

# Sexual & Domestic Violence in Whatcom County

2022 ANNUAL DATA REPORT

Published: October 2023

Data Period: 2022\*

\*This is the most recent year for which cross-discipline data is available



**COMMISSION**  
ON SEXUAL & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**The Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence inspires and coordinates our community's efforts to address domestic and sexual violence.** To fulfill this vital mission, we:



**Connect** institutions, stakeholders, and communities to collectively increase understanding of sexual and domestic violence, especially the impacts and effectiveness of community responses.



**Transform** systems to ensure best practices in trauma-informed, survivor-centered prevention and interventions for sexual and domestic violence.



**Foster** justice, autonomy, and well-being for survivors and communities.

## Definitions

**Domestic violence (DV)** “(also referred to as intimate partner violence [IPV], dating abuse, or relationship abuse) is **a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control** over another partner in an intimate relationship.” This differs from the [legal definition](#), which defines domestic violence as physical violence and other crimes against a household member or intimate partner, but may not include other harmful controlling behaviors. As of 2022, Washington’s [protection order law](#) now includes coercive control, which it defines as “a pattern of behavior that is used to cause another to suffer physical, emotional, or psychological harm, and in purpose or effect unreasonably interferes with a person's free will and personal liberty.”

**Sexual assault (SA)** “occurs when a person is forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into any unwanted sexual activity. [It] is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of victimizations which may or may not involve force or be illegal.” Sexual assault or sexual abuse often appears in domestic violence relationships. In fact, it has been estimated that **two-thirds of survivors** experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) **have been sexually assaulted by their abusive partner**. Some incidents of sexual violence, though extremely harmful, may not always meet Washington’s [legal definition](#) of sexual assault, or may not be able to be proven.

## A Note About Data

This report includes data sourced from local agencies and state-wide data. If you notice a problem with any of the data, please contact us so we may correct it:  
[contact@dvcommission.org](mailto:contact@dvcommission.org)

## Local & National Events Impacting Survivors, Responses, and Prevention



### The impact of the November 2021 flooding on rural Whatcom County

continues to this day. [One man lost his life](#) and [over 500 families](#) were initially displaced. Some of those families are [still facing homelessness](#). We do not have data on the impact on survivors in our community, but [research](#) and reporting from other communities [throughout the nation](#) and [around the world](#) shows that sexual and domestic violence increase, and access to services decrease, during and in the aftermath of a natural disaster. As our community prepares for future natural disasters, how can we mitigate the ways these disasters increase vulnerability for survivors and their families?



### Addiction continues to harm individuals and our communities, a

consequence of and a complicating factor for sexual and domestic violence. [Reporting](#) from communities in other parts of the country describes how abusers control their partners by coercing or forcing drug use, make their partners dependent upon them for drugs and even housing, and give drugs in order to sexually assault their partners. [One study](#) showed that women who use fentanyl worried more about their safety, including the risk of sexual violence and intimate partner violence, than about overdose, describing “**violence as random and a constant threat.**” Our community has recently learned of at least [one case](#) where a man used drugs to incapacitate a teenage victim (drug-facilitated sexual assault), but this likely happens much more often than what makes the news.

As families cope with [rising overdose deaths](#), the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County, along with Washington State, are finding ways to [systematically respond](#) to the crisis, and Lummi Nation is expanding their [holistic approach to healing](#).

In 2013 the Whatcom County Fatality Review panel reviewed domestic violence homicide cases for the report [It Happened in Our Town](#), finding that “in all the cases reviewed, the victims and abusers were using alcohol and/or other drugs...for abusers, substances can increase the volatility of the domestic violence. When victims use substances, **it limits their options for safety.**”



Housing prices remain high in Whatcom County and **homelessness has increased to a record high**. In other communities, domestic violence is the [number one cause of homelessness](#) for women. Data from Whatcom County also shows that domestic violence is strongly connected to homelessness (see page 5). People experiencing homelessness are targeted for violence.



***Nobody should have to be clean and sober to have access to services.*** —Local Survivor

## Local & National Events Impacting Survivors, Responses, and Prevention, continued



In 2022 and 2023, the Washington State Legislature passed several bills that protect access to abortion. They include requiring health insurance to cover abortions (SB 5242); to protect private health data (HB 1155); protect residents of other states who access gender-affirming or reproductive healthcare in Washington (HB 1469) and the providers of that care (HB 1340); and distribute abortion medication (SB 5768). [Reproductive justice includes, but extends beyond, abortion access](#). Survivors deserve “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”



Washington is among the many states across the nation that considered laws to restrict access to gender-affirming care. While many other states [enacted those laws, none passed](#) in Washington’s 2023 legislative session. [Five laws to expand protections](#) of trans people did pass, including protections for youth in shelters; name change privacy rights; protection of health data; protection from other states for those seeking gender-affirming or reproductive care in Washington; and protection from harassment, bullying, and discrimination for trans students.

Despite the legislative wins, [trans and other LGBTQ people are at risk in Washington](#). They have been [disproportionately impacted by the pandemic](#), and libraries in other parts of the state are [facing book bans and even closures](#) over LGBTQ+ books available to young adults. Cultural discussions cross state borders and are harming people in our community.

The word “grooming” is [intentionally used inaccurately](#) to accuse LGBTQ people of harming children and to conflate access to knowledge of LGBTQ+ people (like, through books at school) with predators who are harming children. In reality, [grooming](#) is a dynamic where a perpetrator builds a special relationship with a child to gain access and compliance, and sexually abuse them. Misusing the term misleads community members about the true dynamics of childhood sexual abuse and undermines the actual harm of this abuse. Grooming is not related to being queer or transgender. In fact, the national [anti-trans narrative contributes to violence and discrimination against trans people](#).

Contrary to the narrative that trans people are a threat, [trans people are frequently targeted for lethal and non-lethal violence, including sexual and domestic violence](#). They deserve care, support, and interventions to prevent violence, access safety, and pursue healing and justice.



*I realized I didn't want a lawyer because I knew the truth and my story, I wanted to be heard and acknowledged. —Local Survivor*

## Local & National Events Impacting Survivors, Responses, and Prevention, continued



Two bills related to protective orders were passed by the Washington State Legislature in 2021 and 2022, went into effect in 2022, and continue to be implemented in 2023.

