



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County
Grants

2025 Community Impact

Common Application

PART A: COVER PAGE

Please fill out this form completely. Note that individual funding agencies have specific grant requirements and will require supplemental materials. Please check the agency website below for details.

To which source are you applying?

- City of Bellingham's Housing or Human/Social Services NOFA:
<https://cob.org/services/housing/funding-opportunities-2/partnerships-funding>
- United Way of Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund:
<https://www.unitedwaywhatcom.org/help-for-organizations/>
- Whatcom County Health and Community Services:
<https://www.whatcomcounty.us/Bids.aspx>

Agency Name: Whatcom Center for Early Learning

DBA (if applicable): Click here to enter text.

EIN: 91-1526226 UEID (from SAM.gov): FWQHJMPG53L9

Mailing address: 2001 H Street, Bellingham, WA 98225

Website: www.wcel.net

General phone: 360 671-3660

State of Washington Business License Number(s): 600 309 353

Executive Director (or authorized representative):

Name: Sierra James

Title (if not ED): Click here to enter text.

Email: sierra@wcel.net

Phone: 360-966-1007

Application Contact (If different):

Name: Joseph Garcia

Title: Development Director

Email: grants@wcel.net

Phone: 360-208-7622

Program Information:

Program Name: Birth to Three and Beyond

Program Address: 2001 H Street Bellingham, 400 Sequoia Ave. #1 Bellingham, 2185 Ferndale Terrace - Ferndale

Are all program services delivered at this address? Yes No

Funding Request: The award amount is dependent on the funding organization. Please see individual funder's supplemental materials for more information about the funds available.

How much funding per year are you requesting for this program?



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**

\$ 50,000



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

Total Annual Project Budget:

\$ 320,000

Annual Organizational Budget:

\$ 5,820,388

PART B: AGENCY INFORMATION

Please limit your responses to no more than two pages for questions 1-5.

1. **Agency Mission.** Please paste or copy your agency's mission statement below.

Whatcom Center for Early Learning partners with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities.

2. **Agency Beneficiaries.** Briefly describe the intent of your agency's programs and who primarily benefits from them. Please describe your organization's impact, specifying the number of beneficiaries or clients served per year and their demographics.

Our primary population for WCEL's services are children ages birth to three years old who live in Whatcom County and have a disability or a qualifying level of developmental delay (25% in at least one area), and their families. We serve all of Whatcom County. Our services are provided to families regardless of their ability to pay – we never turn eligible children away. In addition, we also provide services for mental health and early learning for children up to their 6th birthday.

3. **Qualifications and expertise.** Briefly summarize your agency's qualifications and expertise (e.g., years of operation, accreditations, experience of staff members, and number of volunteers). Please mention any recent major organizational changes.

Since 1973, WCEL has provided high-quality, evidence-based programs and practices to the very youngest children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities, and their families, in Whatcom County. Entering our 52nd year, WCEL is in the final year of our three-year Strategic Plan that focuses on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, program delivery and philosophy, internal systems and policies, board expansion and agency planning. This work included the adoption of a revised mission in 2021, as well as defining an agency vision for the first time in WCEL's history. Our mission is to partner with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities. Our vision is an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs.

WCEL includes three campuses: our vintage "Big Blue House" located close to downtown Bellingham, the "Little Brick House" located in Ferndale (opened fall of 2019), and our newest space in the Cordata neighborhood (opened fall 2021).



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

As of the end of 2024, we have a total of 65 staff members (we reduced hours for our ELP staff but we did not have to furlough this year). Thirteen staff hold a master's degree and 4 hold a PhD (which is necessary and required for the work we do and also makes salaries very competitive). This year we also added a Registered Dietician to our staff, which has been many years in the making and will have a high impact on our community.

Through annual professional development funds, our staff keep their knowledge and best-practice goals current. Most of our staff have specific areas of strength and interest that informs their practice: topics include autism, CPS/foster care cases, attachment or behavior challenges, or children with multiple diagnoses and high medical challenges. We recently provided specialty training for staff in feeding that is needed for preemie births. With this training, staff can evaluate and provide caregiver training to families that will allow the feeding to take place in the home rather than in a clinic setting. This is especially valuable for children recently discharged from NICU units in Seattle to transition families being discharged back to their homes in Whatcom County. Our DEI team leads our staff in a variety of workshops and deep reflections. In addition to their professional experience, we have staff members with personal experience that ranges from being parents of children with delays and disabilities (some of whom have received services at WCEL), those who have been foster parents or foster children themselves, who are from multiple cultures, who embody a range of diversity (including those who experience disability). We are so proud of our staff, and we prioritize enhancing and caring for our culture.

