

2025 Wheeler County Community Health Improvement Plan



OVERVIEW

In 2025, **Wheeler County Public Health** convened a steering committee* of representatives from local government agencies, community-based organizations, and community members, and contracted with Insight for Action, to facilitate the development of the first Wheeler County Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan.

DESIGN PROCESS

Reviewed
Community
Health Assessment



Prioritized 6
community
conditions



Drafted Community
Health
Improvement Plan

STEERING COMMITTEE

- ✓ Reviewed the **Community Health Assessment Report** that synthesized data from multiple federal and state databases, local reports, interviews with 17 knowledge holders, and a survey completed by 169 residents
- ✓ Prioritized **six** community health conditions
- ✓ Drafted this **Community Health Improvement Plan** that includes 6 goals, 28 strategies, 6 organizations to lead strategy implementation, multiple indicators to track success, and first year action steps. Actionable strategies were defined as reasonable approaches to advance the goals for which existing momentum could be leveraged by county-based organizations to lead the strategies

SIX COMMUNITY HEALTH GOALS



Improve access, availability, and diversity of healthcare services



Strengthen the county's emergency medical services (EMS) system



Improve access to nutritious & affordable food



Improve infrastructure to allow more housing



Increase access to childcare and early childhood education opportunities



Strengthen community engagement

PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Wheeler County Public Health will support implementation of the Improvement Plan by:

- Convening steering committee members, and other stakeholders, to continue momentum for implementing the plan, reviewing progress and revising strategies
- Championing and advocating for the goals
- Seeking funding and resources to advance the strategies
- Implementing some of the strategies
- Monitoring progress toward the goals

*Steering Committee members: Diana Kirkham, Spray resident; Joan Field, Spray Volunteer Ambulance and Oregon Office of Rural Health; Jon McMurray, Fossil School District; Joni Kabana, Spray General Store; Maryhelen Peterson, Community Counseling Solutions, Matt Davis, Wheeler County Commissioner; Sarah Hartenstein, Wheeler County Public Health; and Teresa Hunt, Asher Community Health Clinic

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GOALS ONE and TWO



GOAL ONE

Improve access, availability, and diversity of healthcare services

The 2024 Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization (EOCCO) Community Health Assessment, 2024 Asher Community Health Clinic Assessment, and 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Assessment documented critical gaps in healthcare services for Wheeler County residents. Getting quality healthcare services was identified as one of the biggest challenges in the 2025 Wheeler County Livability Survey. The strategies focus on bringing services to patients' homes, increasing awareness of existing services, and strengthening the healthcare workforce.

 **Strategy 1a)** Implement **Mobile Integrated Health (MIH)** (also known as community paramedicine) – a care delivery model that brings mobile resources to patients in a home or community-based setting that focuses on chronic disease management, preventative healthcare, post-discharge follow-up visits, wrap around/social determinants of health services, and coordination with other care providers. In 2025, the Oregon Office of Rural Health (ORH) received a grant that includes designing a MIH pilot project for Wheeler County.
Lead: Oregon Office of Rural Health

 **Strategy 1b)** Implement a **public awareness campaign** to help county residents dispel misconceptions, better understand, and access county-based health and social services. Partner with collaborators to embed messaging with home-based healthcare providers (i.e., Asher Clinic community health workers, registered nurse, MIH pilot staff), emergency responders, and existing programs that service community members (i.e., senior meals).
Lead: Wheeler County Public Health

 **Strategy 1c)** Build a stronger **healthcare workforce** through recruitment incentives (hiring bonuses, providing assistance with housing) and education (training, mentorship, continuing education) **Lead: ?**



GOAL TWO

Strengthen the county's emergency medical services (EMS) system

The 2024 Oregon Solutions Report, 2024 Asher Community Health Clinic Assessment, and the 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Assessment document the critical need to improve emergency medical services for Wheeler County. Currently, there is no ambulance service in Fossil, and there is a shortage of aging volunteers for ambulance services in Mitchell and Spray. The strategies focus on supporting Wheeler County Commissioners and Oregon Solutions to pursue a countywide EMS system.

 **Strategy 2a)** Create a county **EMS taxation district** to fund county EMS hub and spoke model.
Lead: Wheeler County Commissioners

 **Strategy 2b)** Establish a **county-wide EMS** that merges city ambulances into a hub and spoke model. The model may include: One central site; an oversight board; a paid coordinator and EMT specialists; stipend volunteers in Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray, and access to Starlink for better communication.
Lead: Wheeler County Commissioners

 **Strategy 2c)** If taxation district fails, create a **hybrid county & city** model based on reimbursements from healthcare insurance for ambulance runs that pays for part-time county coordinator and provides modest stipends to volunteers.
Lead: Wheeler County Commissioners

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GOALS THREE and FOUR



GOAL THREE

Improve access to nutritious & affordable food

The 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Assessment documented that residents with low incomes and seniors with transportation challenges struggle with food insecurity. Many county residents live at or below the poverty line, making it difficult to purchase nutritious food. Although all three school districts offer free breakfast and lunch programs for students, and CAPECO supports weekly congregate senior meals in Fossil and Spray and delivers senior food box drop off weekly in all three communities, the need for greater access to nutritious food remains. The strategies focus on expanding nutritious and affordable food for all residents.