[E2SHB 1320](#) and [SHB 1901](#) created **massive changes to protection orders** in Washington State. In HB 1320, legislators emphasized the importance of survivors' ability to access these civil protections outside the criminal legal system and outlined their intent to "clarify and simplify these civil protection order statutes to make them more understandable and accessible to victims seeking relief and to respondents who are subject to the court process." All six protection order statutes in Washington State are now included in [RCW 7.105](#). Updates are extensive, but include:

- Combining and reconciling differences between six protection order statutes
- Expanding the use of technology for applications, service, and hearings, including the ability to file petitions in Superior Court [online](#)
- Revising jurisdiction
- Adding coercive control to the definition of domestic violence in RCW 7.105.010
- Encouraging training for judicial officers



In November 2022 voters narrowly passed Proposition 5, implementing a property tax to create the **Healthy Children's Fund**. Target areas for funding include capital projects, childcare & mental health workforce development, shared childcare admin, resources for homeless families, expanding parenting support, and co-locating services. Though survivors of sexual and domestic violence are not explicitly named in the [Implementation Plan](#), increasing access to childcare, support for homeless families and parenting, and improved access to services can increase access to safety and healing for survivors. Sign up for email updates, including funding opportunities, on the [Healthy Children's Fund webpage](#).



***I wish I had financial support, I had none. That was one of the main reasons I stayed with him, was because I couldn't afford childcare. I lost my job afterwards because I didn't have childcare, and now I live in poverty.***

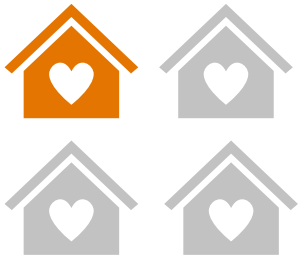
*—Local Survivor*

**Just because he didn't leave a mark doesn't mean he didn't hurt me.**

*—Local Survivor*

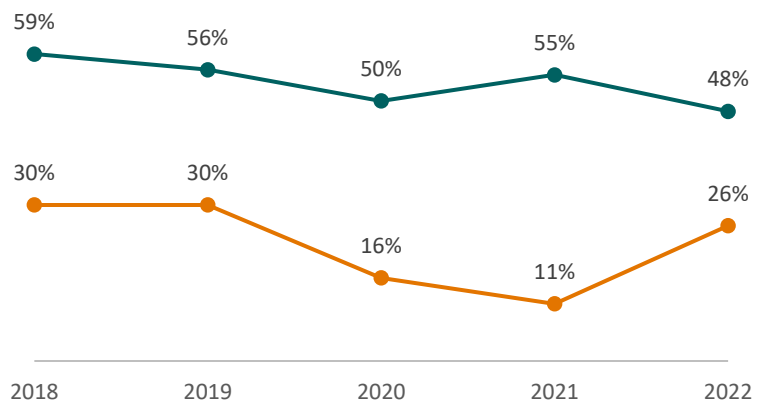
# Sexual & Domestic Violence & Homelessness

**Violence and homelessness are linked.** The threat of homelessness traps survivors in abusive relationships. Escaping DV may lead to homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are targeted for sexual and domestic violence.



On average, more than 1 in 4 households on the Whatcom County Coordinated Entry Housing Pool (homeless households on the waitlist for housing) in 2022 **were fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, human trafficking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions** that relate to violence against the household member(s).

Of youth (ages 18-24) served by Northwest Youth Services Housing Programs, **about half have experienced DV** and **more than a quarter were fleeing DV** in 2022.



*I was in a hotel with my kids most of the summer and he wouldn't let me come home and he wouldn't leave so I could come home with the kids.*

—Local Survivor

*A lot of places won't help you find housing until you are a week away from being homeless.* —Local Survivor

*The father of my older children left. I was left with a young child, pregnant, and sleeping in a car.* —Local Survivor

## Tribal-Based Advocacy Services & MMIP

Lummi Victims of Crime and Nooksack Tribe's Tl'ils Ta'á'altha Victims of Crime provide **critical culturally responsive services** for survivors in our community, including Tribal members and non-members.



### Lummi Victims of Crime

Lummi Victims of Crime (LVOC) serves survivors 24 hours a day with crisis counseling and Ne-Alis Tokw (My Sister's Place) Domestic Violence Shelter. LVOC also provides legal advocacy, therapy referrals, traditional healing, and emergency assistance.



### Tl'ils Ta'á'altha Victims of Crime

Tl'ils Ta'á'altha, a program of the Nooksack Indian Tribe, started in 2020 and serves survivors 24 hours a day with crisis counseling, emergency housing and transportation, referrals, and legal advocacy.



The crisis of Missing & Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) continues to impact Whatcom County. According to Lummi Victims of Crime's 2023 MMIP Data Report, for the past 20 years Lummi PD has had an average of 42 missing indigenous person cases reported each year and Bellingham PD has an average of 133 missing indigenous person cases reported each year. Many of these cases may involve the same person repeatedly going missing.



*I spent a lot of time out in nature just being with myself and learning how to love myself again, and being alone, and focusing on taking care of my animals. –Local Survivor*

*[It's helpful] knowing that we're in it together. During the #MeToo movement it was nice to begin acknowledging that, to meet other people who've gone through similar experiences and learning about different ways of healing. –Local Survivor*



## Survivor Advocacy Services at Western Washington University

### Most students were seeking support for sexual assault.

Students self-identified the reason for seeking support and were able to select more than one reason.



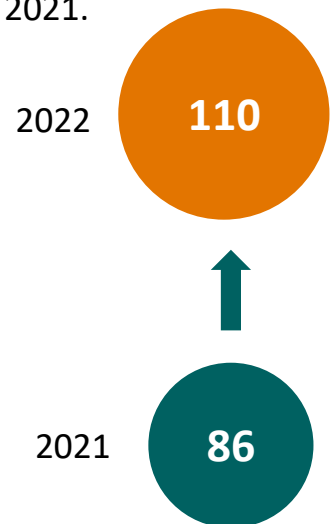
\*Other includes experiences of family violence, roommate concerns, secondary survivors, and students who do not label experiences by the other terms offered.



*I took the online training [on sexual violence] at Western that everyone has to take, and that's when I first realized what I had experienced in relationships was not okay. –Local Survivor*

*On campus, it would have been helpful if the protection order covered everywhere, not just the dorm. I had to move off campus to get away from him, but then saw him at a coffeehouse and he harassed me there too. –Local Survivor*

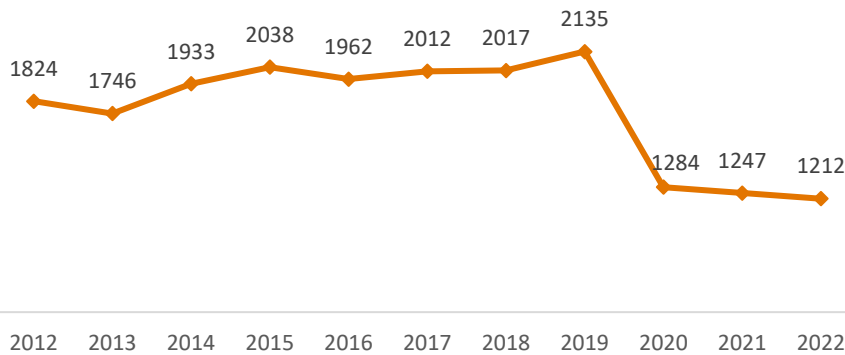
More students accessed individual advocacy services in 2022 than in 2021.





