

FALL 2023

Community in Action

News for friends of Opportunity Council

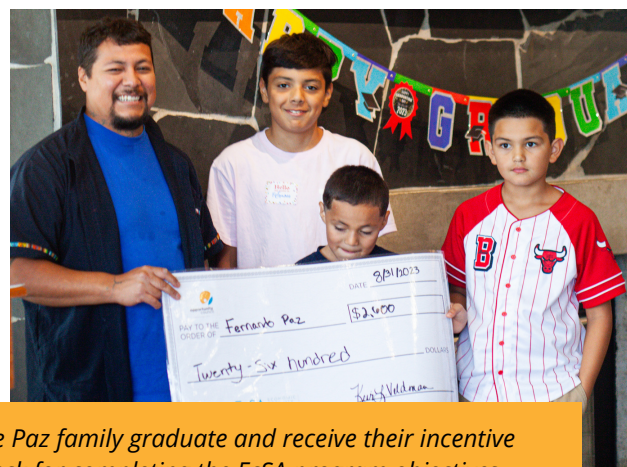


A FINANCIAL FRESH START

Families graduate program more confident than ever about the future

The eight Whatcom County families who completed our Economic Security for All (EcSA) program recently celebrated new confidence and opportunities at EcSA's first-ever graduation ceremony. On August 31st, they were recognized as they came away from the free financial literacy course ready to enjoy their new money management skills and catalyze a new era.

Each year-long course combines education, mentorship, career coaching and planning, and support to overcome barriers that these participants face, helping them build financial resilience. This works by helping families start an emergency fund, create a budget, and build credit. The course is designed for the whole family, including kids.



The Paz family graduate and receive their incentive check for completing the EcSA program objectives.

EcSA mentors work hand in hand with mentees to develop goals, making a true difference in their lives.

Participants also work with a career coach through a partnership with Northwest WorkSource Council and develop a career plan that equips them with what their families need.

Participants may earn up to \$3,200 once they complete the program goals. Families can use the financial incentive for all kinds of needs, creating a foundation for success, said Program Coordinator Kevi Veldman.

"It's empowering for mentors and participants alike because there's always something to learn from our community," said a program mentor. "Sharing support is invaluable when it comes to sometimes-touchy topics like finance."

continued on Page 3



Audelia, a program graduate, and Olga, a mentor/interpreter, smile at Audelia's success in completing the EcSA program.

Inside this Issue

Transitions: A Message from the Executive Director 2

Clinic Helps Clients Access Community 5

More Homes for More Hearts 6

Big, Yellow, Electric: Meet the Newest Member of the OC Sustainability Fleet 7

Early Steps for Mental Health 8

Multi-Family Weatherization Project 9

Meet Talvi 10

A SEASON OF TRANSITION, CELEBRATION, AND HOPE

A Message from the Executive Director

Autumn is here! A time of transition that marks the passage of time. Our lead story this issue celebrates a positive transition—a graduation—for eight families from our Economic Security for All program. I'm sure you'll join me in congratulating their success in this dual-generation program that combines education, mentorship, career coaching and peer support to build financial resiliency.

We're also taking some time to reflect on recent staff transitions: wishing one of our key leaders luck as she steps into retirement, saying hello to a new agency leader, and saying goodbye to a beloved member of our team.

Another exciting transition begins as OC moves towards a brighter and greener future. A generous partnership with Puget Sound Energy allowed us to add an electric school bus to our fleet. Read all about it on page 7.

Autumn is also a time that portends the upcoming hazards of winter. Each winter, on the Winter Solstice, OC's Homeless Service Center and our Homeless Outreach Team convene a community memorial to honor people who lost their lives while experiencing homelessness. Please mark your calendar for this year's service taking place on December 21.

Even for those fortunate enough to have a home, fall and winter bring discomfort due to drafty and leaky homes that are unhealthy and expensive to heat. On page 9 we're celebrating a remarkable project completed by our amazing Home Improvement Team that improved the air quality and energy efficiency of a 38-unit apartment community, in partnership with the property owner.

