

WASHINGTON STATE  
**Academy of Sciences**



Science in Support of Local Decision Making for COVID-19:

# A DIALOGUE WITH SPOKANE COMMUNITIES

*Summary*

## ***About WSAS***

The Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) was requested by the Governor and authorized by the Washington State Legislature in 2005. WSAS is a not-for-profit organization of Washington State's leading scientists and engineers dedicated to serving the state. Members are elected by their peers for outstanding contributions to research.

WSAS is modeled on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. WSAS provides independent, objective analysis and advice to the State and conducts other activities to solve complex problems and inform public policy decisions. WSAS also encourages education and research, recognizes outstanding contributions to knowledge, and increases public understanding in matters of science and engineering. Learn more at [www.washacad.org](http://www.washacad.org).

## ***Acknowledgements***

WSAS thanks the panelists who participated in this community dialogue event:

**Glen Duncan**, *Professor and Chair, Nutrition and Exercise Physiology, Washington State University (moderator, WSAS member)*

**Alisha Benson**, *CEO, Greater Spokane Incorporated*

**Margo Hill**, *Associate Professor, Urban and Regional Planning, Eastern Washington University*

**Patrick Jones**, *Executive Director, Institute of Public Policy & Economic Analysis, Eastern Washington University*

**Pablo Monsivais**, *Associate Professor, Nutrition and Exercise Physiology, Washington State University*

**Robert Stevens**, *Community Health Worker, Greater Spokane*

WSAS is also grateful to the many community organizations that helped shape and disseminate this event: NAACP Spokane, Spokane City Council staff members, Catholic Charities, WA Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative, Greater Spokane Incorporated, Multicare, Kalispel Tribal Economic Authority, Washington State University faculty in the schools and divisions of Global Health, Native Health Services, Engineering, Education, Medicine, Extension, and Government Relations, Eastern Washington University faculty, and individual Spokane community members.

The Community Dialogue Series, founded through a partnership with the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, is carried out under the guidance of the WSAS COVID-19 Steering Committee with support from the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 2122687.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication constitute the proceedings of an event and do not necessarily reflect the views of WSAS or the organizations or agencies that provided support for the project.

## COMMUNITY DIALOGUE OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

In November 2021, the Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) hosted the third in a series of dialogue events on how COVID-19 is affecting local communities. The purpose of the dialogue series is to bring together scientific experts and community members to discuss issues being navigated by local communities. This event was designed and planned through months-long engagement with community members and organizations in the greater Spokane region to understand which issues were most pressing for them. The engagement was not a comprehensive representation from the area, but it was a chance to hear from multiple perspectives about challenges that stood out and questions that were top of mind. WSAS connected with its statewide network of scientific and technical experts to complement local expertise from a broad set of community members.

This virtual event focused on the relationship between growth and health in the context of ongoing development in the greater Spokane region, which is made up of urban, suburban, and rural communities totaling roughly 575,000 people. The pandemic brought an influx of new residents to the Spokane region, which had major effects on the ability of already-stretched existing resources and services to provide for this growing region.

Roger Myers, current WSAS president, described how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected every aspect of life in Washington State, and that many decisions are made at the local level, as well as outside of government. Myers described the need for the evolving knowledge gained from research and experience to be part of a dialogue about the interpretation and implications for decision-making, with a community approach to policy and

solutions. John Roll, WSAS president-elect and Spokane community member, provided additional remarks that surfaced the idea that communities can grow in ways that support or undermine health.

### *How can a community grow in ways that enhance health?*

Glen Duncan, the dialogue's moderator, then framed the conversation around a question: How can a community grow in ways that enhance health? Communities can be thought of as an interconnected web with multiple components including the built environment (transportation, public spaces, parks, etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic caused shifts in the use of the built environment and exacerbated existing growth issues such as housing availability and equitable distribution of resources.