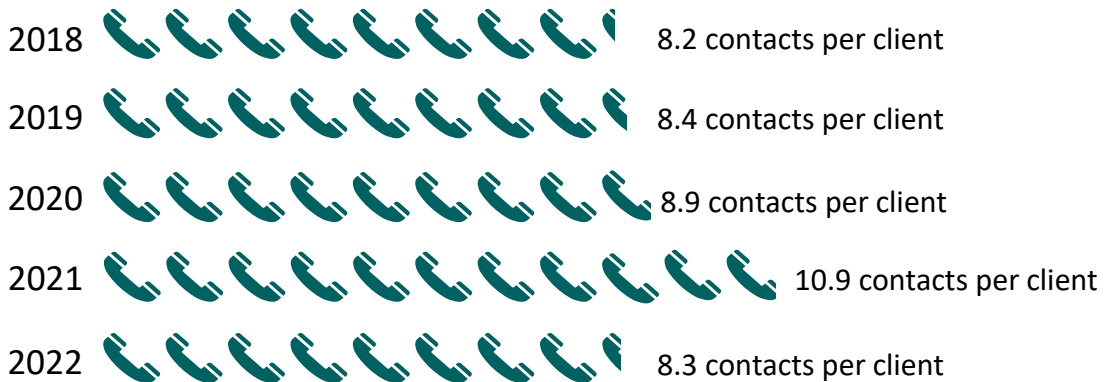
# Community-Based Advocacy Services, continued

## DVSAS Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Services



In 2022, the number of individual clients dipped slightly, continuing a downward trend following a big drop in 2020.

The number of contacts per client at DVSAS returned to pre-pandemic averages.



*Not just for me, but making it known about DVSAS. I didn't know until the police gave me that pamphlet. Making it more known. I have a friend who went through the same thing after me, and I told her about DVSAS, and she had never heard of it.*

—Local Survivor

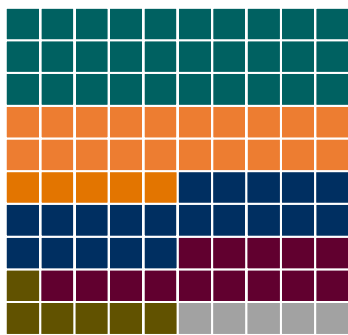
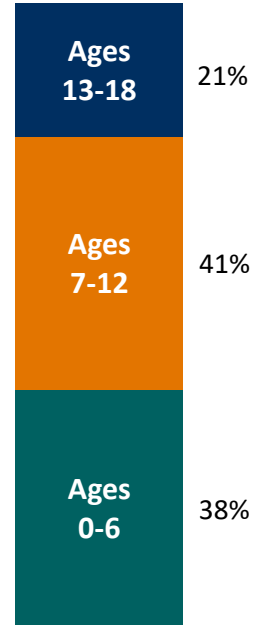
*Justice and healing go hand in hand. I felt unheard for a long time. I went to DVSAS and felt heard—that started the process of healing.*

—Local Survivor

In 2022, **Brigid Collins' Child Advocacy Center** conducted 103 forensic interviews and 3 medical exams.



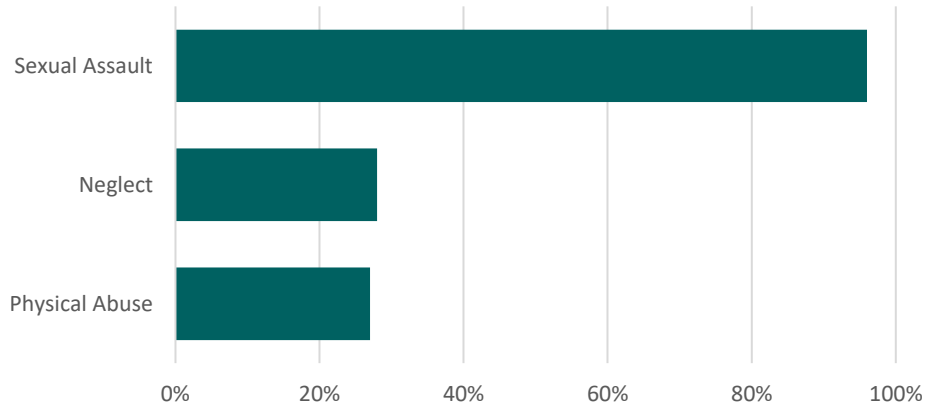
Nearly 80% of children interviewed were under 13



### Offenders knew the child

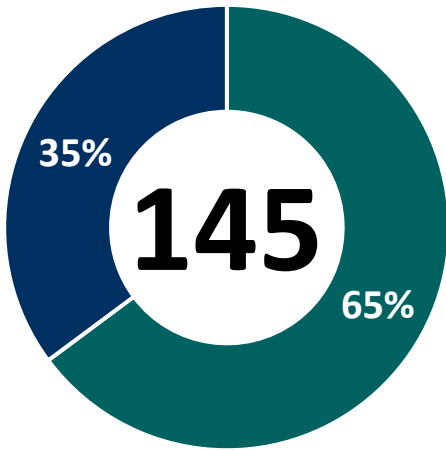
- other known person
- other relative
- parent
- unknown by victim, or not disclosed by victim
- stepparent
- parent's partner

**96% of children interviewed had experienced sexual violence.** Many had also experienced neglect and/or physical abuse.



In 2022, Brigid Collins' Child Advocacy Center also provided **therapy to 150 children** and **case management to 290 children** who experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and/or were victims of other crime.

## Forensic Exams



Of the 145 forensic exams at St. Joe's in 2022, more than 1/3 were for **children under the age of 13**. The remaining were for **adults and adolescents**.



