Innovation Report

Washington Association for Community Health
Community Health Centers Advancing Quality Care for All

CHC Community Health Center of Snohomish County

Ensuring Vaccine Access at School-Based Health Centers

Community Health Center of Snohomish County works closely with school nurses to ensure students experiencing housing instability can access vaccines.

Background

Community Health Center of Snohomish County (CHC) partnered with the Edmonds School District to open the county's first school-based health center (SBHC) in the fall of 2022 at Meadowdale High School. Starting from a strong partnership during the pandemic and in response to growing concerns around student wellness and access to services, the Meadowdale SBHC initially started on a part-time basis, providing access to medical and dental services. It has since grown to provide full-time medical and behavioral health care, a dedicated clinic coordinator, and robust dental screening and treatment,

The program expanded to Mountlake Terrace High School in January 2024 and supports dental care and connection to SBHC services for all 14 feeder elementary and middle schools.

SBHCs are national, evidence-based models that provide access to private, convenient, and safe healthcare services. SBHCs support students and their families to access other resources and benefits and refer them to other outside healthcare providers when needed. Services are provided to students at no cost to families and are in alignment with all HIPAA privacy rules and standards.

The CHC SBHCs operate with grant funding from Snohomish County, Verdant Health Commission, and the Department of Health and have also received capital and equipment grants from Foundry10 and the Hazel Miller Foundation. The program also bills insurance plans for reimbursement when applicable, which supports sustainable program operations.



Snapshot of CHC:

- **Non profit, in operation for over 40 years**
- **Mission is to provide their community with access to high-quality, affordable care**
- **Provides medical, dental, behavioral health, and pharmacy services**
- **Served over 76,000 individuals during 244,000 visits in 2024**
- **Operates 7 medical primary care clinics, 2 medical walk-in clinics, and 6 pharmacies**

A strong partnership – and an outbreak

Right from the start, CHC's school-based health centers were rooted in a strong partnership with the Edmonds School District. In addition to the initial impetus to start the Meadowdale SBHC during the pandemic, an additional need quickly became apparent as students returned to in-person school. This collaboration emerged in response to challenges families faced in meeting Washington State's vaccination requirements. Those challenges could result in missed school or disruptions in learning. The school district understood that bringing vaccines and health services to their students was more efficient and effective than hoping students and their families would have the resources to seek health services on their own.

Both of CHC's school-based health centers are located within school buildings to be as accessible as possible. CHC's staff work closely with district and school staff to integrate the school-based health centers' registration process with the school district's registration process. Integrating services and registration is especially impactful for students who have barriers to accessing care, like those experiencing housing instability or students who may not have access to their vaccine records, like refugee students who have recently resettled in the school district. By completing both school and health center registration at the same time, new students can often access any vaccines they need before their first day of school.

When a pertussis ("whooping cough") outbreak hit Snohomish County in the spring of 2024 and a local student became ill, the school nurse at Mountlake Terrace High School reached out to CHC's school-based staff, hoping to coordinate the Tdap vaccination for students. The Tdap vaccine is recommended by the CDC for preteens (11-12 years of age) to protect against pertussis and is required by Washington State for all students entering 7th grade. But the disruption caused by the pandemic meant that many of the high schoolers attending Mountlake Terrace High School had not received a Tdap vaccine as preteens and were now at risk of contracting pertussis.



The school nurse and CHC's school-based team worked quickly to coordinate a Tdap vaccination campaign with CHC providing informational materials that the school sent to parents along with the SBHC registration materials. The school nurse and CHC staff reviewed current SBHC patients to determine who might need a vaccine. The school nurse also ran reports from the Washington State Immunization Information System (WA IIS) to identify students who had not received a Tdap vaccine and reached out to those students to inform them as well as support them in registering and scheduling with the SBHC.

CHC staff worked with families to receive the required registration and consent to vaccinate interested students and were also able to provide additional information on pertussis and how other family members could keep themselves safe and access vaccines at CHC's community clinic.

