



Health & Well-Being Institute

DIVISION OF EXTENSION

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ANNUAL REPORT

2023

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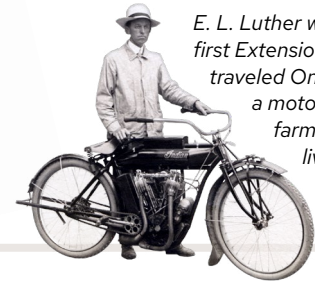
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E. L. Luther was Wisconsin's first Extension agent and traveled Oneida County on a motorcycle to teach farmers about crops, livestock, and farm management.

About Extension

Founded in 1891, UW–Madison Extension embodies the Wisconsin Idea to extend university knowledge to every corner of the state. Extension's first agent started making farm visits in 1912 and that mission continues today through our work with community, family, and business development; youth engagement; and natural resources and well-being programming all across Wisconsin. Our statewide network of educators and specialists on UW campuses across Wisconsin is responding every day to emerging and longstanding hurdles residents are overcoming to compete and prosper. We've identified key opportunities to leverage local resources and lead research to affect change and improve lives for business owners, volunteers, and families. Extension is focused on continuing to support the Wisconsin Idea and ensure its relevance to today's communities. The Division cultivates partnerships and relationships to adapt the practical applications of research in addition to informing studies with community input.

extension.wisc.edu





Health & Well-Being Institute

DIVISION OF EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Working together to create opportunities for health across Wisconsin communities

The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Our health and well-being are influenced by multiple factors, not just individual behaviors but the environments where we live, learn, work, and play, social and community connections, quality education and health care, sufficient income, and housing.

The UW–Madison Division of Extension Health & Well-Being Institute’s programming addresses these multiple factors influencing health. We provide education to increase health-promoting behaviors and build organizational and community capacity to create systems and environments that foster well-being. We partner with state and local agencies, organizations, and coalitions to address community-identified health priorities. We recognize that every individual and community is distinct, and context matters in identifying sustainable solutions to promote and protect overall physical, mental, and social well-being across communities.

This report showcases examples of the Health & Well-Being Institute’s program impacts across Wisconsin communities in 2023. From increasing healthy food access to creating physical activity opportunities and promoting mental health, fostering community dialogue around health issues, and connecting individuals to health insurance and social supports, our evidence-informed and community-engaged programs address health and well-being in all dimensions.

Our impact on individual and community health is a collective achievement made possible through the support and collaboration of our many partners. We all have a role to play in promoting health and well-being, and together, we can achieve more.

Your partner in health,

Amber E. Canto

AMBER CANTO, MPH, RDN

Health & Well-Being Institute Director
University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension



Mission

Extension's Health & Well-Being Institute supports healthier lives by working with and for the people, communities, and tribal nations of Wisconsin to build relationships, facilitate learning, and pursue data-informed and culturally-based strategies.

Values

In living our values, the Health & Well-Being Institute:

- Builds and maintains **positive, trust-based, inclusive relationships**.
- Centers **community voices**, experiences, strengths, and diverse perspectives.
- Takes **purposeful, strategic action** to build capacity in addressing identified needs.
- Engages in **lifelong learning** with the people and communities we serve.
- **Collaborates** to achieve shared goals by integrating diverse perspectives.
- Supports **opportunities for everyone to achieve optimal health**.

Strategic Priorities



Equity in Health

We're committed to creating fair and equitable health outcomes for everyone, using strategies that truly make a difference.



Community-Based Research and Programs

We deliver top-notch, culturally relevant applied research and education. Our goal is to ensure clear and effective communication with everyone — from our team members to the communities we serve.



Resilient Team and Structure

We build a strong, adaptable Health & Well-Being Institute team by focusing on thorough onboarding and ongoing professional development. Our staffing and structure are designed to support our mission and enhance collaboration across programs.



Streamlined Operations

We're always refining our processes to ensure our administrative systems are efficient, effective, and aligned with our program goals.

Programs

The Health & Well-Being Institute consists of four programs and one center.

Our evidence-informed programs are focused on food and nutrition security, chronic disease prevention, mental health promotion, substance use prevention, and access to health care. Rooted in both urban and rural communities, we're working together to help solve the state's most pressing well-being needs and to ensure that all Wisconsinites have the opportunity to live their healthiest lives.



Our Work in 2023

We provide educational programming, support collective action, and promote sustainable community changes to create **opportunities for health for all.**

5 PROGRAMS IN 72 COUNTIES



87,465 individuals reached by policy, systems, and environmental changes for healthy food and physical activity access.



Over **1,200** partners across Wisconsin.



535 clients helped through health justice services.



27,415 consumers helped with health insurance enrollment and health insurance questions.



48,703 participants engaged in health and well-being programming.



Health & Well-Being Institute Focus Areas

Healthy Food Access

Our programs help individuals access healthy, affordable foods.



Health Insurance and Care

Our programs help individuals get access to and support for health care and coverage.