**660**  
hours

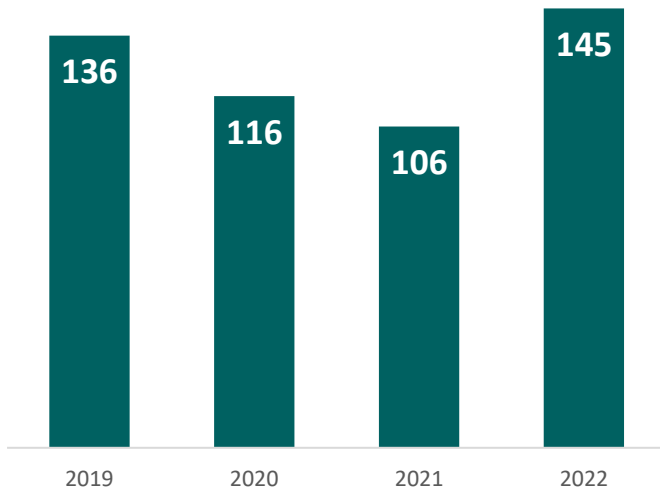
Time forensic nurses spent conducting exams at PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center in 2022.



The average exam took 4.5 hours to complete. Consider what it's like for a survivor of sexual violence to undergo such an exam for hours.

**The number of forensic exams has increased beyond pre-pandemic levels.**

Members of our community response anticipate that the number of exams will continue to increase each year.



*[The officer] asked if I wanted to do a rape kit, but it had been long enough that there may or may not be evidence. I'd done one in the past and it had been the most traumatic thing, so I decided against that.*

*—Local Survivor*

## What is a forensic exam?

In Whatcom County, specially-trained nurses at **PeaceHealth St. Joseph Medical Center, Lummi Tribal Clinic, and Brigid Collins Child Advocacy Center** conduct forensic exams. They collect evidence after a sexual assault and can also collect evidence of physical assault related to domestic violence, including strangulation. Patients receive care like medication to prevent pregnancy and STIs. Advocates are always called to accompany survivors through this process. In nearly half of adult cases in 2022 survivors chose not to report to police. The evidence will be stored but not tested by the state lab unless the survivor decides to report.



*My friend and my mom [were helpful]. The first step was taking me to the hospital.*

*–Local Survivor*

*I didn't go directly after to get examined because I was in denial and pretending everything is normal.*

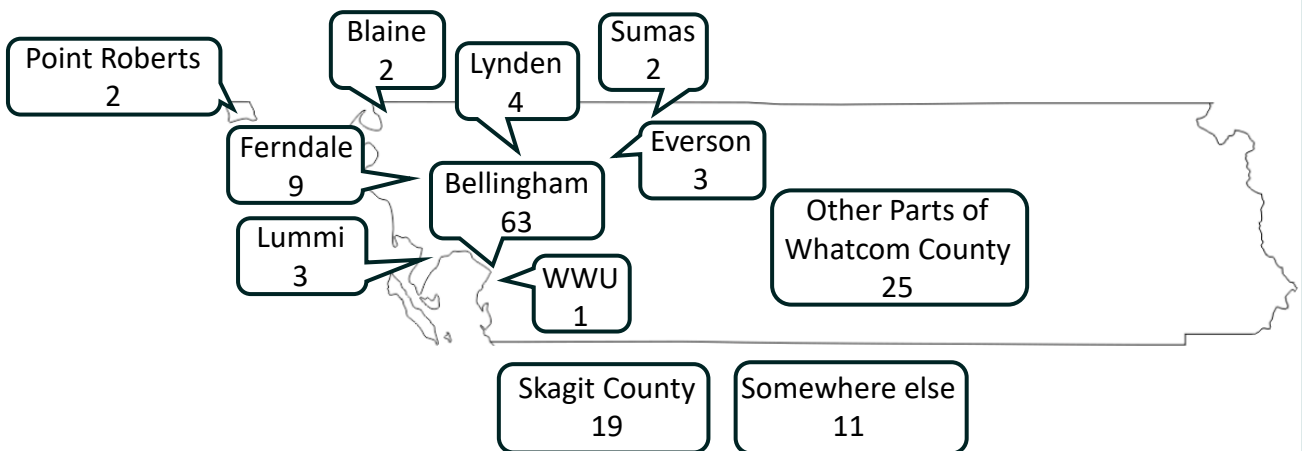
*–Local Survivor*

*Justice could look like trauma-informed care, especially in medical offices.*

*–Local Survivor*

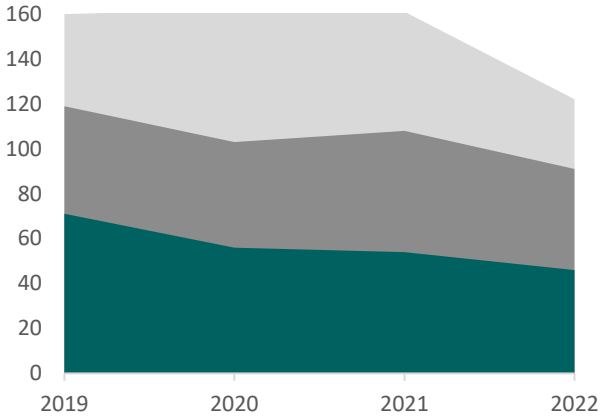
## Where did incidents occur?

Survivors who sought exams at St. Joseph Medical Center had experienced the incidents throughout the region: Whatcom, Skagit, Island, San Juan, and King Counties, and as far away as Portland, Oregon.

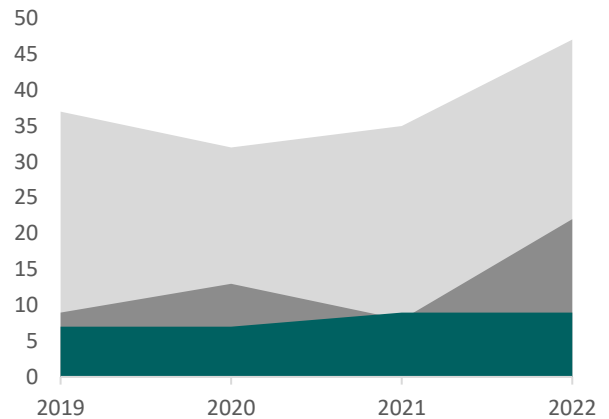


# Domestic Violence Protection Orders

**Superior Court** Domestic Violence Protection Order **Petitions** fell in 2022. Half or more were **granted temporary orders**. About 1/3 were **granted final orders**.



**District Court** receives fewer Domestic Violence Protection Order **Petitions** than Superior Court. About 25-50% were **granted temporary orders**. Only about 1/4 or fewer were **granted final orders**.



Nooksack Tribal Courts received 7 Domestic Violence Protection Order Petitions. All of those were granted temporary orders and **4 were granted final orders**.