For me, fall is also a time when I'm already eagerly anticipating the resurgence of a verdant spring. And next spring won't disappoint, as we look forward to breaking ground on Camas Flats in Oak Harbor, one of our newest affordable housing developments that you can read about on page 6.

There's more to explore in this edition of our newsletter, including the groundbreaking on the Way Station program in Bellingham, how we're supporting families and children with special needs, our awesome volunteers who are supporting seniors and people with disabilities through the CHORE program, and one of our newest community services to help people obtain official forms of identification.

As each colorful leaf falls, I think about how each of you, our generous supporters, combine to make the work we do possible. We cannot do this without you.

Thank you for all you do to change lives and help others in our community!



Greg Winter
Executive Director



P.S. To make sure you never miss an important update from Opportunity Council, sign up for our monthly electronic newsletter at oppco.org.

HOMELESS PERSONS MEMORIAL

Recognizing the dignity of everyone in our community

Every year, the community gathers with our Homeless Outreach Team and Whatcom Homeless Service Center to commemorate those who lost their lives while experiencing homelessness. The memorial takes place on the longest night of the Winter Solstice, when we will read the names of the people who have passed during the past year.

Please join us Thursday, December 21st, 2023 at 5:30 P.M. on the steps of Bellingham City Hall at 210 Lottie St to light a candle and remember these important members of our community.

PASSING THE TORCH

Sheri Emerson made her mark on Opportunity Council through 23 years of growth and change. Sheri brought her press and communications know-how to the agency, starting as a public relations coordinator and serving as Communications Director before retiring in July as our Associate Director. Her positivity, expertise, kindness, and sense of humor made the work environment at Opportunity Council a positive one for all who worked with her.



Sheri Emerson and Lorena Shah at Sheri's retirement party in July 2023

Sheri shared some of her favorite memories that she'll take with her as she heads off into new adventures. They include:

- Opportunities to talk with donors and supporters, build relationships, and tell them about the great work our staff does.
- Serving on state and local boards and working with remarkable, dedicated people here and across the state.
- Participating in grassroots lobbying in Olympia.
- Mostly: the people. Staff who do this work bring her joy, Sheri said.

We also welcome our new Director of Operations, Lorena Shah, previously the Assistant Director of Community Programs. We're thrilled to have Lorena bring her considerable knowledge from 14 years of work at the Opportunity Council to the position!

COVER STORY

Continued from Page 1

Graduates are better equipped to manage income and new opportunities. Many continue into a 2-year certification, 4-year degree, or high-paying job with benefits. Veldman stressed their ability to "accomplish almost anything."

"This program has helped push me to do things that I knew I was capable of all along, and just needed someone to believe in me and give me a nudge," said a participant. "I'm very proud of myself for going back to school and pursuing a degree in early childhood education and psychology."

EcSA is currently enrolling and recently expanded to Island County. The program is available to families and individuals who receive SNAP benefits and are searching for employment or on-the-job training. Find out more and apply online to be a volunteer mentor at oppco.org.

Economic Security for All – Opportunity Council and Northwest Workforce Council are funded in part by Federal WIOA funds. The Opportunity Council and the Northwest Workforce Council are equal opportunity employers/programs.

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REMEMBERING JON MARTIN

Opportunity Council's former facilities manager, Jon Martin, recently passed away peacefully among friends at the Hospice House. For many years, Jon kept everything running smoothly at the agency as our Facilities Manager. Many staff looked forward to regularly seeing Jon come by our offices, (almost) always smiling, with his trusty four-legged sidekick Elvis trailing along. When he wasn't smiling, it was because a contractor had done shoddy work, which Jon would insist be done right. He was always looking out for our well-being and our mission. The improvements he oversaw throughout the organization are a lasting legacy we continue to enjoy.

Even in retirement, Jon continued to serve as a project manager for OppCo, helping to shepherd projects like the Early Childhood Kitchen. Through his work, humor, and integrity, Jon embodied what it means to build community.