Drug and Alcohol Use Prevention and Recovery

Our programs help individuals, employers, and multi-state partners address substance use disorders and support recovery.



Physical Activity

Our programs help people of all ages to live stronger, healthier lives by providing knowledge, inspiration, and ongoing support.



Mental Well-Being

Our programs teach skills to help individuals manage stress, practice mindfulness, and access mental health resource



Community Health

Our programs connect partners and communities with resources and support to address identified needs and strengthen Wisconsin communities.





FoodWise Food Garden Grant

Public Health Challenge

Access to fresh foods is limited in many Wisconsin communities. When available, fresh food may not be affordable for many residents.

Approach

FoodWise staff implemented 18 food garden projects in 2023. These projects spanned 14 counties and supported the establishment, expansion, or maintenance of seven donation gardens, seven community food gardens, and four school gardens.

This effort involved 61 community partners, 20 Master Gardeners, 143 volunteers, and 287 individuals who are eligible for SNAP-Ed programming to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate the gardens. Volunteers contributed 1,773 hours of service, demonstrating strong community support for food gardens.

FoodWise also provided garden-based nutrition education at 17 sites, reaching 361 participants, including 221 youth, 87 adults, and 53 older adults. Lessons focused on healthy eating, preparing food from the garden, food resource management, the physical benefits of gardening, and food safety practices. Educators used fresh produce from the gardens in food demonstrations and taste testing opportunities.

Results

The gardens produced food for 5,133 people, with produce donated to charitable food sites, distributed at garden sites, used in congregational or school meal programs, or featured in educational activities promoting nutrition and physical activity. Food garden grants reached new and diverse audiences in 2023, focusing on growing culturally relevant foods and designing accessible garden spaces.

At the Sand Lake Community Learning Garden in the St. Croix Chippewa Nation, FoodWise strengthened its relationship with the community. Students from the First Nation’s Youth Enrichment Scholarship program maintained the garden and harvested produce for tribal elders, fostering intergenerational connections. Elders enjoyed fresh, culturally relevant produce while connecting with tribal youth.

One elder was quoted, “It’s so nice to see the youth of our tribe helping harvest food from the garden.”



“It’s so nice to see the youth of our tribe helping harvest food from the garden.”

– ST. CROIX CHIPPEWA ELDER





GenteFuerte Pilot

Public Health Challenge

Spanish-speaking adults in Wisconsin face unique health challenges, including limited access to community-based health programs in their language. This lack of accessible programs exacerbates health disparities, hindering opportunities for Spanish speakers to engage in physical activities that enhance strength, flexibility, and balance. Many aging Spanish-speaking adults are at increased risk for chronic diseases, muscle loss, and falls, often lacking resources to stay physically active and socially connected.

Approach

To address these challenges, the Health & Well-Being Institute was awarded Institute for Clinical and Translational Research funds in 2020 to launch **GenteFuerte**, a Spanish-language adaptation of the **StrongBodies** program. The initiative began by assessing

the health needs of Spanish-speaking communities through three focus groups with former Spanish-speaking participants and potential leaders.

Local community leaders were trained to lead the classes, receiving stipends to support their involvement. Partnerships were established with local organizations for implementation and ongoing support.

Feedback from educators and community partners was incorporated into the training to enhance recruitment, implementation, and sustainability. Program enhancements included adding music, adding cardio bursts similar to Zumba®, and providing childcare and transportation options. Classes were offered at various times to accommodate schedules.

Extension partnered with Wisconsin Public Television to make StrongBodies available online for anyone to participate anywhere. StrongBodies online is available in **English, Spanish, and Hmong** at PBS University Place.



Results

In 2023, GenteFuerte expanded from one class to 13, reaching 130 Spanish-speaking participants. Of those, 91 percent reported improved physical strength, 76 percent experienced positive mental health benefits, and 71 percent felt more socially connected.

GenteFuerte continues to enhance the physical, mental, and social well-being of Spanish-speaking adults in Wisconsin, helping to reduce health disparities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SUPPORT

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Covering Wisconsin's Targeted Outreach Project

Public Health Challenge

During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE), the federal government ordered states to pause the Medicaid renewal process to prevent people from losing health insurance. For three years, members did not have to renew or provide proof of eligibility. After the PHE ended in May 2023, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) gradually reinstated annual renewal and redetermination processes. Over the next 13 months, all Wisconsin Medicaid members were required to renew for their coverage to continue.

Some Medicaid members no longer qualified and needed different coverage. Others were anticipated to be stymied by the process due to a lack of understanding or other barriers. For these reasons, it was estimated that thousands of people would lose their health insurance by failing to renew. Members needed to learn about the renewal process and what to do to keep their coverage.

Approach

In partnership with DHS, **Covering Wisconsin (CWI)** planned an extensive targeted outreach campaign with strict data sharing, privacy, and security agreements. Starting in May 2023, CWI sent texts, drop voicemails, pre-recorded calls, and postcards to thousands of households across the state, alerting them about renewal requirements and how to access CWI's free enrollment assistance services.