Occasionally a petition is denied a temporary order but granted a permanent order. This is clear on the chart above in 2021 when one petition was granted a permanent order without having a temporary order. **What does this mean for victim safety between petitioning for a protective order and waiting for the hearing?** The respondent has been notified, but the petitioner has no protective order.

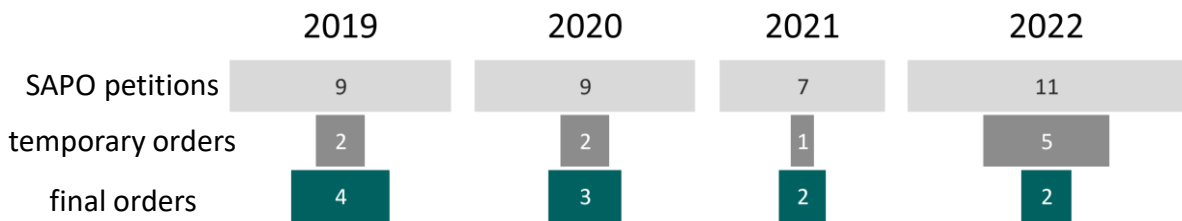


*The DVSAS advocate was amazing, she helped me with every process of the protection order form, examples, remembering every situation that happened, what the court needs to hear and what they don't want to hear, helped me be aware prior to court, explained to me the process of the one-year order, she wrote me notes and gave them to me during court, I needed that so I knew it was ok. –Local Survivor*

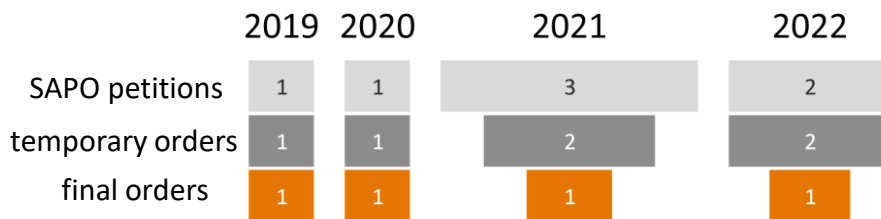
# Sexual Assault Protection Orders

Compared to Domestic Violence Protection Orders, **Whatcom County District and Superior Courts receive very few Sexual Assault Protection Order (SAPO) Petitions.**

District Court has received 11 or fewer SAPO petitions for the last four years. 14-45% were granted temporary orders. Fewer than half were **granted final orders.** Like domestic violence protection orders, some petitions are denied a temporary order but granted a permanent order. Again, consider what this means for victim safety between petitioning for a protective order and waiting for the hearing.



Superior Court receives fewer SAPO Petitions, with 3 or fewer petitions filed in each of the last 4 years. Instead, petitioners may be seeking domestic violence protection orders, as sexual violence can fall under the requirements for a DVPO depending on the petitioner's relationship to the respondent. One SAPO has been granted a final order in each year 2019-2022.



*The strength it took me to go file the PO initially, that felt like the big hurdle. –Local Survivor*

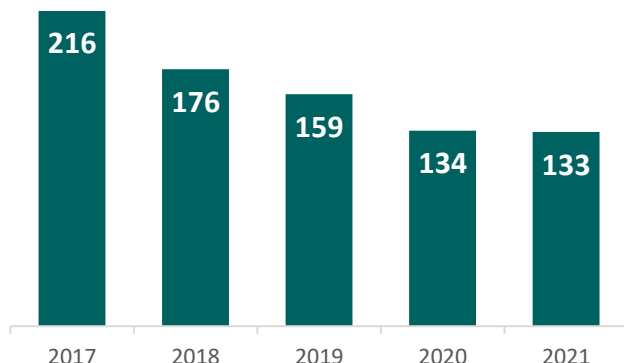
*Everyone asked me "Aren't you glad you won?" But I never should have been there in the first place. –Local Survivor*

# Law Enforcement Calls for Service: Sexual Assault

## Reports of sexual violence in Whatcom County have continued to decrease.

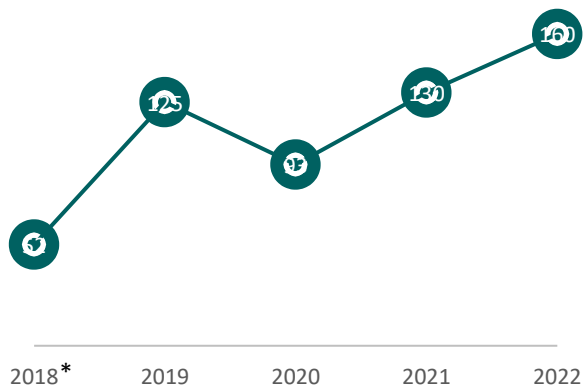
However, because most sexual assaults are not reported, **there is no reason to believe incidence of sexual violence have decreased.**

What is contributing to a decrease in reports?



**Where are the 2022 numbers?** These data (excluding BPD’s sex crime investigation data below) come from the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) [Annual Crime in Washington Reports](#). Each year there are updates to the previous year’s data. From 2017 to 2021, the change in the official number of reported sexual assault offenses for a specific year ranged from an increase of 4 to 21 reports across Whatcom law enforcement agencies, with an average increase of 12.6 reports for a specific year. Including 2022 numbers might misrepresent the trend. The updated numbers will be included in next year’s Data Report.

**In 2018 Bellingham Police Department began tracking some reports as “sex crime investigations.”** These are not included in the WASPC Annual Crime in Washington Reports. In 2022, BPD also conducted **370** follow-up sex crime reports.



\*BPD began tracking these part-way through 2018

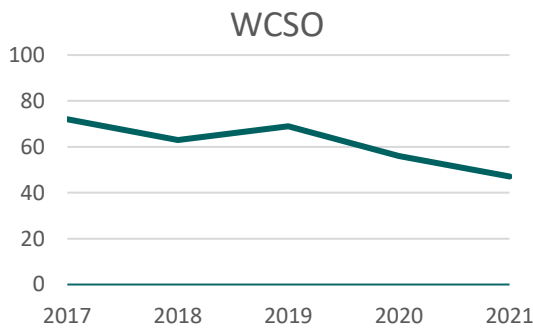
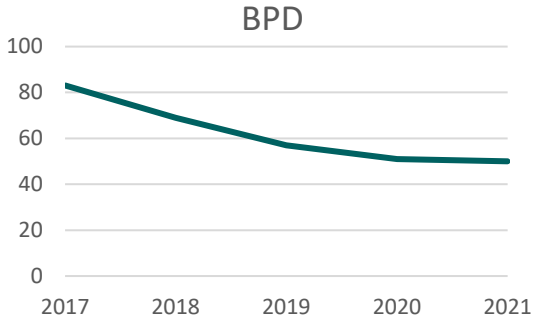


