



---

**PHT Meeting Minutes**  
**February 6, 2025, 8:30-10:30 am**

**Chinook Meeting Room**

**Members:** Dan Berard, Patty Codd, Bill Henkel, Sonia Garza, Chris Johnston, Julie Merriam, Marueen Pettitt, Lyndie Simmons, Anneliese Vance-Sherman,

**Community Stakeholders:** Chris Baldwin, Kas Church, Kristen Ekstran, Jennnifer Sass-Walton

**Ex-Officio:** Howard Leibrand

**Guests:** Lani Miller, Kat Lohman (on behalf of Dean Snider), Sarah Hinman, Genaro Sanchez, Javana Herrera (on behalf of Mario Paredes)

---

## **Agenda review and Steering update**

Kristen welcomed the group and provided updates from the most recent Steering Committee meeting. The month of February marked the end of Margaret's term as PHT Chair. Bill would step up as the new chair and Steering recommended Thomas to be the new vice chair. Kristen asked members for their vote on Thomas as the new vice chair and the group approved.

## **O.U.R. Journey Conversation**

Genaro Sanchez of O.U.R. Journey joined the PHT to talk about challenges that gang-affiliated youth experience. Two youth were scheduled to join him, but given the inclement weather, they were unable to attend. This conversation is part of the Community Health Assessment (CHA) process, providing the PHT with an opportunity to learn more about the experiences of youth.

Genaro opened the conversation by sharing about his background, having joined a gang at a young age following the death of his father. He spent many years in a gang and in jail before realizing at the age of 36 that he needed something else in his life. He cited his relationship with God as the source of his healing and life transformation. He later attended Skagit Valley College, studying substance abuse, then would go on to create O.U.R. Journey. The organization was founded to, "empower, heal, and support youth in Skagit County through culturally responsive mentorship and peer-led intervention."

When asked about the reasons young people join gangs, Genaro said it is often a result of trauma. Many kids that he interacts with have had something in their lives that has led to pain, anger, fear, and/or a sense of hopelessness. They are lacking connection with others in the community. By joining a gang, they have a family, a sense of connection and belonging. Genaro referenced a quote by Father Greg Boyle, "Nobody has ever met a hopeful kid who joined a gang," to reinforce what he shared with the group.

Genaro told members that he has met with many 9–12-year-olds that are already adopting gang culture, dressing the part and tagging areas. He said that recently, a 7-year-old that threw up a gang symbol in school. When he later talked with him, the kid was nervous not about throwing a gang symbol, but because he was high. He said that some early signs a kid is in a gang are when they start to disconnect, then reconnect in a negative way. They may stop caring about doing things, push back against adults, and begin to engage in violence. Ideally, we are intervening at this point, or earlier, to support youth. Once they are already part of a gang, it can be harder to help.

A PHT member asked Genaro if he had an idea of how many gang affiliated individuals are using substances. Genaro said he thinks 100% are using some kind of substance and that for most, their substance abuse needs are not being addressed with treatment or therapy. He said this can be especially hard with Hispanic families because they are often in denial about their child's drug use. Additionally, many of the kids he interacts with have parents that are dealing with their own substance abuse issues. Many of their parents, around 30%, are gang-involved, and membership can be intergenerational. Some of the kids that attend O.U.R. Journey were told by their family not to go to meetings, fortunately, three of the 10 kids came back to the program.

Genaro also noted that the trauma the kids experience that leads them to join a gang is also often intergenerational. He cited the need to support the parents as well, noting that if they aren't healed, it is hard to break the cycle of trauma. He also shared that parents need to have a way to make a living legally. If they can't secure legal employment to support their families, they may turn to gangs as a way earn income.

In addition to sharing about the scope of the challenge, Genaro shared details of his program, the ways it works to support both youth and their families. He shared that there is a youth advisory board, classes for both youth and parents, and that above all, the program creates a space for the kids to belong and to be fed. In the coming weeks they will be opening a community center in Sedro-Woolley where there will be a café, barber shop, beauty school, t-shirt press, game room, and library for young people. The group is also creating a training for student club leaders at MVHS on how to interact with kids that may be at risk for joining gangs. The goal of the training is to teach kids how to show care and concern and to instill belonging for other kids.

When asked how the PHT/greater community could support these youth, Genaro said that collaboration with organizations like his, not being afraid of, but embracing a kid that is in a gang, and having a desire to learn more about the issue all would go far to support these youth.

Dan joined in the discussion to share his perspective on the importance of programs like this. He said that a school's job is to get all their students to graduation. He said they generally do a pretty good job for around 80% of them, but for others, specific programing is needed to provide the necessary support. Mount Vernon

Schools recognized this need and worked hard to bring Genaro on as a staff member, overcoming barriers connected to funding and his prior record.

To close out the conversation, Genaro was asked what he most wants us to remember from the conversation. He noted the importance of building relationships with youth saying, “if we can’t build a solid bridge our kids will be falling into the ocean.”

### **HYS Data**

In addition to learning from Genaro about the challenges youth face, the meeting included a presentation of key indicators of youth wellness from the most recent Healthy Youth Survey (HYS). This presentation included information about substance use, behavioral health, and other health behaviors like exercise, fruit and vegetable consumption, and screen time among others.

Kristen also notified members that there would be a focus group with prevention coalition leaders and potentially with 2SLGBTQ+ youth. She asked the PHT what they would most like to know from the coalition leaders. Members expressed an interest in wanting to know what strategies/interventions/partnerships were working (where they are seeing the most impact), if they are working to address intergenerational issues, and what kinds of protective factors they are working to build for the youth they work with.

The conversation then shifted into a larger discussion of how the PHT could show support for underrepresented populations during this time of political instability. One member suggested creating a statement of support to show that we cared about these communities and were still committed to addressing health disparities. Members like the idea centering it with the PHT’s vision of health for All. Kristen said that she would discuss the idea with the Steering Committee at their next meeting, then report back to the larger group.

### **Up Next**

The Steering Committee will meet on Monday, February 10<sup>th</sup>. During the Board of Health meeting on February 11<sup>th</sup>, the PHT will be recognizing their 10-year anniversary with a short presentation and proclamation- join if you can! The next PHT meeting will be on March 6<sup>th</sup>.