UPCOMING AGENCY EVENTS

MAPLE ALLEY INN - FREE HOT LUNCH

Wednesdays & Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. - 1 p.m.
Closed Nov. 22 and 23
FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH, 2750 MCLEOD RD, BELLINGHAM

GIVING TUESDAY

Tuesday, Nov. 28
OPPCO.ORG/GIVINGTUESDAY

DECEMBER BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

December 7, 4 to 6 p.m.
625 CORNWALL AVE,
BELLINGHAM

FREE HOT SHOWER PROGRAMS

SHOWER CONNECT

Thursdays, 9 a.m. - 3 p.m.
SALVATION ARMY, 1515 BIRCHWOOD AVE, BELLINGHAM

HOMELESS OUTREACH TEAM SHOWER TRAILER

Friday - Sunday 7 a.m. - 5 p.m.
210 LOTTIE ST., BEHIND CITY HALL



VOLUNTEER POTLUCK

Five volunteers from the Volunteer Chore Program gathered on September 13th at Bellingham's Marine Park for a lively volunteer appreciation potluck. They joined the staff of the Volunteer Center of Whatcom County, which runs the program. The group ate, mingled, and painted cute mini pumpkins.

The Volunteer Chore Program pairs volunteers with seniors and adults with functional disabilities so they can stay independent in their own homes. Volunteers help with tasks such as housekeeping, grocery shopping, yard work, dog walking, and transportation to medical appointments. See our feature on page 10 for an adorable example.



BASICS 4 BABIES TRIVIA NIGHT

On August 28, we raised over \$600 for babies and families! OppCo supporters gathered at Stones Throw Brewery for a trivia night fundraiser for Basics 4 Babies, our program to help babies stay healthy and dry. Thank you so much to everyone who donated, made the event possible, or came to make it a blast.

Raffle prizes were donated by the Pickford Film Center and Cheba Hut and garnered over 150 entries. If you weren't able to make it but still want to help babies and families in need, donate now at oppc.org/B4B.

ACCESS ID

Photo ID can be the key to a new beginning

JR* arrived at the first Access ID clinic certain he'd be out of luck. His landlord had suddenly evicted him and thrown away all of his belongings including his ID and birth certificate. An experienced welder, he'd been eager to start work, but having government-issued ID is required to get a job. Pick up prescriptions. Open a bank account. Sign a lease. For most, getting new ID just means digging out a birth certificate.

But too many lose their official ID card and supporting documents, or never had a birth certificate. These are often veterans, those without stable homes, or adults with disabilities such as brain injuries. Many have no idea what options they have. Opportunity Council's Whatcom County office addresses these issues with our Access ID clinic, helping people with low incomes get a state-issued ID card.

ACCESS ID CLINIC

Clinic is held in the 1st Floor Conference Room at the Whatcom Community Resource Center, located at 1111 Cornwall Ave. Find dates at oppco.org/accessid.

To be eligible for financial assistance, individual income must not exceed 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.

The Access ID program may cover the costs and fees associated with a Washington State ID or Enhanced ID card.

To learn more or to support the Access ID program, please visit oppco.org.



ENERGY AWARENESS MONTH

October marked Energy Awareness Month, a time to think about the way we use energy in our homes. Clean, efficient energy should be available to everyone. Our Weatherization programs help people who qualify keep their homes temperature-controlled, energy-efficient, and safe all year, even helping with costs for energy improvements. Our Community Energy Challenge does home energy audits, also offering monetary incentives for improvements.

Learn more at oppco.org/weatherization-and-home-repair.

People like JR have to prove their identities to even get identification, like they're going in circles. This requires up to four different forms of unofficial identification. Getting each document is a different process and can cost up to \$75 each.

At that first clinic, JR met program specialist Amy. She helped him identify what documents would work. JR got two documents; he and Amy got the other two online. Armed with the documents he needed, plus a \$55 voucher to cover the cost at the DOL, JR could get the ID that would open the door to employment, housing, and a fresh start.

"I just didn't think you could do this," JR said.

Programs like the Access ID clinic help make sure every member of our community can have some form of official ID—a key to accessing housing, healthcare, and employment. Ensuring everyone has access to these basics reduces poverty and supports our local economy. Even more than that, they give every person the chance to get hired, secure a place to call home and access services most people take for granted like banking, medical and government services.