*I did report it to the police when I was 18. I had waited until I was an adult so I wouldn't have to tell my parents...The prosecutor didn't think they could convince a jury it was sexual assault. I think sometimes you get desperate for anything to happen, for some kind of accountability.*

—Local Survivor

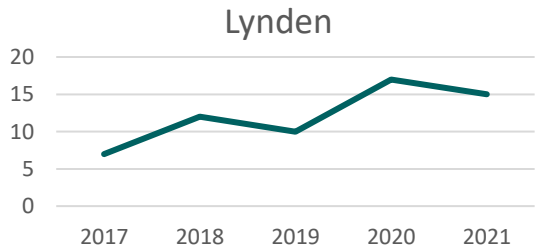
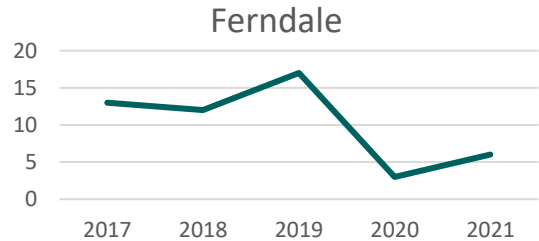
# Law Enforcement Calls for Service: Sexual Assault, continued

**Whatcom's largest law enforcement agencies receive fewer reports of sexual violence than they did in 2017.**

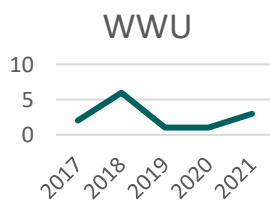
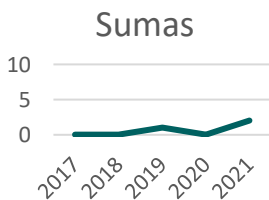
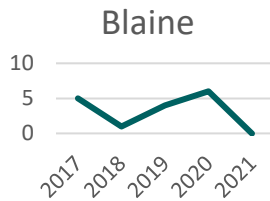
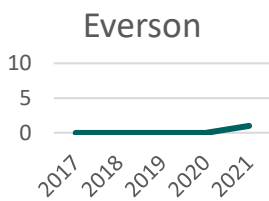


**Reports to Whatcom's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> largest cities fluctuate.**

With fewer than 20 reports per year, it's difficult to identify trends.



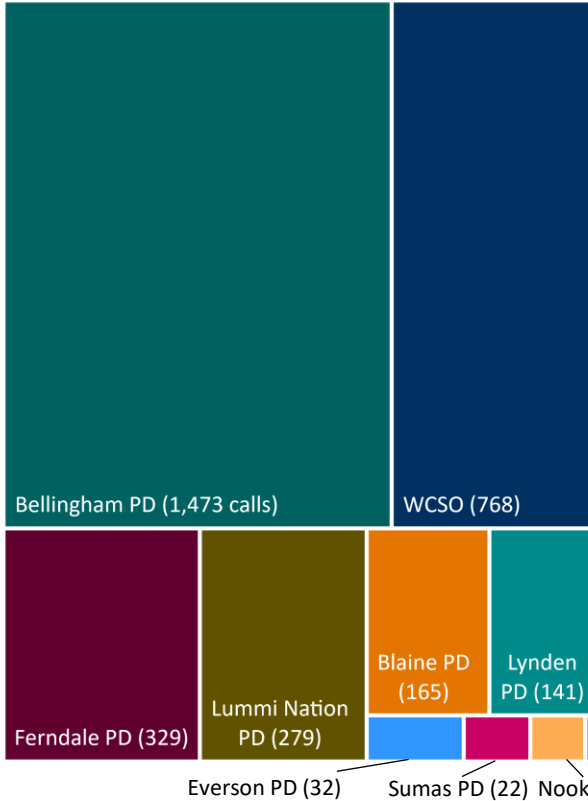
**These four small departments received fewer than 6 reports of sexual assault per year.**



*I tried [to reach the officer] a couple months later because I was ready to know if anything was happening and she never called me back. That's a really hard thing...I'm going to try to see if there's something that can be done about this awful thing. Each time you reach out, you're accepting that something has happened and trying to advocate for yourself. It's really difficult.*  
—Local Survivor



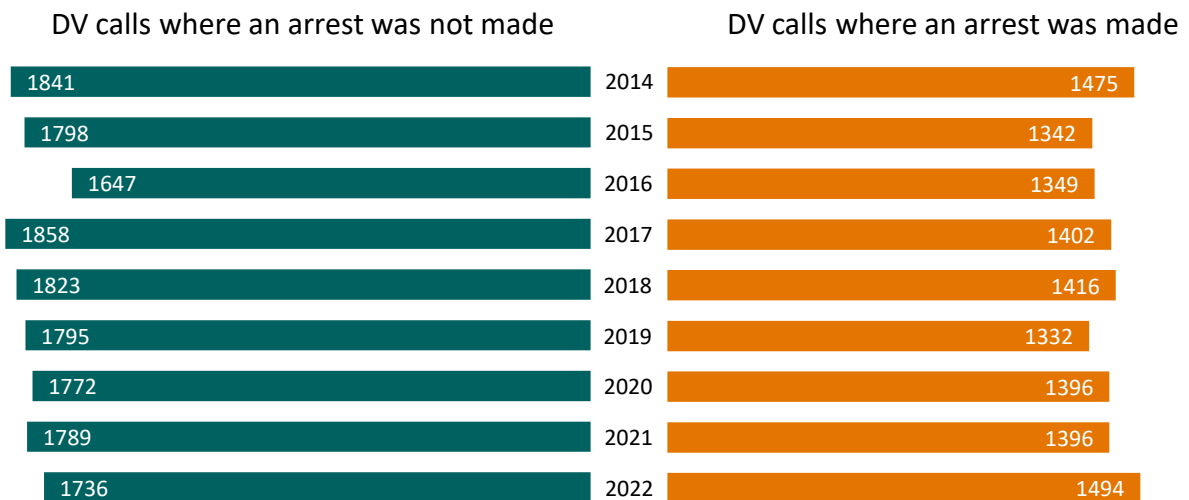
# Law Enforcement Calls for Service: Domestic Violence



In 2022, Bellingham Police responded to nearly half (46%) of all DV calls for service, a slightly higher proportion than its share of Whatcom County's population that year (41%).




