

# 2025 *Annual Report*

The Bessler Center  
Mary Bridge  
Children's



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Dear friends and partners,

As we reflect on the past year at the Bessler Center, I am filled with gratitude and pride for what we have accomplished together. In a time marked by many challenges, our collective commitment to the health and well-being of children has not wavered. We remain dedicated to our vision that children in our community will be the healthiest in the nation.

Our work is a testament to the power of partnership. When teams join together across organizations, communities and disciplines, we move from planning to action and achieving outcomes. Together we have expanded access to vital health services, advanced innovative solutions and supported families through times of uncertainty. Even when faced with obstacles, our shared vision and determination have propelled us forward.

With our 2025 impacts noted, I now step forward with renewed conviction and a readiness to scale what works, challenge what doesn't and lead our Center into a transformative 2026.

As we look ahead, I am confident our continued partnership will drive even greater accomplishments. Thank you for joining us on this journey to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

With appreciation,

**Chris Ladish, PhD**

Executive Director and Assistant Vice President  
Bessler Center at Mary Bridge Children's





## *About the Bessler Center*

The Bessler Center at Mary Bridge Children's was founded in 2023 to advance health access and outcomes so all children may thrive. It's a partnership between two local physician leaders and MultiCare Mary Bridge Children's Hospital & Health Network, the backbone agency of our collective impact work.

Our strategies are grounded in the understanding that broad and diverse partnerships are critical to achieving sustainable health solutions. Because of this, partnering for impact is fundamental to how the Center engages to achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes. As we've advanced

from strategy development to implementation, our work with our partners has become more important than ever. We've partnered to advance nutrition support, prenatal care, immunization access and school health education in 2025, and this work is just the beginning.

We're also grateful for our philanthropic supporters and donors who champion these vital efforts.

None of our work would be possible without our partners, including you. For that we are both thankful and eager as we look ahead to 2026.

# Supporting children's health

## Priorities & objectives

The Bessler Center's strategic priorities are shaped by community input and informed by local and national health data.



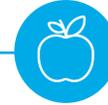
### Ensure healthy starts at birth

We focus on ensuring parents and their newborns have the best possible beginnings by connecting families with food; prenatal, perinatal and postpartum care; and other critical resources.



### Keeping children healthy through illness prevention

We support children's health and wellness through access to a medical home, preventive care and basic need supports that help them thrive.



### Ensure children thrive through school participation

We support every child to have the best chance to learn and grow by bringing health care, education and training to school teams and strengthening relationships between schools, community and health programs.



# Driving strategy

The Bessler Center embraces five key strategies as we help children in our community to be the healthiest in the nation.

- **We engage with our partners, joining them to develop collaborative solutions that support our broader community so all children thrive.** In 2025, we convened the Pierce County Infant Formula Task Force to support formula needs for 1,850 infants whose nutrition was at risk due to changes impacting the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).
- **We accelerate existing initiatives, expanding vital work in our community to reach and serve more children.** Our work with the School Nurse Organization of Washington and Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) supported expansion of TPS' Head-to-Toe series throughout the state, providing advanced health care education and training to school nurses. Participants represent 74 percent of Washington counties and care for the health needs of approximately 425,000 students across the state.
- **We innovate with others to fill gaps in care.** We worked with Acts Pharmacy and Pierce County Medical Reserve Corps to increase vaccine access within our communities and schools, offering over 1,300 vaccines to vulnerable children to ready them for school and protect them from respiratory illness. More than 50 percent of vaccines at our community clinics supported families in vulnerable communities, and 70 percent of our vaccines were delivered to families who were underinsured or uninsured.
- **We generate resources.** In 2025, we leveraged time, leadership and financial support to address care gaps, leaning in to respond to lost services that align with our priorities.
- **Finally, we advocate for support and policy change with local and state governmental leaders.** We were pleased to meet with several congressional leaders in 2025 to ensure the health needs of children and their families continue to reside in the policies designed to support them.



# Local health gaps that focus our work

## Access to prenatal care and appropriate nutrition

Research shows that infants are most likely to develop in good health when their mothers have adequate access to prenatal care — and when both mother and infant have access to good nutrition during pregnancy and infancy.

In the 2025 [Mary Bridge Children's Community Health Needs Assessment \(CHNA\)](#), Pierce and King counties reported the highest prevalence of low birth weight at 6.9 percent, above the state average of 6.7 percent and the service-area rate of 6.8 percent. Combined with geographic challenges to accessing timely prenatal services — for example, 69.8 percent of Pierce County families access timely prenatal services compared to 79.9 percent of King County families — these findings highlight the fact that many families enter pregnancy and early caregiving with compounded risk factors.

Nutritional support during pregnancy and infancy protect both mother and infant. For families struggling with nutritional insecurity, enrollment in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program reduces maternal and infant illness and death by reducing pregnancy risks, low birth weight and long-term chronic health complications.