COMING SOON: ISLAND COUNTY HOUSING

Multi-use spaces for the many faces of Oak Harbor

Opportunity Council's next affordable housing project will help ensure Oak Harbor households have a place to call home.

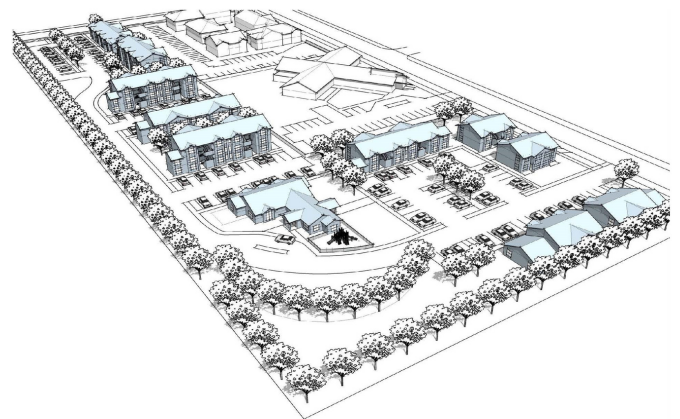
Camas Flats, a partnership with Shelter Resources, Inc., will soon add to our ever-expanding effort to increase the number of affordable homes in our communities. The units will provide options to Oak Harbor residents and families with a mix of low and moderate incomes, and populations that need support the most.

It will have 81 affordable units, including eight Permanent Supportive Housing units for those experiencing homelessness and two units for Veterans. Units will be one-bedroom, two-bedroom, and three-bedroom, for mixed-income community members from 30% to 80% of the area median income. The groundbreaking will happen in the spring of 2024.

The site is designed to help build community and improve people's lives. Residents will also have access to the community laundry facility, large playground, community gathering space, flex space, and management and services provider offices.

Shelter Resources, Inc. is an affordable housing developer based in Western Washington. The project is also funded by Island County, Washington State Housing Finance Commission, Washington State Department of Commerce, and the Housing Authority of Island County.

Camas Flats, an affordable housing development, will serve a variety of Oak Harbor residents



CAMAS FLATS

Oak Harbor, Washington
March 1, 2023

Camas Flats Oak Harbor 1, LLP

RON WRIGHT & ASSOCIATES/ARCHITECTS, P.S.
2003 WESTERN AVENUE, SUITE 610
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98121
(206)728-4248

PAVING THE WAY TO A HEALTHY FUTURE

On August 18th, public officials and community leaders gathered downtown for a groundbreaking at the future site of the Way Station – a collaboration between Opportunity Council, Unity Care NW, PeaceHealth, and the Whatcom County Health Department. This health and hygiene facility will help guests with showers, restrooms, and laundry for people experiencing homelessness. Patients experiencing homelessness who are discharged from the hospital will be referred to its medical respite program.

Community leaders gathered to mark the start of construction that the community partners hope to complete in the summer of 2024.



NOT-SO-MYSTIC MONEY

Teaching the skills to build strong foundations

Like a phone network where not everyone has the same coverage, the economy uplifts some more than others. The Demystifying Investments series held by our Whatcom Asset Building Coalition helped make sure everyone has the same access to a reliable network of economic opportunity. The 3-part virtual series was created to cover everything people need to know to start investing in their futures.

The first installment, the Introduction, started with some basic concepts and investing vocabulary, misconceptions and pitfalls, and types of financial advisors. The second course talked about mutual funds, crypto, and socially conscious investing. The third went over investing in health and education plans like Health Savings Accounts and life insurance, and the fourth covered retirement plans and options.

Investing can be daunting for first-time investors, but everyone should have access to the know-how on using their money to its full potential. Teaching these skills helps people build a stable economic foundation for themselves and their children. Find out more about how we help people build financial stability at whatcomabc.org.



CHILDREN & FAMILIES

SCHOOL ACCESS GOES GREEN

A journey to equitable learning

This year we celebrated the newest addition to the Opportunity Council sustainable transportation fleet: an electric school bus for the Early Learning programs in East Whatcom County. The ribbon cutting was the culmination of three years of work and partnership with Puget Sound Energy.