As a group, the panelists brought decades of experience to speak on the complexity of growth and community health issues in the Spokane region:

- **Alisha Benson**, *CEO, Greater Spokane Incorporated*
- **Margo Hill**, *Associate Professor, Urban and Regional Planning, Eastern Washington University*
- **Patrick Jones**, *Executive Director, Institute of Public Policy & Economic Analysis, Eastern Washington University*
- **Pablo Monsivais**, *Associate Professor, Nutrition and Exercise Physiology, Washington State University*
- **Robert Stevens**, *Community Health Worker, Greater Spokane*



## QUESTIONS

Throughout the discussion, panelists fielded a number of questions and built on or responded to each other's statements, often to highlight the interconnectedness of the issues at hand. Forty-seven registrants shared questions prior to and during the dialogue that helped to frame the discussion, including:

- How has the pandemic shifted policy approaches to cross-sector and cross-community collaborations?
- What role does housing policy and resources have in building healthy communities?
- How can science inform policy that affects the growth and health of communities, such as reducing health disparities?
- How can Spokane build a healthier community for members of all incomes? If cost weren't a hurdle, what would the ideal look like?
- How can neighborhoods and new developments be designed to enhance outdoor activity, exercise, active transportation, multimodal transportation, and other elements of healthy lifestyles?
- What tools, programs, infrastructure, or financial resources could help to enhance health as part of pandemic recovery?
- What cross-sector and cross-community collaborations can solve problems in this space? How can everyone from local community members to city leaders make a difference?



## KEY INSIGHTS

### *Describing a Healthy Community*

Panelists shared their own unique definitions of a healthy community, which included:

- Access to housing
- Access to healthcare (including mental and behavioral healthcare)
- Food security, including traditional foods
- Services working in tandem with jobs
- Equitable access to opportunities
- Safe employment
- Connections to cultural activities
- Access to internet and other infrastructure
- Opportunity for a high-quality long life
- Equitable support for healthy lifestyles
- Minimizing chronic disease and disability
- Meeting safety needs for community members
- Cultivating a healthy social and economic environment on top of meeting basic needs

A common theme across panelist comments was how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing public health and resource issues in the Spokane region, including the challenge of serving a growing population with physical and mental health services (particularly challenging for low-income individuals to access), public transportation, outdoor recreation opportunities, and infrastructure. Panelists noted that rising home costs, homelessness, and increases in food insecurity are top of mind for community members.

### ***Growth and Demographics***

A central thread in the conversation was the contextualization of Spokane's growth and demographics. Jones described how population growth in Spokane county has increased substantially in the last five years, particularly in the periphery of Spokane's city limits. Benson noted that Spokane's communities include some families that have been in the area for generations, as well as newcomers to the city; one challenge in development is serving both groups. While Spokane's growth started accelerating prior to COVID-19, Benson noted that additional people moved to the area during the pandemic – partially because of the environment, parks, and being able to get outside as an 'outlet for health.'

Jones pointed out that, while Spokane's demographics are not very diverse, with fewer than 20% of residents identifying as people of color, people of color were most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hill described inequities in housing – residents in single-family dwellings were better situated to cope with many effects of the pandemic but Spokane homeowners are disproportionately white, while Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the area were more likely to rent and live in multigenerational households that led to increased exposure.

***Poverty often stacks inequities that affect health.***

### ***Social Determinants of Health***

Housing is one example of a social determinant of health. Hill, Monsivais, and Stevens described social determinants of health as the many factors of housing and living conditions, working conditions, air and water quality, access to sanitation facilities and supplies, food security, health services, access to green space, and so on, that play a role in health and how groups were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Monsivais described that who was most at risk of infection, serious illness, and death was determined by inequities in these social determinants of health – for example, some people in the Spokane community were more exposed to COVID-19 because their occupation and housing situation made them more vulnerable. Stevens noted that poverty often stacks inequities that affect health. Hill described how greater Spokane's tribal communities have experienced exposure to environmental hazards and underfunding of Indian Health Services that led to a higher incidence of existing health issues, compounding the challenges of the pandemic.

Panelists described how these social determinants of health can be influenced by policy. Duncan, Stevens, and Hill spoke to the need in Spokane for more housing, particularly affordable permanent housing. Jones shared that people being able to earn a living is critical, citing research that shows increases in the minimum wage can decrease poverty. Monsivais and Stevens shared how transportation can be a key method for people, particularly low-income individuals, to access resources, services, and opportunities across Spokane and beyond. Monsivais noted that neighborhood attributes can be affected by policy and economic investment, emphasizing the impacts of policy on the factors that contribute to healthy communities.

### ***Opportunities to Promote Healthy Communities***

Panelists acknowledged the many challenges of health in the Spokane community, as well as the opportunities to promote healthy communities. Benson pointed out the opportunity to move policymaking towards investment in infrastructure that impacts how people within communities can be served and supported. Stevens suggested that housing policy can be structured to help individuals integrate into the broader community. Monsivais noted that resources such as green spaces, an active transport and transit-oriented transportation system, mixed-use developments, and access to healthy food options were integral for promoting healthy lifestyles and equalizing opportunities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and can contribute to community resilience going forward.