Over this last year we have continued to focus on building and refining our systems to match the growth that we have experienced. We have completed a successful, 'clean' audit for the third consecutive year. Our Board has formalized and expanded their onboarding and communication systems, increased its diversity, and has expanded to 12 members.

We partner regularly with regional colleges and universities to offer volunteer and internship opportunities to students. Our volunteer base includes churches, former staff and donors, and individuals of all ages and abilities. We are always looking for partnerships with local agencies, programs and school districts. We believe these partnerships make our staff, the wider community and our work with families stronger.

4. **Racial Equity and Social Justice.** What steps has your organization taken to address issues of racial equity and social justice within your agency? Which steps are complete, and which are planned or ongoing?

WCEL continues to set milestones for our agency with a focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. This includes the adoption of a revised mission in 2021, as well as defining the agency vision for the first time in WCEL's history. Our vision statement is an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of their strengths and needs.

We have defined an 'equitable society' as a society in which we can no longer predict someone's outcomes (in terms of health, educational attainment, likelihood of incarceration, access to wealth, etc.), based on their race, gender, disability status, or other social identities that experience marginalization. The mission statement argues that through the actions of WCEL, we will move closer to a world in which the needs of children and families are met, so that there are fewer



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

disparities in those long-term equity approach in our work meaning need.

outcomes. WCEL currently takes an we serve children and families based on

In our 2022 Strategic Plan, we have identified a goal to “provide WCEL’s services in a culturally sensitive, evidence-based, equitable, and inclusive fashion by mid-2025 so that all children and families feel seen, planned for, and affirmed.” We have created a new DEI and Outreach Specialist position who also does Cultural Navigation work to support our families, and we have established a full-time Language Access Coordinator role in 2024. We are in the process of:

- conducting enhanced outreach, child find, and screening activities targeted at marginalized populations and
- to recruit, support, retain, and promote staff and board members from disabled, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and other marginalized groups so that community members see themselves represented at all levels within WCEL.

In the future we also have goals to continue to:

- support the WCEL workforce in understanding the sociopolitical context that shapes bias, privilege, and the needs and experiences of diverse populations for the purpose of forwarding disability justice, forging strong connections, and providing equitable services,
- develop practices designed to nurture a culture of inclusion, curiosity, learning, and celebration of difference, and
- to utilize evidence-based strategies and ensure accountability and equitable program delivery.

5. **Agency Funding.** List your organization’s most significant funding sources from greatest to least (including the United Way, Whatcom County Health and Community Services and City of Bellingham); dollar amounts are not necessary. Significant funding sources can be defined as sources that make up more than 15% of your program budget. If you have many funding sources, you may list them by category (i.e., federal, state, foundations, individual donors). Please mention any anticipated or recent changes in your future funding or financial position.

1. Early Support for Infants & Toddlers (ESIT)/State of Washington 2. Grants, including United Way 3. Insurance (Public & Private) 4. Annual Fundraising 5. Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA)/Whatcom County 6. In 2024 we received a one-time grant award from Yield of \$2M and ERTC refunds of \$449K. Collectively these funds rebuild and increase our reserves. As an agency with a budget over \$5 million dollars, that has experienced rapid growth and a need to build an agency that can grow and serve the needs of our population, reserves will be essential to building our services in a sustainable way.

PART C: PROGRAM INFORMATION

Please limit your responses to no more than two pages for questions 6-8.

6. **Program Summary.** Briefly summarize the program and its core activities in one or two sentences.

WCEL’s “Birth to Three and Beyond” services include early support home visiting, family resource coordination, parent support services, classes and playgroups, as well as parent and child mental health support for children and families. For the early support program, services are provided for



WHATCOM COUNTY
**HEALTH AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

children who have been identified with diagnosed disability, providing a wrap-caregivers.

at least a 25% developmental delay or a around approach for families and primary

7. **Program Purpose.** Identify the community need(s) that the program addresses. What are the measurable outcomes that will result from the services provided?

