

Yakima County's mental health tax revenue could boost law and justice services

[PHIL FEROLITO Yakima Herald-Republic](#)

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A bulk of Yakima County's mental health tax could be spent on law and justice services, according to a recent proposal.

The proposal calls for spending more than \$1.8 million on programs in the department of corrections and the courts, with an additional \$2 million to fund outside services supporting the courts and law enforcement.

That would total nearly \$3.9 million — about 70% of what the tax is expected to generate annually.

But the proposal is more of a measure of program needs within government agencies and is not intended to serve as priority over projects suggested by non-governmental organizations, said Yakima County Human Services Director Esther Magasis.

“The intent has not been to prioritize law and justice projects over other types of projects,” she said. “(Commissioners) wanted to review internal costs first to get a sense of the county's funding needs.”

A previous board of Yakima County Commissioners [approved the 0.1% sales tax](#) in 2019 in effort to combat homelessness. Revenue from the tax can be used on projects that provide mental health and substance abuse services.

[The tax was embraced](#) by law enforcement agencies, the courts, corrections and area service providers. They all agreed the tax would help fund programs to combat recidivism at the county jail, where repeat offenders often experienced mental health, substance abuse problems and homelessness.

The tax was first assessed in April 2020, and at that time was estimated to generate \$3.5 million annually. So far, the tax has generated nearly \$13 million, and is expected to bring in another \$5.6 million in 2023.

Now commissioners are seeking to find the best use of the funds.

Here's a breakdown on the proposed spending:

- Yakima County Department of Corrections — \$111,914 for a medical team to provide detox services at the jail in effort to cut down on emergency room transfers.
- Juvenile Court — \$95,428 for a family treatment court that would provide wrap-around services to parents with children facing substance abused problems.
- Yakima County District Court — \$559,633 for a mental health supervision team that helps offenders follow court ordered requirements and access treatment services.
- Yakima County Superior Court — \$217,701 for a probation officer and police officer assigned to drug court.
- County Clerk's Office — \$155,501 for additional staff to assure docket coverage in juvenile dependency, therapeutic and treatment courts. The clerk's office has been short-staffed.

- Department of Assigned Counsel — \$195,610 for a paralegal.

Proposed additional expenditures include:

- \$1,028,866 for seven designated crisis responders, who respond to police calls when someone is experiencing a mental health crisis.
- \$166,803 for external services from providers outside county government in DUI court.
- \$821,775 for external service providers in the department of corrections.

These are only proposals at this time as commissioners continue to seek the best way to use the funds, said Commissioner Amanda McKinney.

The county used sequential mapping to assess behavioral health needs in the following systems: criminal justice, homeless response, and youth care.

“We have the data which is fantastic,” she said.

Now commissioners will look at possible projects proposed by service providers, who said a lack of affordable housing was among the top concerns.

Funding programs will vary each year and total amount will be based on what the tax generated the previous year, McKinney said.

“We’re not always going to spend \$3 million, \$4 million every year,” she said. “So every year this could fluctuate.”

A reserve fund also will be established, she said.

Commissioner Kyle Curtis said the county's Department of Human Services soon will publish a request for information for service providers to identify proposed needed programs to be funded.

Those requests will be reviewed in April, he said.

"It's important to me that we get these resources allocated to programs and services that serve our most vulnerable population, those that are often overlooked and go unnoticed," Curtis said.

Reach Phil Ferolito at pferolito@yakimaherald.com.



Phil Ferolito

Yakima County Government, Lower Valley Reporter

Hi, I'm Phil Ferolito, longtime reporter with the Yakima Herald-Republic, where I have gained an array of experience from covering small city governments and school districts to big-picture issues concerning county government, crime and the Yakama Nation, a federally recognized tribe with important historical and cultural ties to the land. I began with the Herald-Republic in Oct. 2000 as a copy editor, designing pages, writing headlines and proof-reading stories. Over the years I have covered four Lower Valley municipalities, Granger, Toppenish, Wapato and Harrah, and the Yakama Nation. My goal always has been to shine a light in dark places and bring readers closer to concerning issues, important people, and other events in our community.