- ✦ **Strategy 3a)** Support **local producers** to grow food to sell to local vendors **Lead:** OSU Extension
- ✦ **Strategy 3b)** Establish **community gardens** at schools and other places with open spaces **Lead:** Wheeler County Public Health
- ✦ **Strategy 3c)** Establish **Farm to School** programs at schools **Lead:** Wheeler County Public Health
- ✦ **Strategy 3d)** Establish **Farm to School** programs at schools **Lead:** Wheeler County Public Health
- ✦ **Strategy 3e)** Expand **Veggie Rx program** **Lead:** Wheeler County LCHIP
- ✦ **Strategy 3f)** Expand **nutrition educational** opportunities for county residents on how to prep and cook low cost, nutritious, and delicious food **Lead:** OSU Extension
- ✦ **Strategy 3g)** Expand **senior meals** more than once a week **Lead: ?**
- ✦ **Strategy 3h)** Establish a regional **food distribution** system to bring surplus food to places in need **Lead: ?**



GOAL FOUR

Improve infrastructure to allow more housing

Finding affordable housing was the highest ranking “big challenge” from the 2025 Wheeler County Livability Survey. The cost of renting or buying houses is high due to low availability of existing housing stock and limited land available to build more housing. Many county residents live at or below the poverty line, making it difficult to afford housing. Local government agencies and nonprofits struggle to recruit employees for critical jobs due to lack of housing. Improvements to sewer, water, and other public infrastructure are needed to support the building of new housing stock.

No lead organizations have been identified for implementing these strategies.

- ✦ **Strategy 4a)** Make critical improvements to city (Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray) **water and sewage systems** to accommodate new housing
- ✦ **Strategy 4b)** Change city (Fossil, Mitchell, Spray) **land use zoning** to allow smaller and alternative housing units (i.e., multi-unit, auxiliary dwelling units)
- ✦ **Strategy 4c)** Access **state funding or subsidies** for building housing stock
- ✦ **Strategy 4d)** Incorporate **creative design** (i.e., tiny homes, co-ops) when building housing stock
- ✦ **Strategy 4e)** Incorporate **energy efficiency** in new or renovated housing units
- ✦ **Strategy 4f)** Offer **incentives** to homeowners for providing temporary housing for workforce

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GOALS FIVE and SIX



GOAL FIVE

Increase access to childcare and early childhood education opportunities

The 2025 Wheeler County Community Health Assessment documented Head Start preschool programs for 3 to 5 year olds at Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray school districts; however, there are no licensed childcare providers for children 0 to 12, except for a program at Fossil School District for staff only. Fossil School District is planning to open a childcare center for the public and support other Wheeler County school districts to do the same. The strategies focus on supporting Fossil School District's public childcare center.

- ✦ **Strategy 5a) Remodel the county-owned Glover Center** to house the Fossil School District library to open up space for a childcare center open to the public at Fossil Elementary School
Lead: Wheeler County
- ✦ **Strategy 5b)** Establish a **childcare center** for children 0 to 3 years at Fossil Elementary School
Lead: Fossil School District
- ✦ **Strategy 5c)** Expand **career and technical education** (CTE) program at Wheeler High School for childcare
Lead: Fossil School District
- ✦ **Strategy 5d)** Promote school-based childcare center models to other **Wheeler County school districts**
Lead: Fossil School District



GOAL SIX

Strengthen community engagement

As documented in the 2025 Wheeler County Livability Survey, residents value a deep sense of community and people are willing to help out their neighbors. A variety of informal community engagement is already happening across the County. The strategies focus on strengthening community engagement by establishing a countywide community engagement coordinator position who can create more formal channels of engagement.

- ✦ **Strategy 6a)** Secure **sustainable funding** to support Wheeler County community engagement (i.e., a countywide coordinator position and inter-regional transport) **Lead:** Wheeler County Public Health
- ✦ **Strategy 6b)** Establish a **countywide community engagement coordinator** position with secured philanthropic funds **Lead:** Agency to host the coordinator position to be determined
- ✦ **Strategy 6c)** Create county-wide **communication channels** for residents
Lead: Community engagement coordinator
- ✦ **Strategy 6d)** Create and update listing of **volunteer opportunities** across the county
Lead: Community engagement coordinator
- ✦ **Strategy 6e)** Hold intentional, **regular gatherings** in Fossil, Mitchell, and Spray (ex; Tables of 12, Sunday Suppers)
Lead: Community engagement coordinator
- ✦ **Strategy 6f)** Establish **inter-regional public transport** routes to events, gatherings, and farmers markets **Lead:** Community engagement coordinator