While only about 3% of children are diagnosed with developmental delays at birth, 11-15% of children are identified as delayed by age 5 years old. Whatcom County serves approximately 4-5% of children in our community – less than the 11-15% we believe should be eligible, statistically, but almost twice as much as our State average, which sits at about 2%. Our program builds upon a family's strengths and provides coordination, resources, support and services in everyday settings where a child and family's routines are based. Our services are responsive, flexible and individualized. The very young children we serve benefit both physically and emotionally from our services as they increase their skills to realize their full potential. Additionally, our services look holistically at the family unit's needs, strengths and challenges to create a solid foundation for the child. We provide specialized supports for the primary caretakers in the child's life, whether that is a parent, grandparent, nanny or childcare staff. Our services help children to develop positive social skills and relationships, acquire language and communication skills, and develop appropriate behavior to meet their needs. We help families and primary caretakers to know their rights and be able to advocate for their child and to have the information and support to help meet their child's needs. There are clearly more children to reach, and we believe that these children fall into traditionally marginalized populations, including families who speak languages other than English. Over the last few years we have focused on addressing this gap and will continue to do so.

8. **Program Status.** How long has this program been in operation in Whatcom County? Since your last application, have you made any changes in how you offer services? If this is a new program, how far along is your agency in the planning process? What resources has your organization already invested?

WCEL started in 1973 and has been providing services to families for over 50 years. We have added mental health support services to our outreach pieces and training for families and caregivers. In 2025, we will also be starting an Inclusive Childcares project supporting professional development around disability and inclusion for those working in childcares across the more remote parts of Whatcom County.

We are in the last year of a three-year strategic plan that was implemented in 2022, and we are currently writing a plan that will be a five-year strategic plan to guide the agency. We are also looking into facilities development to accommodate our growth. WCEL has been working with various funders and stakeholders to invest funding for staff-time-space program development and alignment with emerging and expanding community needs.



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

2025 Community Impact Fund Grant Application Addendum

UNITED WAY FOCUS AREAS

1. To support financial stability in Whatcom County, we have identified three funding priorities below, basic needs, economic mobility, and breaking the cycle of poverty. Choose **one** category below that best aligns with your agency/program:

Basic Needs

- Food security
- Stable, attainable, affordable housing
- Health and mental health care access

Economic Mobility

- Financial literacy and training
- Vocational readiness training and support
- Adult education programs

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

- Affordable child care and early learning programs
- Academic programs to increase student attendance and achievement
- Parenting support
- Addiction treatment and recovery
- Abuse prevention

2. Please describe how your program/agency services align with the category you selected above.

WCEL's "Birth to Three and Beyond" services include early support home visiting, family resource coordination, parent support services, classes and playgroups, as well as parent and child mental health support for children and families. For the early support program, services are provided for children who have been identified with at least a 25% developmental delay or a diagnosed disability, providing a wrap-around approach for families and primary caregivers. Our services are provided to families regardless of their ability to pay – we never turn eligible children away. In addition, we also provide services for mental health and early learning for children up to their 6th birthday. Our mission is to partner with families to provide high-quality, equitable, and comprehensive therapy and support services to children experiencing developmental delays and disabilities. Our vision is an equitable society where children with disabilities and their families thrive, experience meaningful connections, and have a deep understanding of



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

2025 Community Impact Fund Grant Application Addendum

their strengths and needs. Our services are responsive, flexible and individualized. The very young children we serve benefit both physically and emotionally from our services as they increase their skills to realize their full potential. Additionally, our services look holistically at the family unit's needs, strengths and challenges to create a solid foundation for the child. We provide specialized supports for the primary caretakers in the child's life, whether that is a parent, grandparent, nanny or childcare staff. Our services help children to develop positive social skills and relationships, acquire language and communication skills, and develop appropriate behavior to meet their needs. We help families and primary caretakers to know their rights and be able to advocate for their child and to have the information and support to help meet their child's needs.

3. Please provide two or three key outcomes you measure that indicate progress toward your mission. List the number of clients being served, what you track, and the most recent results.

Over the last year we have focused on building back our Early Learning program, which was paused during the pandemic. This year, we are seeing this program stabilize. We believe that with additional staffing capacity and a sustainable funding source, we will continue to reach our goal of 12 classes per week held pre-pandemic. We are currently offering 11 classes per week, including weekly drop-in classes at the school district buildings in Ferndale and Lynden and at WCEL's Bellingham Cordata location, and we have plans to begin classes in Blaine and Nooksack in this next year.