WIC investments yield three to four times health savings per dollar invested in the form of reduced rates of low birth weight and improved health outcomes. Despite these positive outcomes, less than half of those who qualify for WIC in Washington state are actually enrolled. States leading in the nation demonstrate enrollment rates closer to **75 percent**.



# 10<sup>th</sup>

week of pregnancy by which a woman should begin receiving prenatal care

# 21%

growth in participants served by Mary Bridge Children's WIC over past 3 years

## Primary illness prevention, vaccinations and access to care



Children who have access to ongoing pediatric care receive more frequent health screenings, ongoing access to regular disease prevention measures and coordinated care that may address chronic health needs.

In Pierce County in 2023, more than one in every 10 children had gone 12-24 months without a preventive health checkup, and one in every 17 children had gone over 24 months since their last checkup. Immunization compliance data from the 2023-24 school year shows that many school districts struggle to meet standards for required school vaccinations. In that school year, 5,498 Pierce County K-12 students were out of compliance for vaccination requirements. This varies highly by district, with compliance ranging from 1-16.8 percent of enrollment.

**22** vaccine clinics brought into community in 2025

**70%** of immunizations to under/uninsured community members

## School attendance and participation

School absenteeism has many causes, and Pierce County is fortunate to have a strong network within the Foundation for Tacoma Students, which leads the charge in driving school participation rates. High absenteeism in vulnerable areas reduces educational progress and limits a child's ability to thrive. We believe that schools benefit when they have access to evidence-based training to equip health teams to manage complex care needs effectively, reducing the likelihood that a child is sent home to address needs that can be managed at school.

In Pierce County during the 2023-24 academic year, rates of regular attendance varied from 64-88 percent. [In Tacoma Public Schools alone, it's estimated that almost 10,000 students missed 10 percent or more school days during the 2023-24 academic year.](#)



# Addressing needs and advancing outcomes for children

## Expanding prenatal care access and enhancing nutritional support

Building on the “Healthy Births, Healthy Babies” 2024 summit, the Bessler Center has served as a convenor and driven collective action around prenatal and infant health in our communities. Our 2025 accomplishments include:

- Developing an automated medical record referral to help providers connect more families with Mary Bridge Children’s Women, Infants and Children (WIC) services; our pilot launched in late 2025 and will support increased perinatal nutrition access in 2026.
- Partnering with Quilted Health to support the launch of Early Care service in Pierce County so women may meet recommended health standards for prenatal care access. Quilted Health midwives offer judgment-free virtual support to newly pregnant people and connect them with resources for pregnancy, birth and beyond.
- Convening and leading the Pierce County WIC Infant Formula Task Force in response to the threat of lost benefits caused by the federal government shutdown; this task force brought together more than 30 partner agencies, including state and local government offices, all working collaboratively to provide infant formula to WIC participants in Pierce County. Our formula shortage tool kit developed through this task force will be shared at both state and local levels to support our communities through any future shortages.

*“The Bessler Center set a gold standard in emergency response when WIC benefits were in jeopardy.”*

*- Community leader feedback*



# Increasing vaccination coverage and preventing respiratory illness

The Bessler Center partnered with Acts Pharmacy and Pierce County Medical Reserve Corps in 2025 to launch a program to vaccinate children and their families across the county. Since July, we have:

- Launched a static, recurring vaccine clinic at the Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center, delivering 395 vaccines to 160 individuals.
- Hosted 11 community vaccine clinics, including those at the recurring site and 11 separate school-based clinics.

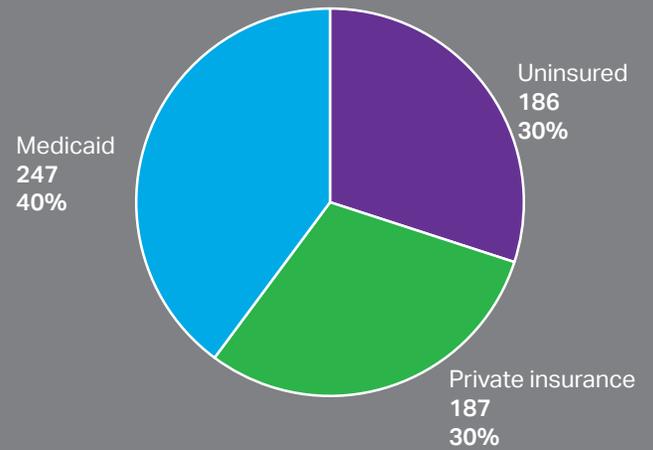
*Thank you to all of our vaccination partners for your support in making these clinics possible. Through this collaboration, we were able to offer community vaccine clinics on evenings and weekends, increasing access for local families and vaccinating all children close to home.*