The new bus is a perfect example of what makes Opportunity Council great: a practical idea combined with community collaboration resulting in immediate and long-lasting benefits for people and their communities.

Because of this one small bus:

- We're ensuring children from some of our most rural communities have access to early childhood education that will impact a lifetime of brain development
- We're helping reduce stress on families by providing transportation for their children to the programs working parents depend on
- We're reducing emissions, which both reduces our carbon footprint and improves air quality in an area where air pollution has historically been a significant health issue



A future rider of the new bus taking a tour before the maiden voyage.

- The communities served by the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center now have access to the two-part electrical charging station that is partly powered by the EWRR's solar panel array, which also powers the center

INVESTING EARLY IN HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Children, families, and the child care providers that serve them are among the countless lives impacted by the spiking rates of mental health needs. To help meet those needs for the youngest members of our communities, the Early Learning & Family Services Team recently expanded to include Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants and Instructional/Behavioral Coaches in our Preschool Division.

CHILD CARE AWARE

Child Care Aware NW (CCANW) is an Opportunity Council-administered affiliate of the Child Care Aware of Washington Network. Dedicated to ensuring every child in Washington has access to high-quality child care and early learning programs, CCANW administers Holding Hope—a statewide program that offers Infant-Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation.

Our mental health consultants and coaches are part of OC's Quality Child Care and Child Care Aware of Northwest Washington programs within the Early Learning and Family Services Department (ELAFS).

Both coaches and consultants work alongside other OC Early Learning Coaches to support child care center staff and families as they work to meet the needs of a specific child. Regardless if the child has a clinical diagnosis, the team works together to address atypical behavioral concerns like

changes in behavior or attitude towards siblings, classmates, parents and/or staff. Together team members promote the social-emotional development and well-being of children in a variety of ways, including:

- Working with center staff to strengthen their relationships with their co-workers and the children in their care
- Helping families and caregivers understand and manage challenging behaviors
- Connecting families and caregivers with other community resources throughout the region
- Supporting caregivers and family members as they cope with the stresses of caring for young children

The efforts of our consultants and coaches reduce family stress and conflict as well as provider burnout, ensuring parents and caregivers are able to give their all to the children in their care.

With more than 600 child care programs spread across five counties to support, these staff are very busy! Currently, funding for more Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants rests in the hands of the State Legislature, but our hope is to build a larger mental and behavioral health team in the future.

To learn more, visit oppco.org/child-care-resources.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: *Single Entry Access to Services*

In this Opportunity Council Program highlight, we share what happens when a community comes together to address high-priority needs. The Single Entry Access to Services (SEAS) program was created in 2014 after working with the community to identify unmet needs for children and families. SEAS makes it possible for parents and caregivers to make just one phone call to get connected with resources that serve both their mental and physical health and well-being.

By contacting SEAS, parents and caregivers are connected with a caring, knowledgeable staff member who will help them navigate children's healthcare, mental health and counseling services, and Early Learning resources. They can also get resources for postpartum mental health screenings and resources, and other OC services like food assistance, housing, and energy assistance.



In 2022, SEAS expanded so all families with a child under five years old, and prenatal parents, can access its local resource navigation services. Since its beginning, SEAS has served families that have a child up to age 21 with a disability or developmental concern. SEAS is program of Whatcom Taking Action, a collaborative network that supports children with special needs.

To learn more, please visit the SEAS website at seaswhatcom.org.

IMPROVING ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND COMFORT

Thanks to community support, a hardworking Home Improvement Team, and a property owner with a commitment to a clean energy future, 38 families will now have more comfortable homes with lower energy bills and better air quality.

Historically, our Weatherization team has primarily worked with income-qualified homeowners and renters in single-family homes. Knowing that so many individuals and families in our region are renters of multi-family properties, the team has been working to figure out how to share the energy and health benefits of weatherization with those renters.

While larger projects like this one are more complicated, they are well worth the effort due to the long term impacts. This most recent project was two years in the planning stage. It included adding insulation to the attic and the underfloor, sealing up air leaks in the building, and installing whole home ventilation fans in every unit. The completed upgrades will result in \$3,400 in estimated annual energy bill savings, plus improved comfort and indoor air quality for those making the units their homes.