This chart includes all domestic violence calls for service: calls where officers made an arrest, and calls where officers determined that there was not enough evidence that a crime had occurred and did not make an arrest. Even in those calls where no arrest was made, an abusive person could have still caused harm to a survivor because the **tactics used to establish power and control are harmful, even when they are not illegal.**

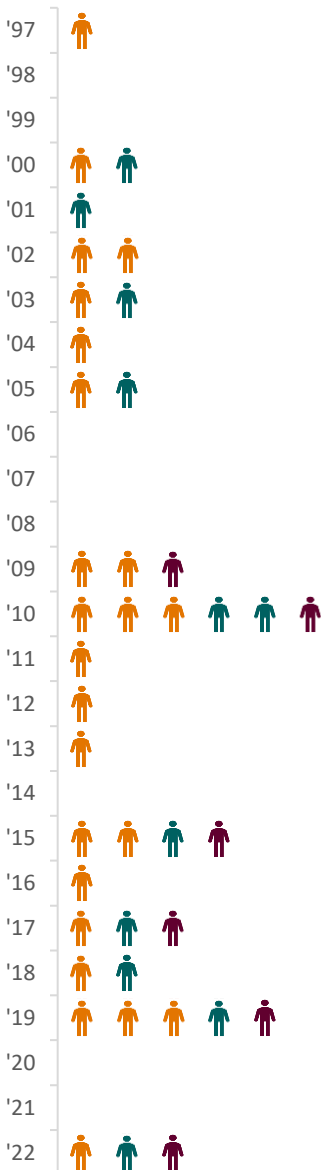
## Domestic violence calls where an arrest is NOT made have consistently made up more than half of all DV calls for service throughout Whatcom County.



# Intimate Partner Homicide

In 2022, three Whatcom County residents died as a result of intimate partner violence.

-  Intimate Partner Homicides
-  Abuser Fatalities
-  Other Relationship (children, law enforcement, victim's new partner, etc.)



On May 6, 2022, **Pablo S. Rabang** was killed by Rayven Taylor Dan Butler-Washington, who hit Mr. Rabang with her car. [The Bellingham Herald](#) reported that witnesses heard “a comment made about a man ‘having a gun’ before the accident...” Ms. Butler-Washington told Bellingham Police Department that “she and Rabang had previously been in a relationship...”



On September 5, 2022, **Robert R. “Red” Beaugez Jr.** was shot and killed by James Hayes, who then died by suicide. [The Bellingham Herald](#) reported that Mr. Beaugez was dating someone who had previously dated Mr. Hayes.



Our community also lost someone who worked in Whatcom County for many years. On March 31, 2022 **Holli Brawley** was shot and killed by her husband, Michael Brawley, at their home in Burlington, WA. Mr. Brawley then died by suicide. Ms. Brawley had worked in Facilities Management at Western Washington University for eight years. Because these deaths occurred outside of Whatcom County, they are not included in the chart at left.

## We can prevent domestic violence fatalities.

How do systems support or limit survivors’ options? How can systems hold abusers accountable and support abusive people to be non-violent? [Local](#) and [state](#) fatality reviews provide recommendations to prevent DV homicides in our community and throughout Washington State.



**Spotlight Report:  
Re-Occurring Themes from Survivor Input on  
Healing & Justice**

---

## Introduction

This report was developed from the feedback we received through semi-structured interviews and surveys with more than 40 survivors, after which we conducted thematic analysis of the responses.

In the interviews and surveys, survivors shared their experiences, what justice and healing could look like for them, and their feedback about restorative justice processes. Those themes and recommendations for using restorative justice to address gender-based violence can be found in our full report: [Restorative Justice for Survivors of Sexual & Domestic Violence: Report on Survivor Feedback](#).

Themes also emerged from those interviews and surveys that crossed categories and questions. These themes can inform the work of all practitioners and systems that work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, achieving the S/DV Commission's goals to:

- Connect institutions, stakeholders, and communities to collectively increase understanding of sexual and domestic violence, especially the impacts and effectiveness of community responses.
- Transform systems to ensure best practices in trauma-informed, survivor-centered prevention and interventions for sexual and domestic violence.
- Foster justice, autonomy, and well-being for survivors and communities.

## Validation, belief, and connection are consistently essential and helpful for survivors

“The only thing I couldn't have survived without was validation. I don't know what would have happened if I never experienced validation.”

“The first healing thing that happened was just having someone validate for me that it was a negative experience and that it wasn't my fault.”

**Healing for survivors was often independent and separate from any response to, consequences for, or involvement of the person who caused harm.** Survivors noted that they healed through:

- engaging in counseling (30%)
- receiving validation and belief (26%)

- achieving a sense of well-being and security (23%)
- seeing societal and cultural change (21%)
- feeling self-compassion (21%)
- receiving structural supports (16%)
- participating in support groups (12%), and
- having community support (7%)

“Healing to me would be processing it and accepting that it did happen and that it was not in any way, shape, or form my fault.”

“Now I know that I was doing the best I could and making the best decisions I could.... Maybe that is healing, to know that I did my best, and to let my daughter heal.”

“I found community in that as well, talking with other survivors of violence. It’s a sad thing, finding others who have experienced violence. Having a space to talk safely and feel validated.”

## **Survivors frequently experienced repeated victimization**

**throughout their lives**, either by the same abuser (77%) and/or by different abusers (30%).

“He wasn’t my first abuser; he was my last...Both baby daddies were abusive...They were both bad but the second one was not as bad.”

“I had a number of experiences in childhood that were attempted assaults from strangers. The main incident is when I was 18 and it started off as consensual, hooked up once consensual, but after that it was not consensual.”

“Throughout my life there’s been a lot of patterns of abuse. Caregivers and in relationships.”

“Those were the most egregious incidents that I had in my life, though there have been others.”

## People around the survivor often actively supported the abuser

and/or took action to shield the abuser from responsibility (47%), or they wanted to stay out of the situation (17%).

“...it’s been interesting the amount of people who with this story respond to this by being concerned about him, and what would happen to his reputation. It’s interesting to have me share what happened that was hurtful, and they focus on the hypothetical hurt that this other person might experience.”

“I reported his suicidal text to the counselor. She told me not to break up with him right away even though he had assaulted me. They put him first.”

**Survivors want societal and cultural change** to prevent gender-based violence and create healthy relationships and communities, in addition to solutions for their individual situations.

“As this was happening to my body, I had a thought that I joined the many generations of women that I come from, in this culture.”

“We really need a massive cultural transformation in order to full address sexual and domestic violence, we have to address all the other intersecting issues, like capitalism, intergenerational trauma, racism, ablism, all these wounds we all carry intergenerationally...Normalizing support groups and mutual aid. All these pieces have to come into being for there to truly be justice that works...”

