BLUEPRINT UPDATE REPORT:
INFORMATION & NAVIGATION

This report was compiled to inform the community work session on the Aging Well Blueprint focus area of Information and Navigation, one of the six focus areas of the Aging Well Whatcom Blueprint. The purpose of the work session, held March 28, 2022, was to engage organizational partners and community members in reviewing and revising strategies for the 2022 edition of the Blueprint. Work session participants provided additional information, which was added to this report.

Information and Navigation and Older Adults in Whatcom County

What has changed?

1) **COVID-related changes.**
   - COVID has highlighted the fact that the need for Information and Navigation is stronger than ever for people of all ages in Whatcom County.
   - The many closures and service changes have caused more information and resources to be available only online, making them less accessible to many older adults (see Challenges, below).
   - At the same time, COVID has also prompted an increase in many older adults' facility with using technology to access information and services (see Opportunities, below).
   - Some changes caused by the pandemic are helpful for many older adults – they would have benefitted them well before COVID. Examples include click-and-pick up shopping, Zoom church services, telemedicine appointments, and virtual support groups.

   > Information sources for **What has Changed** section: Community partner survey and discussions regarding older adults and Information and Navigation (Nov 2021); interviews and other communication with Information and Navigation partners; website and report review; data review

2) **Whatcom Resource Information Collaborative**
   The Resource Information Collaborative (previously called the "Resource Roundtable") will be a community-owned and designed "resource access eco-system." A broad group of community members are developing a three-phase system to increase equitable access to resources for all

people in Whatcom County. After evaluating existing resource data platforms such as 211 and case management technologies such as Unite US, the group explored and determined that use of open-source technology (no proprietary ownership) would be most flexible and cost effective for advancement of a new system locally.

Phase 1 focuses on developing the data utility, an internal use database using Airtable, and a "beta" version of an external facing website for public access. The data utility is managed by a steward, who at this time is the Opportunity Council. The first iteration of this data utility and website is expected to be functional in Summer 2022, with limited records. Early stages will focus on building records around child and family resources due to the availability of funding.

The Opportunity Council's Community Resource Center (CRC) and their Single Entry Access Services (SEAS) Navigation also function, in the early phases, as two of a larger future number of Community Access Points. These are physical places where the public can access the resource data in person and electronically. We envision a time when libraries, schools, and organizations, such as NW Regional Council, would also be Community Access Points.

Phase 2 envisions the ability for any number of care/case management technologies to be able to interface with the data utility within three years.

Phase 3 envisions a Community Information Exchange (CIE), an effective community eco-system that will allow our community to engage in advanced referral, communication and client services across sectors (education, health care, social services, government supports) -- working better together so our citizens may better thrive.

Leadership for this effort is provided by the Whatcom Family and Community Network, Whatcom County Health Department and the Opportunity Council, along with a Steering Committee and multiple workgroups. This is a complex, collaborative undertaking with considerations regarding information technology, data sharing, partnership building, and public communications. State and regional efforts, such as 211, are now watching what is happening in Whatcom County and are considering how to adapt and move in similar directions.

3) **WA Cares Fund**
   - The WA Cares Fund, signed into law in 2019, is a state program that makes long-term care insurance affordable for all Washingtonians for the first time. WA Cares Fund is a benefit earned like Social Security that covers care in-home or a facility, as well as home modifications, meal delivery, car rides, and caregiver training.
   - With WA Cares Fund, people can receive long-term care services and supports worth up to $36,500 (adjusted annually for inflation) over your lifetime. An estimated seven out of ten Washington residents will need long-term care.
   - Workers will begin making contributions in July 2023 and services will begin in July 2026.
   - WA Cares Fund may have implications for information and navigation, especially for services that are covered by the program.

Challenges

CHALLENGE 1: FRAGMENTED OR HARD-TO-FIND INFORMATION

- "We need to have more information about what is available for us."
- "Access for senior help and services in the county, not just in Bellingham. We live at the south end of Lake Whatcom."
- "A better knitting together of information for all without the economic and physical criteria, then a good information campaign to increase awareness."
- "Clearer pathways for older adults to find the resources needed for retirement life."
- "Clarity and easy access to up-to-date clearing house of all services, especially essential health and quality of life services, available for older adults."
- "I think there could be more outreach to seniors to let them know what is available."

> Information sources for **Challenges** and **Opportunities** sections: Community partner survey and discussion regarding older adults and Information and Navigation (Nov 2021); Aging Well Whatcom Older Adult Survey (Nov 2021), and listening session with Elder Service Providers (Dec 2021).
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> **Items in quotes are survey responses as written by the respondents.**

CHALLENGE 2: ACCESSING INFORMATION INCREASINGLY REQUIRES TECHNOLOGY

- "Lack of technology or tech know-how is now a greater barrier to access, since so much is online or virtual."
- "Systems don't support those without computer literacy or cell phones."
- "[Make] access and ability to schedule doctor appointments easier - listening to phone directory is long and confusing, scheduling [takes] a long time."
- "[An impact of COVID was] depression due to inability to keep up with computerized meetings – lack of knowledge, skill to utilize equipment."
- "The over use of technology is alienating."

CHALLENGE 3: NAVIGATION – NEEDS BEYOND INFORMATION

- "[I wish] that each person could identify a local and personally selected advocate who can help them."
- "Have one person to manage all concerns. Presently it's all 'here's a number to call for help.' Calls result in a chain of calls, and no one can help."
- "An unbiased, helpful way to find assisted living, once one needs it."
- "Being a single lady with no family here, I would like to find an organization that can help guide me into aging and providing resources of how I manage. I'm worried I might get dementia and no one would know or that I would die in my house and no one would know. Maybe this exists and I haven't run across it yet."
- "[I have] frustrations about our local health care system which does not facilitate care for disabled and elderly in general - for example, many could use advocates to help them understand procedures, etc."