**1,376**  
cumulative vaccines provided

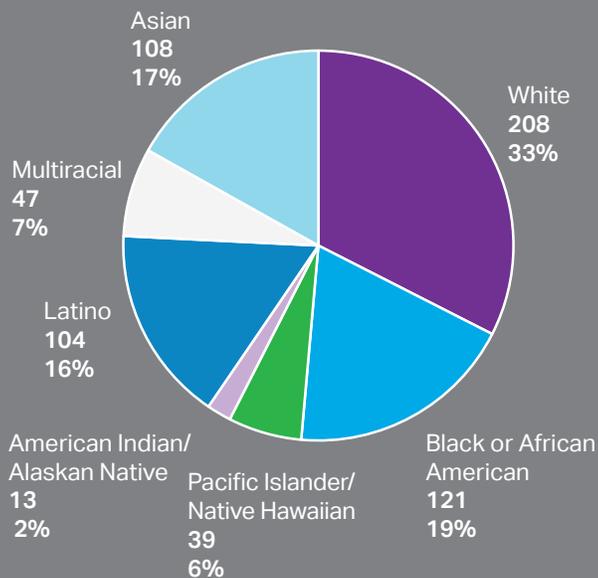
**908**  
total individuals receiving education and immunization status checks

**640**  
individuals vaccinated

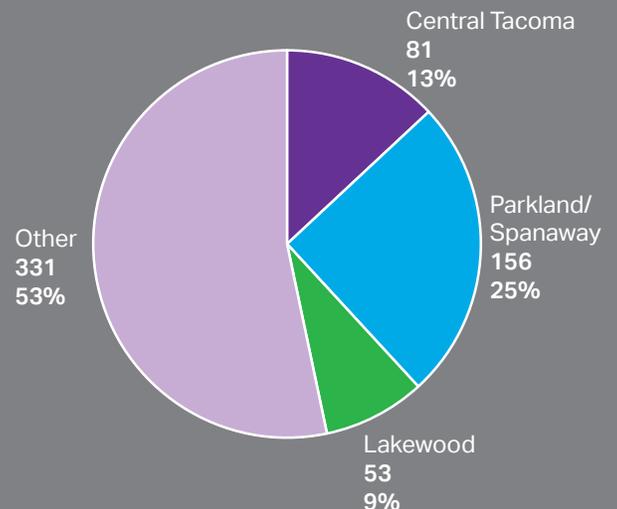
**Total individuals vaccinated by insurance type**



**Total individuals vaccinated by race**



**Total individuals vaccinated by CDC Social Vulnerability region**



We use the Center for Disease Control's Social Vulnerability Index to help identify and describe communities that are most vulnerable to disasters based on 15 distinct social factors.

## Supporting children's participation in school

The Bessler Center ensures that children have the best opportunity to learn and grow by strengthening partnerships between community, health care experts and school health teams. By providing health care education and professional development opportunities, school nurses are more equipped to treat low-to-moderate health needs in the health room. This keeps more children in school, actively participating in their education.

Our school health work grew significantly in 2025. This year, we:

- Held the Mary Bridge Children's annual School Nurse Education Update conference in August, providing over six hours of specialty care education to 125 school nurses from eight counties across Washington.
- Facilitated hands-on skills training for our nurse partners in Western Washington.
- Partnered with Tacoma Public Schools to launch Head-to-Toe, a virtual, statewide professional development series for school nurses.
- Further developed our school health website, bringing evidence-based resources within reach of all school nurses.

*Since August we've educated over 365 nurses from 29 of our 39 counties throughout Washington State.*

*“From our hands-on skills day, to the statewide Head-to-Toe professional development, as well as the myriad of questions to connect us with best practice and content expert providers, we are truly grateful for the Bessler Center partnership.”*

*- Tacoma Public Schools community partner*

425,000

Estimated  
students reached

988.5  
hours

of continuing  
education clock  
hours awarded

74%

Washington counties  
represented by  
our school nurse  
participants



## *Thank you, partners*

As the Bessler Center's work evolves, we want to acknowledge that none of this progress would be possible without our partners. We deeply appreciate being included in the places where health lives in our community. From multiagency work groups to community events, we're always grateful for the opportunity to join together to serve children and families. Through these collaborations, we expand current successful interventions and co-create new solutions to emerging health issues.

In 2025, we've strengthened our existing partnerships and developed important new relationships. We want to offer a special thank you to the following partners:

Acts Pharmacy, Abundance Health, Family Connects, Multicultural Child and Family Hope Center,

Pierce County Early Childhood Network, Perinatal Collaborative of Pierce County, Pierce County WIC agencies, Pierce County Medical Reserve Corps, School Nurse Organization of Washington, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Tacoma Public Schools and other Pierce County school districts, Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Washington State Department of Health, Washington School-Based Health Alliance.

We also want to thank the families who have attended our events, offered their wisdom or otherwise informed our work. In 2026, we hope to continue connecting and creating a community that promotes health and wellness for all.



# The Bessler Center

## Mary Bridge Children's



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