## Survivors frequently named therapy as a way to heal.

Survivors mentioned appreciating various modalities of therapy, including talk therapy, support groups with other survivors, art therapy, and somatic therapies. Therapists who did not understand the dynamics of sexual assault and domestic violence caused harm to survivors, and therapy was often inaccessible or unaffordable.

“I’ve had lots of therapy. I worked on it really hard in my twenties. The process of healing for me is...being able to talk about it. To have your feelings affirmed.”

“[After experiencing child sexual abuse], I did have a therapist at first who asked me what I was wearing when things happened and if I had given him the idea that it was okay.”

“Something that really changed my life in a positive way was somatics. I found that healing was working with a practitioner who can guide me through all of the pain and suffering and sadness and fear, and activation that really rooted itself in my body after that experience.”

“It would be nice to have a therapist, I have had zero healing or help, a lot of days I have a feeling of hopelessness.”

“I have built up a way through with the therapy process. I have healed.”

## **To survivors, justice often means they want abusers be held accountable, to change their behavior, and not harm anyone else.**

Different survivors had different ideas about how to achieve these goals, with the majority supporting legal consequences (35%) or therapeutic and educational interventions (33%) to achieve accountability. However, some survivors just wanted distance from their abuser and to never see or interact with them again (16%).

“One thing that really bothered me is there was no support for the potential perpetrator and that felt negligent – it puts that person in position to cause further harm. In any of these processes, whether in criminal justice or in restorative justice or in college, the perpetrator needs counseling. If that is successful, that feels like justice.”

“In my dream world justice would mean knowing that the person doesn’t do it to anyone else in the future. That feels like a big ask. There’s no way to force them into it, to force them to be better. That’s what I would want if I could have that.”

“I just wish he would at least have had to do the jail time he deserved, wear the ankle monitor, and do the probation he was required.”

“I just wanted an apology and for the other party to admit that they actually did wrong to me for once.”

**Survivors need time, support, and resources** to heal and engage on their own individual timelines.

“...healing would be being able to have therapy or support as long as you need it. And not just as long as you can afford it.”

“It takes time. That’s a vulnerable process. You can’t rush it, either.”

“After I left, a couple of months later, my mom told me, “You should be over it by now,’ which was nasty and hurtful.”

### **Survivors can find it challenging to name what happened to them**

(17%) as sexual assault or domestic violence, especially while they are still experiencing it, and faced difficulty getting free (37%).

“I had a sexually violent experience with somebody that I went to high school with, who I thought I was friends with...I would say no, and he would say nice things and physically force me even though I said no, and I really didn’t understand what was happening.”

“We stayed together for a year and a month. I didn’t think breaking up was an option.”

### **Survivors experience many different types of responses and**

**interventions that are harmful.** Survivors experienced harm from inner circles of the survivor (friends, family, partners) (57%), medical-legal systems (34%), service providers (17%), community (neighbors, teachers, coworkers) (14%), counselors/mental health providers (12%), inner circles of the abuser (9%), and faith communities (6%).

“I had to go through the court process more than once, and I shouldn’t have had to do that.”

“I felt...like I was dismissed because I was a hysterical emotional female compared to my partner, who was very composed at the time.”

“People didn’t understand my way of being – people thought I should stand up for myself, but that would have been harmful.”



“It’s tough that you can only stay at the DV shelter for three months because it’s hard to find a place to live in that amount of time.”

“They judge granted more time in the restraining order hearing because the lawyer and my son’s dad were unprepared, and that wasn’t my fault.”

“I also ended up going to jail because I retaliated to get away from her. I had a DV charge and wasn’t able to get a job because of it...”

“The church sent help to my ex-husband but not to me, they didn’t care how I felt.”

## **Survivors, like all people, want lives of well-being, joy, and success**

(23%). This can include having the time and capacity to be in nature, create art, practice yoga, spend time with friends, and achieve financial stability.

“Healing looks like being believed and supported by my community, having that energy put into me recovering my autonomy and my safety. Healing is being able to walk around town, go to the store, go to the park, living without hypervigilance. Being able to wear my hair down again, wearing clothing that makes me happy, being able to experience joy with my friends.”

“For the first time in my life, my name is on a lease and I’m accomplishing things, I have a little car.”

“I spent a lot of time out in nature just being with myself and learning how to love myself again, being alone and focusing on taking care of my animals.”

### **Read the full report Restorative Justice for Survivors of Sexual & Domestic Violence: Report on Survivor Feedback**

Learn more about what is helpful and harmful, and how to support survivors in healing in our new resources: [\*\*What Healing & Justice Look Like: Survivor Feedback by Topic\*\*](#). Find guides focused on advocates; faith communities; family, friends, neighbors; offender behavior; therapists; and workplaces.

# Bellingham-Whatcom County Commission on Sexual & Domestic Violence

October 2023

## Community Appointments:

Beth Boyd,  
*PeaceHealth*

Christina Byrne,  
*Western Washington University*

Tammy Cooper-Woodrich,  
*North Intertribal Vocational Rehabilitation Program*

Christina Kobdich,  
*Unity Care Northwest*

Ken Levinson,  
*Ken Levinson Law LLC*

Jason McGill  
*Northwest Youth Services*

Moonwater,  
*Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center*

Jessyca Murphy,  
*Make.Shift Art Space*

Katie Olvera,  
*KPO Counselling*

Chris Roselli,  
*Western Washington University*

Garret Shelsta,  
*Stuff You Can Use*

Krista Touros,  
*PeaceHealth*

Raquel Vernola,  
*Whatcom Community College*

Pamela Wheeler,  
*Opportunity Council*

## Government Representatives:

Greg Baker,  
*Bellingham Public Schools*

William Elfo,  
*Whatcom County Sheriff's Office*

Starck Follis,  
*Whatcom County Public Defender*

Greg Hansen,  
*City of Ferndale*

Erika Lautenbach,  
*Whatcom County Health Department*

Alan Marriner,  
*Bellingham City Attorney*

Rebecca Mertzig,  
*Bellingham Police Department*

Diane Miltenberger,  
*DSHS Community Services Office*

Darlene Peterson,  
*Bellingham Municipal Court*

Dave Reynolds,  
*Whatcom Co. Superior Court*

Eric Richey,  
*Whatcom County Prosecutor*

Adrienne Renz,  
*Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault Services*

Donnell Tanksley,  
*Blaine Police Department*

Bruce Van Glubt,  
*Whatcom County District Court*

[dvcommission.org](http://dvcommission.org)