Ensuring Access - and Consent



It might sound easy enough to administer Tdap vaccines, but before each shot was put into an arm, CHC school-based staff engaged with students and their families to ensure informed consent as required by Washington State law.

CHC school-based staff note that they always obtain written informed consent for vaccines from parents. Parents complete an initial consent form when they register their student with the school-based health center as well as an additional consent form before a vaccine is administered. To make it more convenient for parents, CHC uses digital consent forms that can be sent to and completed on parents' phones. This system means parents don't need to take time off work.

For students experiencing housing instability, getting parental consent can be a challenge, if not impossible. The Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 7.70.065, section 3 addresses this challenge by authorizing many students experiencing housing instability to provide informed consent for immunizations (among other primary care services) for themselves if they do not have a parent or legal guardian.

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools are required to identify and serve students experiencing housing instability. In addition to doing building-wide outreach, the school nurse also focused on unvaccinated McKinney Vento students and worked closely with the CHC team to support those interested in receiving an immunization to successfully register and get vaccinated with the CHC Provider.

When a school board member from a neighboring district heard about CHC's process for supporting eligible students to self-consent, he shared that he knew first-hand what a positive impact that support will have on students with unstable housing. He had experienced homelessness himself as a student and shared that he was often excluded from sports and other school activities because he was not able to get parental consent or self-consent for things like sports physicals, mental health support, or even the flu shot.

Outcomes & Impacts

The strong partnering between the school nurse and CHC school-based staff ensured that during the pertussis outbreak all students got the right care, at the right time, and at the right place. Through this joint effort, they were able to reach 100% vaccination status for the school's students experiencing homelessness and provided vaccines to all interested students. And that partnership continues to positively impact students, the school district, and the community.



Since partnering closely with the school nurse to identify students that need vaccinations, CHC school-based staff report that Mountlake Terrace High School's exclusion rate has been under 10 students (out of a student population of about 1,460) – that is, fewer than 10 students are excluded from school due to not meeting Washington State's vaccination requirements. This is an important outcome not only for students but for schools. If a student is excluded, the school district cannot include that student in their student count, and the school district may receive less funding from state and federal governments.

100% vaccination status for the school's students who are experiencing homelessness

CHC school-based staff also note that offering vaccinations provides an entry point for students to access other primary care services at the school-based health center, like mental, behavioral, and social-emotional health services. The partnership and referral process that started with the school nurses has now spread to the school counselors and they are able to efficiently refer students to CHC school-based staff for behavioral and mental health services.

They also note that the school-based model brings benefits to many different sectors in the community.

- Students miss less school because they are able to easily access the healthcare they need. This positively impacts academic achievement and graduation rates.
- Parents and guardians miss less work because they don't need to take time off to take their student to an appointment. This positively impacts families' socioeconomic status.
- Students get a chance to explore careers in healthcare, through internships and other training programs. This positively impacts the workforce pipeline.

Challenges & Next Steps

School-based staff said that it was challenging to initially stand up their school-based vaccination program. It took CHC a full year to meet Washington State's Childhood Vaccine program and vaccine storage requirements, but the Washington State Department of Health staff were helpful throughout the onboarding process.



CHC is excited to expand their school-based health center program into the Everett School District in the fall of 2025. They plan to work closely with the school nurse there to increase access to vaccines for all students and replicate the success they had at Mountlake Terrace High School.

Services Offered at CHC's School-Based Health Centers:

- **Illness or injury**
- **Chronic condition and medication management**
- **Dental care**
- **Insurance eligibility and enrollment assistance**
- **Mental, behavioral, and social emotional health services**
- **Sports physicals**
- **Wellness exams and preventative healthcare**
- **Referrals to other healthcare providers and specialists as needed**

Washington Association for Community Health

The Association's innovation reports aim to support community health centers in leading innovation by identifying successful promising practices and communicating them to the statewide network.

Does your CHC have an innovation to share? Let us know!

This publication is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling $1,011,178 with 0% financed with nongovernmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government