. Others commented on the changing weather leading to a harsh winter this year and concern for safety due to more snow and ice on the roads. (Groups did not present specific opportunities for this issue).

### 7. More stringent environmental regulations. (Past and Future)

According to participants, more stringent environmental regulations have led to job and revenue loss to the region. Although participants agreed regulations present an opportunity to protect our environment including vital fish species, the result is often less funding for things like public health services and education.

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“The \$2M that went to upgrading the water treatment plant required by the feds now can’t go to something else...”

## **8. Response to homelessness. (Past)**

Key leaders from the county’s Eastern region spoke positively of the community’s response to homelessness over the past year. Participants shared that a shift in community attitudes toward the homeless has improved overall response to provide individuals with basic needs, “instead of just imposing the law,” and harm reduction models are more embraced. (Groups did not present specific threats for this issue).

## **9. Immigration legislation. (Future)**

Key leaders from two focus groups discussed how future changes in immigration legislation under a new administration may impact the region negatively. Participants agreed undocumented residents currently contribute to the workforce and economy, and that racial and ethnic diversity has a positive impact on students and families in the community. If undocumented residents were forced to leave the area, this could threaten the local economy due to the sheer numbers of immigrants living in the area (e.g. there are 200-300 students in Quillayute Valley School District alone).

## **Local Public Health System Assessment: Common Themes (Gaps in Services)**

### **1. Mental Health Services**

- a. Issues: No psych beds in Clallam County (The closest facility is in Bremerton). Lack of State funding for behavioral health services.
- b. Opportunities/Assets: None discussed.

### **2. Provider Shortage**

- a. Issues: Positions are left unfulfilled for as long as 6 months. Lack of specialists.
- b. Opportunities/assets: Shared-services. For example, the Makah tribe is in discussion about sharing an ARNP with two other tribes.
- c. Create a “fast-track provider training at Peninsula College.” There are current plans to expand allied health training programs.

### **3. Emergency Medical Care**

- a. Issues: Distance to Emergency Department. No urgent care in Sequim.
- b. Opportunities/assets: Stand Alone Emergency Rooms. The new Olympic Medical Center walk-in clinic may divert emergency department primary care cases.

### **4. Policies That Support Affordable Housing (and Job Creation)**

- Issues: Lack of low-income housing, and rentals. Hard to attract new residents and students.
- Opportunities/Assets: Economic - People want to move to Clallam, rent or buy houses, be in nature, etc. There is an opportunity to attract new students, and keep local kids here at the college to train into the healthcare workforce.