CHALLENGE 4: ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AND FUNDING LIMITATIONS

- The Northwest Regional Council's Aging and Disability Resources (ADR) currently provides Whatcom County's most comprehensive information and referral service for older adults and their family members and caregivers. Other organizations, such as the Whatcom Council on Aging/Bellingham Senior Activity Center, Dementia Support Northwest, and PeaceHealth's Center for Senior Health also receive many inquiries, most of which they refer to the NWRC's ADR.
    - ADR is funded by the Older Americans Act; funding is not keeping up with inflation or service growth. Because ADR capacity is limited, services are prioritized for low-income and underserved populations.
    - Keeping the ADR database up to date is very time consuming. COVID has caused program availability and eligibility to change even more frequently, adding to the difficulty of providing up-to-date and accurate information.
    - ADR funding dictates they must use the Community Living Connection database, so it could be challenging to interface with the open-source utility the Whatcom Resource Information Collaborative is working toward.
- The Whatcom Resource Information Collaborative also concerned about the availability of sustainable funding for "adequate human capacity for ongoing resource cultivation and management with a centralized steward, with multiple Community Access Points and supports."

CHALLENGE 5: ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Funding stipulations, organizational capacity, and other factors introduce eligibility criteria. Common examples are age (e.g., over age 60, or 62, or 65) and income (below a certain income threshold, often marked by Medicaid eligibility).

> The challenges around eligibility criteria are by no means limited to programs and services for older adults.

- Eligibility requirements add another layer of complexity to navigating information and resources, and potential confusion about who qualifies under what circumstances.
- "There must be free Meals on Wheels for all low income people 50+. It is not okay that you can be a [senior center] member at 50, but you have to be 65 to get Meals on Wheels for free if you are low income!! That disconnect in age requirements is inexcusable!!!!" [*Note: Meals on Wheels eligibility is not based on income; this comment illustrates confusion regarding eligibility criteria*].
- While the intent of eligibility criteria is to focus resources on those who most need them, this can leave out others who may have similar needs, creating service gaps.
- "There are options for people in poverty or with a lot of wealth, but less assistance for those in the middle."
- "[There should be] affordable access to at-home care services for those who are living independently with limited assets. Example: A loved one earns $100 too much per month through social security and pensions to qualify for any assistance at home. That said, she

cannot afford to pay for at-home care a couple of times per week. She needs help to remain in her home, but she does not have enough cushion in her budget to afford extra help."

CHALLENGE 6: INTERNET ACCESS
- "As a community, we need more access to the internet for all, improved communication services so that people won't be left out stranded."
- "We [should] have an affordable internet that would assist the older adults to have access to so that they can feel more connected to people and events."
- "Broadband to homes…[is] needed for telehealth, for adult education and reskilling, remote work, and staying connected with family."

Opportunities

OPPORTUNITY 1: EXPAND IT TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR OLDER ADULTS
- "[We need] affordable computer orientation classes for seniors."
- "Simplified computer instruction & procedures."
- "Training about email and social media."
- "More help with telephones and how to use and pay for them."
- Leverage older adults' expanded tech skills to teach others.
  - "More older adults are using technology now. They have shown great adaptability in terms of learning how to use technology."
  - "[COVID] forced me to build up my computer skills."
  - "I've become quite adept at Zoom and FaceTime."

> Aging and Disability Resources often helps people get cell phones, can help train regarding their use.

> Whatcom Council on Aging offers technology peer support groups. While young people are skilled technology users, older adults are sometimes more understanding and patient teachers for other older adults.

OPPORTUNITY 2: MAINTAIN VIRTUAL OFFERINGS
- Continuing to offer virtual services beyond COVID may be helpful for many older adults, especially those who are homebound or lack transportation.
- "[Dementia Support NW] plans to retain virtual support groups – it works well for some, and is a good way for extended family members who live in other places to join."
- "Virtual services have been great for some."

OPPORTUNITY 3: PROVIDE INFORMATION AND NAVIGATION TRAINING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF
- [Organizations can] make sure everyone knows where to refer for what, and avoid duplicating resources and efforts.
- "It's important to remember non-IT side of sources navigation – 'soft skills' need to be developed too, building relationships and rapport."
- "[I'd like] people who listen to my needs and people who do what they say they will do."

- "Caring support… that is more than simply 'info referrals.' Need to know there are real people capable of helping; not just projected, futuristic info."

OPPORTUNITY 4: EXPAND OUT-STATIONED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

- "[Bellingham Senior Activity Center] is the first stop for many…could hold educational/informational events more frequently throughout the year."
- "NW Regional Council's Family Caregiver Program used to do more outreach. It could be ramped back up and offer staff trainings."
- Build partnerships between organizations to share resources, such as spaces at senior centers for rotating non-profits and programs to be out-stationed.
- "Take things to people vs. asking them to come to the service provider." Recently developed examples are Dementia Support NW's mobile office, and the Ask-a-Nurse program at the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center.

Other Assessments and Strategic Plans

The NW Regional Council Strategic Plan 2020-2023 includes the goal *"To provide outreach, information, assistance, and options and benefits counseling for people with aging or disability related challenges."* Strategies for accomplishing this goal are to 1) Maintain capacity (and expand as resources allow) to provide information and assistance services that are in high-demand; 2) Build access funding into all major program initiatives; and 3) Improve the Internet presence of community information focal points, including social media.