While only about 3% of children are diagnosed with developmental delays at birth, 11-15% of children are identified as delayed by age 5 years old. Whatcom County serves approximately 4-5% of children in our community – less than the 11-15% we believe should be eligible, statistically, but almost twice as much as our State average, which sits at about 2%. We also have focused on equity measures and closing the gaps for the families who have been historically underserved in our programs. We have translated forms, informational brochures, communications, and video media into a variety of languages, have invested additional outreach staff, continued to build relationships with different social and ethnic groups, strengthened our support of the migrant preschool program in Lynden, and are seeing some changes in the diversity of the kids and families we work with. We are currently serving families with interpreter services to include Spanish, Ukrainian, Russian, Vietnamese, Japanese, Mixteco (multiple dialects) and Urdu. During a point-in-time count, we have increased enrollment by Latinx families by 27, Asian/South Asian families by 4, Native families and Black families by 1 each, and “2



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

2025 Community Impact Fund Grant Application Addendum

or more races” by 3. With the implementation of our new Electronic Medical Records system, we anticipate having much clearer demographic and other data sets to utilize in the future.

We recently were awarded a grant to improve our own Language Access systems and to also work to support a community-wide effort to improve language access across educational and medical communities in Whatcom County. This project aims to also increase the interpretation and translation workforce available to contract with. We have given out six interpreter training scholarships thus far. We anticipated 40 people coming to our Language Justice Convenings in Whatcom County. The first language justice convening in November of 2024 had 70 people and the second one on March 4th had 80 people attend from a large variety of health and educational agencies.

4. How does United Way’s investment help meet the funding needs of the organization or program? Please give specific examples of how United Way funds are/will be utilized.

The United Way funds are critical and provide flexibility and the ability to pivot and respond as financial conditions shift. Our services are provided to families regardless of the ability to pay. United Way funding helps fill funding gaps so that we can continue to provide high quality services to families. It gives our agency the flexibility to pivot and continually expand our wraparound service to meet the emergent needs of our youngest community members. United Way’s investment helps Whatcom Center for Early Learning fund work that improves early support opportunities in our community through a variety of approaches. For example, early learning classes provide play based learning for children in our programs, are open to our community, and create early support outreach and networking opportunities among families.

5. Briefly describe how your agency/program will utilize community partnerships or coordinate with other agencies (UW partner agencies, other community non-profits, government agencies, local companies, schools, etc.) to advance your work/mission.

We partner regularly with regional colleges and universities to offer volunteer and internship opportunities to students. Our volunteer base includes churches, former staff and donors, and individuals of all ages and abilities. In our community, WCEL works closely with Whatcom Infants and Children’s Council (WICC) and collaborates directly with pediatricians and local or regional medical providers. WCEL undertakes outreach with SeaMar, Iris, Catholic Community Services, Inspire, Agape Food Bank and various



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

2025 Community Impact Fund Grant Application Addendum

other local partners. WCEL actively participates in the WICC along with multiple community partners from School Districts, Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD), Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA), the Opportunity Council (OC), Western Washington University (WWU), the ARC of Whatcom County, Parent to Parent, and childcare centers. WCEL is also an active member of Whatcom Taking Action, which is a cross-sector visioning and leadership body led by the Health Department to ensure the system-wide quality of services to meet the needs of children and youth with special health care needs. We also have partnerships with local school districts such as the Lynden, Blaine, and Ferndale school districts. We believe these partnerships make our staff, the wider community and our work with families stronger.

6. United Way focuses on ALICE households in Whatcom County. ALICE refers to households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level but not enough to afford the basic cost of living in our community.
 - a. What percentage of your program recipients are below the ALICE threshold based on the survival budget for Whatcom County?

We have not collected this data yet. However, we are planning to start to collect this data as part of our new Electronic Medical Records system which is currently in the process of being implemented. As that program is firmly established, the client family's financial information will be part of the data collection process.
 - b. What percentage of your program recipients are ALICE (above FPL but below the ALICE threshold)?

In the past, we have used the number of children in Medicaid to answer this question. The number of children receiving Medicaid in our early support has moved from over 80% to around 50%. The current percentage of Medicaid on our mental health caseload is 68%.

We think this may have to do with the fact by December of 2023, 4.16 million fewer children nationwide were enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP than the month before, as each state began the process of renewing eligibility after the COVID-related Medicaid continuous coverage protections were lifted. We also anticipate that with the pending budget cuts more children will no longer be able to receive Medicaid, putting a greater stress on our organizational resources.

Due to the above, we think we need to come up with a new way to measure a family's income and thus their ALICE threshold. We are trying to find a sensitive



UNITED WAY
Whatcom County

2025 Community Impact Fund Grant Application Addendum

way to ask families about their personal financial information and record it in our new EMR, so that we can respond more adequately to data-related questions in the future.