Opportunity Council staff who planned and coordinated this project are Walter Fogg, Sean Slocum, and Kyle White. And in addition to thanking those three all-stars, we'd like to acknowledge the hard work of our primary contractor, Arrow Insulation, and funding partners: US Department of Energy and Puget Sound Energy.

WHY WEATHERIZATION MATTERS

Weatherization & Home Repair programs (services like insulation and sealing air leaks) impact nearly every area targeted by Opportunity Council. The programs create jobs, reduce heating and cooling costs, preserve existing housing, reduce energy requirements and improve air quality. These in turn improve economic security, increase available housing, and improve individual and environmental health.



Opportunity Council's Weatherization team worked on this multi-family property, adding energy upgrades that will create around \$3,400 in annual utility bill savings.

A CLIENT IS A CLIENT, NO MATTER HOW SMALL

My name is Talvi, and I'm different from most Opportunity Council clients – I'm a dog! An extra-fluffy dog, in fact. I get told a lot that I'm adorable. That's my picture over on the right...do you agree?

I'm so glad that dogs like me get help from Chore program volunteers from the Volunteer Center of Whatcom County. I love my friend Ellie, my own Chore volunteer, who walks me regularly. I'm a small pup who's big-time friendly.

Let me tell you about myself, since I'm pretty cool. My name means 'snow' in Finnish! I have a lot of talents and I know lots of tricks, because I used to be a show dog. I'm even clever enough to back out of my harness, so I need two leashes when I go on walks.

My friend Ellie knows all of this and more because we hang out all the time. I get to run, which I love, and I have so many friends. They can tell I'm a happy gal!

My owner, Kate, depends on me. I love my person, but I'm only canine—I've got to stretch my legs! My walks with Ellie let me get my zoomies out, so I can be the doggo Kate needs.



Talvi, an energetic snow dog, is a client of the Chore program by the Volunteer Center of Whatcom County. Her Chore volunteer takes her on walks so her owner can live independently with her four-legged friend..

I won't go into details (what kind of a best friend would I be if I didn't respect her privacy?), but without my help she wouldn't be able to stay in her home. Having to move wouldn't just mean finding a new place for my dog bed, but Kate would also have to find specialized housing, need more specialized help, and worst of all, I might not be able to go with her.

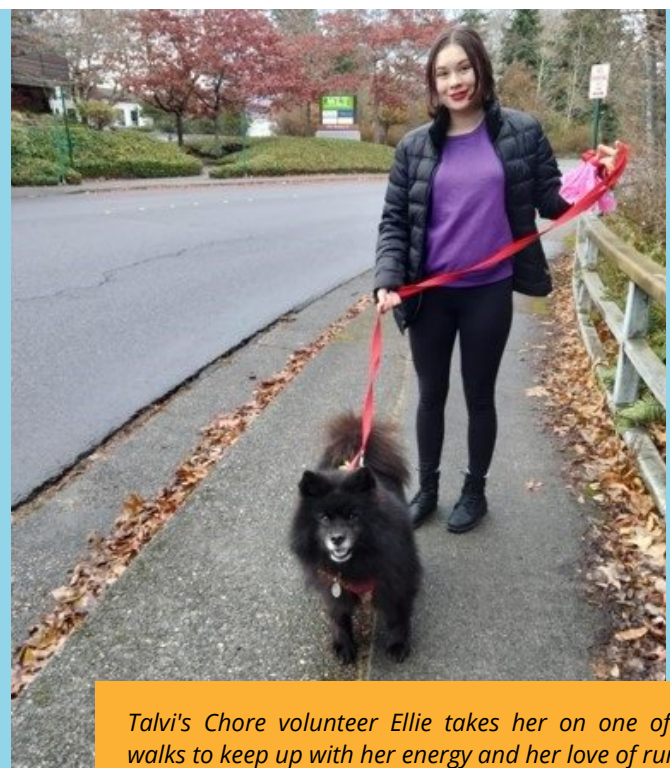
Thanks to the Chore program and all the volunteers that make it possible, I have a second best friend in Ellie. I get to stay with my Kate, and my Kate gets to stay in her home.

