

\$70.9B WA budget proposal boosts funding for behavioral health

Washington lawmakers will offer their own proposals in the legislative session that begins next month.

by [Joseph O'Sullivan](#)

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The Washington State Capitol in Olympia. (Amanda Snyder/Crosscut)

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Washington Gov. Jay Inslee on Wednesday released a proposed \$70.9 billion supplemental state budget that includes \$464 million in new spending for improvements to the behavioral health system and money to combat the opioid epidemic and homelessness.

The governor's spending proposal – his last after three terms as governor – comes just before lawmakers in the Democratic-controlled Washington Legislature return in early January for a two-month legislative session that also kicks off a high-stakes 2024 election year.

“We need more housing encampments removed and people getting housing, we need more young people getting mental health treatment, we need more fentanyl recovery systems to get people off of drugs,” Inslee said in a news conference to announce the budget.

“We need more officers on the street, and this is providing all of those things,” he added.

Inslee’s plan – which includes no new tax proposals – would pay for the [new 100+-bed Tukwila psychiatric hospital](#) bought by the state earlier this year after it was closed by a private company. It also provides \$38.4 million to recruit and retain workers at Eastern State and Western State hospitals, Washington’s two big public psychiatric facilities.

On the opioid front, Inslee’s proposed budget would spend \$64 million on new programs. That includes more than \$11 million for opioid prevention, education and public awareness campaigns and nearly \$12 million to increase treatment programs in jails and state prisons.

The spending blueprints also propose \$100 million for the state Department of Commerce to buy properties that could be quickly converted to housing for people experiencing homelessness. That emergency housing could include hotels that are made into apartments, as well as tiny home villages and enhanced shelters with services. The proposal would support approximately 600 manufactured homes and 550 units of transitional or permanent supportive housing, among other shelter.

The request to lawmakers would continue the governor’s existing initiative to move people out of encampments around the state and into more stable housing.

“Which so far has reduced 30 dangerous encampments ... and we’ve got about 1,000 people now into housing because of that program,” Inslee said. “But it’s essentially out of money, and if we’re going to continue to making progress we’re going to need to have the resources ... ”

In education spending, the budget plan boosts wages for paraeducators by \$3 per hour, according to the Office of Financial Management. Inslee said that would bring a pay bump for roughly 32,000 education workers working in that role.

The proposal would spend \$30.9 million to pay for 80 additional Washington State Patrol troopers and 100 non-field positions for the agency. And it attempts to ease issues with Washington's ferry system by spending \$16.2 million to add staff to boats, and additional dollars to expand crew training and boost recruitment efforts.

In a statement Wednesday afternoon, Sen. Lynda Wilson, R-Vancouver, criticized the governor's budget proposal.

"The good news is that the governor isn't proposing any new taxes," said Wilson, ranking Republican on the Senate's budget committee. "The bad news is that the taxes he has already passed continue to fuel rapid growth in state spending.

"Washington's new income tax on capital gains and the 'hidden gas tax' of the Climate Commitment Act have enabled the governor to more than double state spending during the decade he has been in office," she added.

The governor's budget spends \$330 million in new operating-budget dollars from the Climate Commitment Act, with more money from that law going into other state spending plans, like for transportation.

Washington's carbon-reduction cap-and-invest law has been assailed by conservatives, who appear to have gathered the [signatures necessary to put it on the ballot](#) next November for voters to decide upon.

That sets the stage for one of the governor's biggest political victories to face a vote as Republicans hammer on the law and blame it for higher gas prices.

In his remarks, Inslee touted the carbon-law funding in his proposed budget, pointing to heat pump and weatherization programs he said will save money for low-income people, as well as funding free bus and ferry rides for youth.

“Those payments are going right back to Washingtonians ... in so many different ways,” Inslee said.

In addition to funding projects, the law “puts a lid on pollution,” he added. “It makes it illegal to pollute more than a certain amount, and that’s really important to understand this law.”

State lawmakers in the coming session are tasked with drafting supplemental spending plans that tweak the main [two-year \\$69.2 billion state operating budget](#) approved by the Legislature this past spring, along with transportation and capital-construction budgets.

House and Senate lawmakers will propose their own supplemental spending plans for the session, which is expected to wrap up in early March.

This story has been updated with quotes and details throughout.

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