- c. Do you collect client data by zip code? We do have all of our client's zip codes.

Visit the [United for ALICE](#) website for the most recent (2024 report) Whatcom County data to determine the survival budget guidelines for ALICE households.

7. Please share an example of a client who was helped by your services.

**Note: if you receive a 2025 Community Impact Grant, this story may be shared on your behalf by United Way for the purpose of our community fundraising. Names and details may be altered for privacy.*

"I can't say enough wonderful things about WCEL. I appreciate the environment that it provides for my children to learn and socialize. It also offers a space for parents to connect and feel a sense of community during a season of life that can often feel lonely. I have made friendships that have continued outside of toddler time and sensational toddlers that I will be forever grateful for!" - Aubrey McDevitt

Please see a longer family story attached.

Application Checklist:



“At 18 months, our son Ethan wasn’t responding to his name and could not say “mama” or “dada.”

There was just something not quite right with Ethan’s development.”

Our son Ethan displayed signs of a developmental delay at his 18-month checkup. He wasn’t responding to his name nor showing early language development. Our pediatrician realized this and promptly referred us to the Whatcom Center for Early Learning (WCEL) for an Early Support evaluation.

Emmy, a WCEL Family Resources Coordinator, quickly contacted us to schedule an initial meeting with our speech therapist, Bryn. Ethan was thoroughly evaluated and diagnosed with delayed language development. We were able to start speech therapy with Bryn immediately, meeting weekly (at that time virtual with COVID-19 restrictions in place).

Ethan’s Journey

Shared by Ethan’s parents,
Amanda and Jeff

Bryn was a real gift to our family. She taught us various tools for communicating with Ethan, like using simple sign language to help him express his needs. She gave us an abundance of emotional support and hands-on parenting techniques to practice with Ethan between sessions.

We also attended WCEL’s inclusive playgroups and monthly parent workshops. The playgroups provided a structured setting for Ethan to practice social skills with children of all abilities. Often, we felt discouraged and frustrated by Ethan’s limited communication and developmental delays. But WCEL’s caring staff demonstrated helpful ways to interact with Ethan during tough situations. Connecting with other parents facing similar challenges was incredibly reassuring.

“Around 2 years old, the team began to wonder if Ethan may be autistic. Through WCEL’s referral and coordination, Ethan was rapidly evaluated by specialists. Within a few months, he was officially diagnosed with autism.”



It was difficult for our family to receive Ethan’s diagnosis. We were filled with denial and worries while trying to determine the next steps. But WCEL’s compassionate support made us feel well-equipped with this news. We feel fortunate to have identified Ethan’s autism so early, thanks to WCEL guiding us through the evaluation process.

Ethan continued with weekly language coaching and playgroup sessions at WCEL. Together with Bryn, we developed an Individualized Family Services Program (IFSP) that set 6 month goals and adapted to Ethan’s changing needs. The WCEL team celebrated each milestone Ethan achieved, giving our family confidence in his strengths and growth.

WCEL also hosted parenting workshops and support groups during Ethan’s playgroup times. This gave us a much-needed break and a community of parents who understood our challenges. We found their stories about their children’s developmental gains and their challenges helpful.

After over a year of language therapy and playgroup sessions, Ethan made great strides from age 2 to 3 years, expanding his vocabulary and verbalizing words along with sign language. As parents, we also gained skills to better understand and advocate for Ethan’s needs. This invaluable early support from WCEL set Ethan up for future success.



“As Ethan approached the age of 3, WCEL helped us navigate his transition to his school districts’ Developmental Preschool program. This required extensive coordination between WCEL providers and school administrators.”

WCEL staff guided us through the entire process. Teacher Michael and our team advised us on what to expect at evaluations and how to advocate for Ethan’s support services. Without WCEL, we’d have felt completely lost trying to access special education services through his public school.

When Ethan started preschool, we were anxious about how he’d adjust. But the WCEL team provided his teachers with a detailed report about Ethan’s needs and strengths, easing the transition. On his first day, he thrived, using skills like cleaning up that he’d learned in WCEL playgroups. We credit and appreciate WCEL’s early support for preparing Ethan to excel in his preschool environment.

Happy, energetic, and observant, Ethan can now communicate his needs verbally, loves counting, and enjoys playgrounds. At home, he seeks out water play and hugs from family. We are sincerely grateful to WCEL for their invaluable guidance and support through Ethan’s early years. They set our son up for future achievement.