Jones described how Spokane's large park system was a positive outlet for the community during the difficulties of the pandemic.

Panelists described the different community touchpoints to promote health. Benson and Stevens described schools as an access point for services to reach entire families, such as food distribution. Hill described how The Native Project clinic, an urban Indian-focused program, serves multiple populations of color in Spokane. Benson mentioned opportunities to support small businesses, particularly multi-ethnic businesses, in the community.

***Panelists emphasized collaboration as key to promoting community health.***

Panelists emphasized collaboration as key to promoting community health. Hill outlined how groups and agencies can work together to not duplicate efforts. Stevens used the term "community health" to describe the interconnectedness of factors beyond physical and mental health that feed into the health of a community and described how a homelessness outreach event convenes all applicable service providers in the same building simultaneously to facilitate access to services for those in need. Monsivais suggested an opportunity to create local economic resilience, particularly of the food supply, by collaborating to preserve agricultural land and green space.

The panel also highlighted the role of science in realizing these opportunities. Stevens described how science can weigh in on the interdependent aspects of health and community health. Jones added that science does not have all the answers, nor can it comment on values, but that science can give information to support decision-making. Hill shared that scientific messaging

and communication would be key to effectively informing decisions that promote healthy communities.

***Final Reflections***

The panelists were invited to close with something they took away from the conversation. These reflections highlighted the following:

- There is a diversity of voices in Spokane that are engaged in the community, even this panel reflects a range of groups working towards understanding health and communities.
- Collaboration and relationships within the community, including non-profit and for-profit organizations, will be especially important moving forward in problem-solving.
- It is helpful to reflect on what is truly important for community and population health in order to implement the relevant science and policy.
- Spokane community partnerships and collaborations would benefit from regrouping and assessing what has changed and how to move forward building community sustainability.
- While there is pressure for more development, especially on the periphery of the city, Spokane would benefit from the city's core having a better, smarter built environment with features such as mixed-use development and protected water sources.
- There is an opportunity to test new ways to address issues exacerbated by the pandemic as well as address root causes of health inequities that have been present for decades.
- It is possible to push for more change and also celebrate the initiatives already happening in Spokane, including those highlighted during the dialogue.
- Spokane has a high level of engagement, community activity, initiative, and collaboration. The community often comes together and collaborates, which gives hope for finding lasting solutions to longstanding issues.

***The role of WSAS as a convener of individuals with different expertise and experience directly impacted the tenor of the conversation. One of the goals of the dialogue series is to deepen science-for-policy discourse at the local level.***

## OUTCOMES

Participants included Spokane community members, including policymakers and staff of community service organizations, and scientists including members of WSAS. The dialogue focused on the complex understanding of what a healthy community is, both during the pandemic and for the region's future. The pressures facing Spokane are shared in many parts of Washington State and across the nation; the city has experienced rapid growth and is now grappling with rising home prices, changing demographics, and strains on public resources. While Spokane shares challenges faced elsewhere, panelists shared their belief that bolstering existing community resources can lead the region to a positive public health future.

The virtual event brought community members and experts together to discuss growth and health as it relates to the pandemic and changing demographic and development issues in greater Spokane. The civic spirit embodied in the dialogue was inspiring, and the collaboration between WSAS, local organizations, panelists, and registrants, showed a willingness to engage across the region to find answers and establish solutions for the community. The role of

WSAS as a convener of individuals with different expertise and experience directly impacted the tenor of the conversation.

One of the goals of the dialogue series is to deepen science-for-policy discourse at the local level. Participants who responded to a post-event survey nearly all found the dialogue informative and engaging, and all had more or equal interest in seeking more and different types of information about how communities can grow in ways that enhance health. Responses to the dialogue also included interest in turning dialogue into action, and that while science can inform policy, community values, politics, and other factors are critical in decision-making.

In keeping with the event's purpose, a major outcome was to engage a variety of perspectives in a thoughtful dialogue about a complex issue with planning and participation from across the broader community. This event, as with the others in this series, sparked those conversations, made new connections among panelists, and brought awareness to how science can contribute to dialogue about local solutions across communities.