ABOUT CHORE

The Volunteer Chore Program helps older folks and people with disabilities throughout Whatcom County stay connected, independent, and in their homes. Volunteers help with simple chores like grocery shopping, dog walking, rides to medical appointments, picking up prescriptions, and yard care.

Chore volunteers give hope and companionship to some of the most vulnerable and isolated members of our community. The program creates a safety net that keeps people with low or fixed incomes stay housed when other resources are unavailable or out of reach, reducing the number of local residents without a place to call home. Chore assists more than 200 human and canine residents of Whatcom County each year.

To learn more or to apply to become a Chore volunteer, visit whatcomvolunteer.org.



Talvi's Chore volunteer Ellie takes her on one of many walks to keep up with her energy and her love of running.

GOVERNOR HEADS TO EAST WHATCOM

Governor Jay Inslee visited us in September, speaking with staff and community leaders about their impact.

Gov. Inslee paid a visit to our East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC) on September 12th to hear about early learning, sustainability, and food insecurity. He and First Lady Trudi Inslee visited our preschool facility and learned from childhood experts about the needs of preschool providers.



Gov. Jay Inslee visited our East Whatcom location in September, hearing from experts about the importance of early learning programs.

EWRRC Manager Jessica Bee described the host of services that we provide to the region. Dr. Lisa Tsuchiya, Assistant Director of Preschool Services for Opportunity Council, and Ferndale Superintendent Kristi Dominguez explained the importance of high-quality tuition-free education and affordable care for families.

The governor visited the EWRRC's electric school bus, a stop on his tour of 'green' energy use throughout Whatcom County that highlighted the impact of our climate change work.

GIVE TODAY FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

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Mailing Address: _____ **City:** _____ **State/Zip:** _____

Email Address: _____ **Phone:** _____

Enclosed is my tax-deductible gift for: ☐ \$30 ☐ \$50 ☐ \$100 ☐ \$200 ☐ \$500 ☐ Other

Payment Method

Please make checks payable to "Opportunity Council" ☐ **Check** ☐ **Credit Card**

Card Number: _____ **Exp. Date:** ____ / ____ **CCV:** _____

Signature: _____

Mail this form and payment to:

Opportunity Council, P.O. Box 2134 Bellingham, WA 98227

For questions, or to give by phone, call (360) 734-5121 x 1332.

Friends of the Opportunity Council are appreciated and may be publicly recognized.

☐ Please check this box if you do not wish your name to be published.



Opportunity Council Programs: Community Resource Centers • Homeless Housing • Dorothy Place • Marjie's House • Homeless Prevention • Child Care Aware • Nutrition • Basic Food Outreach • Maple Alley Inn • Weatherization • Home Repair Loan Program • Early Support for Infants and Toddlers • Emergency Child Care Vouchers • Early Achievers • Head Start • Early Head Start • Early Childhood Education Assistance Program • Building Performance Center • Energy & Utility Assistance • Homeless Outreach Team • Conservation Education • Community Energy Challenge • Housing Development • 22 North • Financial Literacy and Renter Education (F.L.A.R.E.) • Whatcom Asset Building Coalition • Employment Case Management • Economic Security for All • Veteran Services • Care Coordination • Access ID • Kinship Care

For mailing address changes, newsletter submissions and comments, please contact us at (360) 734-5121, ext. 1331.

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Visit us online for more event information & updates,
oppco.org



Our Island County Resource Center in Oak Harbor recently gathered for a picture of everyone together. Whether it's supporting Veterans, teaching financial wellness, helping people pay utilities, or doing so many more things, our Island County staff find a way to help people in the community get what they need to succeed. From left: Noah, Danielle, Jen, Liz, Jaime, Julie, Melissa, Kitty, Ross, and Angela.

Inside this Issue

OPPORTUNITY
COUNCIL'S CUTEST
CANINE CLIENT

BIG, YELLOW, ELECTRIC:
NEWEST MEMBER OF
OUR SUSTAINABLE FLEET

'ELLO, GUVNAH!

