



# Legislative Actions Counties Support

Counties are regional governments providing many services residents cannot access from any other entity. The following policies will assist counties in delivering critical services, protecting public health and the environment, and supporting vibrant local communities.



## Equal Access to Justice

*“Given the existing low level of state funding and the increased costs identified to date, the State should increase the funding levels to cities and counties for public defense.”*

- HOUSE JUDICIARY WORKGROUP ON MISDEMEANOR PUBLIC DEFENSE COSTS IN WASHINGTON STATE, 2014

**The absence of state revenue, for such an obvious state mandate delegated to counties, leaves counties with no other option than to cut from other public health and safety services provided to our shared communities.**

**Counties support increased state funding for trial court public defense.**

### Current Funding Structure:

- Washington counties pay over 97% of the cost of trial court public defense (\$198.7 million/year)
- This is an unbalanced approach to funding our justice system
- Washington State is one of the lowest contributors nationally to public defense (45 out of 50)
- Nationally, 23 states fully fund public defense, and another 10 states fund more than 50%

### Growing Requirements:

- The Legislature and the Supreme Court have required counties to adopt new caseload standards for public defenders
- Costs to maintain staffing level consistent with the new standards have skyrocketed
- Caseload standards are likely to be reduced even further, resulting in even greater costs



## Taking on the Behavioral Health Crisis

Counties are on the front lines of Washington’s behavioral health crisis. Our state has a shortage of mental health providers and a high demand for treatment. Counties need help to deliver what is needed most by some of our most vulnerable residents.

### Actions counties support:

- Timely mental health evaluations, restorations, and treatment.
- Workforce investments and support.
- Investments in facilities, including operational funding.
- Authorize the CMS-approved 90-day Medicaid re-entry waiver for individuals leaving prison, jail, or juvenile detention facility.
- Affordable housing and support for released individuals.

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## County Revenue Enhancement & Flexibility

Counties are the least financially diverse government system in the state, heavily dependent on property tax that is limited in annual growth to 1%, well below recent inflation. Other revenue sources, like penalty assessments, interest, and sales taxes, have been reduced through legislative action without replacements.

**Counties support policies to increase and diversify county revenues and local flexibility in resource utilization. Statewide policies to eliminate or exempt fees and taxes should not impact local revenues.**



## Investments in Fish Passage Barrier Removal

Adequate resources are needed to remove over 8,000 locally-owned fish barriers across the state.

**Counties need financial assistance to advance the state's goals for salmon recovery by replacing fish barriers.**



## Housing

Nearly every community needs more housing units now.

**Counties support state investment in infrastructure that supports housing development and resources to assist local government in streamlining permitting systems and processes.**



## Broadband

Digital equity remains an issue for many county residents and an impediment to growth for many communities.

**Counties need funding to support local project planning, business development services, and stakeholder and partner engagement for broadband.**



## Study to Assess Septage Treatment Capacity

Understanding existing treatment capacity and future needs is critical for infrastructure planning that supports housing and prevents environmental and resource contamination.

**Counties support one-time funding to study septage treatment capacity.**



## Public Records Act Reforms

Counties are advocates for open government and transparency. Still, too many tax-payer resources are wasted responding to public records requests intended to harass, intimidate, and extract financial penalties from local governments.

**Counties support working with stakeholders to reduce abusive public records requests and litigation.**



## Additional Corrections Officer Training Classes

More training is needed for county jail corrections officers than the current class offerings can support, and wait times can be up to a year, creating recruitment and retention challenges.

**Counties support adding two additional Corrections Officer Academy classes in FY 24 and four additional classes in FY 25, ongoing.**



## Fully Fund All New County Responsibilities and Stabilize Existing Support

The Legislature often passes policy that shifts, increases, or creates new costs for counties without providing new revenue. Existing state revenue support for state-imposed responsibilities is not keeping pace with inflation. Unfunded and underfunded policy isn't effective or sustainable.

**Counties support state action assuring adequate resources for all new and existing requirements resulting from legislation.**