Results

More than 300,000 messages were sent to 200,000 households in 23 languages. CWI partnered with UW–Madison's Department of Population Health Sciences to measure the effectiveness of the campaign's various outreach methods. The results of the study will inform future outreach efforts.



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LIFT Wisconsin: Removing Barriers to Health with Legal Tune Up

Public Health Challenge

Many Wisconsin residents face legal challenges that hinder their financial stability and well-being, including issues like driver’s license suspensions, eviction records, and child support orders. These challenges, disproportionately affecting low-income communities, contribute to cycles of poverty and poor health.

Approach

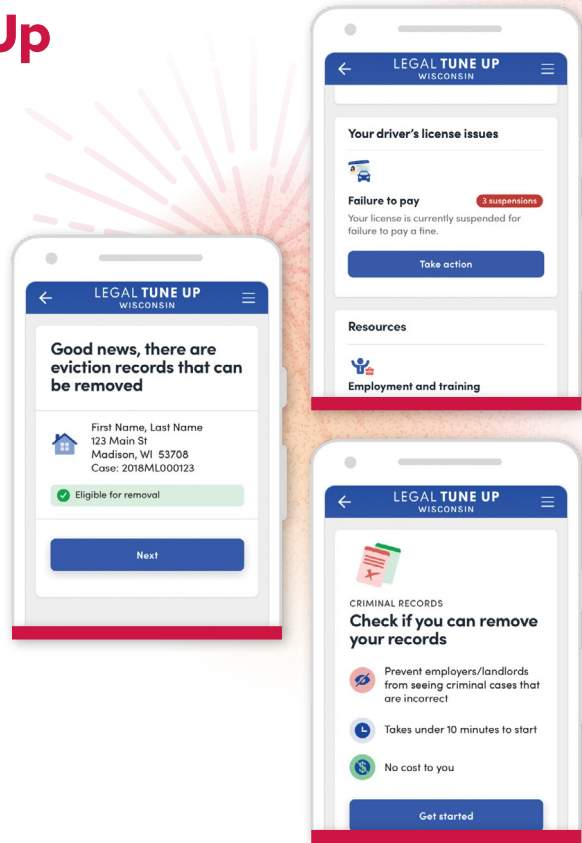
LIFT Wisconsin is a collaboration between the Economic Justice Institute, **Center for Patient Partnerships**, Legal Action of Wisconsin, UW Law School’s civil legal clinics, and the Employment and Training Association. Together, they work to address these barriers through the **Legal Tune Up** tool, a technology-driven solution designed to help residents resolve legal issues without the need for a lawyer. The tool aids in reinstating driver’s licenses, clearing eviction and criminal records, and adjusting child support orders. In 2023, LIFT launched a billboard campaign across several counties, reaching over 61 million impressions with a campaign value of \$421,910. The campaign included designs in both English and Spanish.

“ This tool is useful because people often “give up” when it is overwhelming but this is so simple!”

– LEGAL TUNE UP USER

Results

Since 2022, nearly 15,000 individuals have created LIFT accounts, with 1,200 new users each month. The tool has helped over 300 users adjust child support orders, and 200 individuals have identified eviction or criminal records to clear. LIFT also delivered 88 trainings to over 1,140 participants, supporting them in using the tool to help their communities. The program continues to drive system-level changes that benefit Wisconsin families, creating long-term improvements in access to justice and health.





The Year of Mental Health

Public Health Challenge

Governor Tony Evers declared 2023 the Year of Mental Health, highlighting the ongoing mental health crisis in Wisconsin. Data shows that 26 percent of residents report symptoms of anxiety or depression, 23 percent of adults engage in binge drinking, and opioid overdose deaths are rising. Inequities in mental health persist among youth, rural and farm-connected individuals, and service professionals, making mental well-being a critical public health issue.

Approach

To address these challenges, the **Behavioral Health Program** delivered evidence-based mental health programs to equip community members with the skills needed to recognize and respond to signs of mental health issues.

Results

In 2023, the Behavioral Health Program trained 903 people as Mental Health First Aiders in adult, youth, or teen programs, while 614 individuals received training in the Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) suicide prevention program. Additionally, 170 rural and agricultural-connected individuals completed the Changing Our Mental and Emotional Trajectory (COMET) program, which is based on motivational interviewing. The program also saw 393 adult 4-H program volunteers trained in the Supporting Youth Mental Health program. Furthermore, 331 individuals gained self-care and stress management skills through the Connecting with Our Positive Emotions (WeCOPE) program.

These trainings are a key step toward addressing mental health challenges and building long-term well-being for Wisconsin residents.

Behavioral Health Program Outcomes



92% of adults feel prepared to support youth mental health.



97% can identify signs of a mental health challenge in youth.



97% agree they have the skills to use open communication and active listening to support youth.



95% can cope with their own emotions to better support youth.

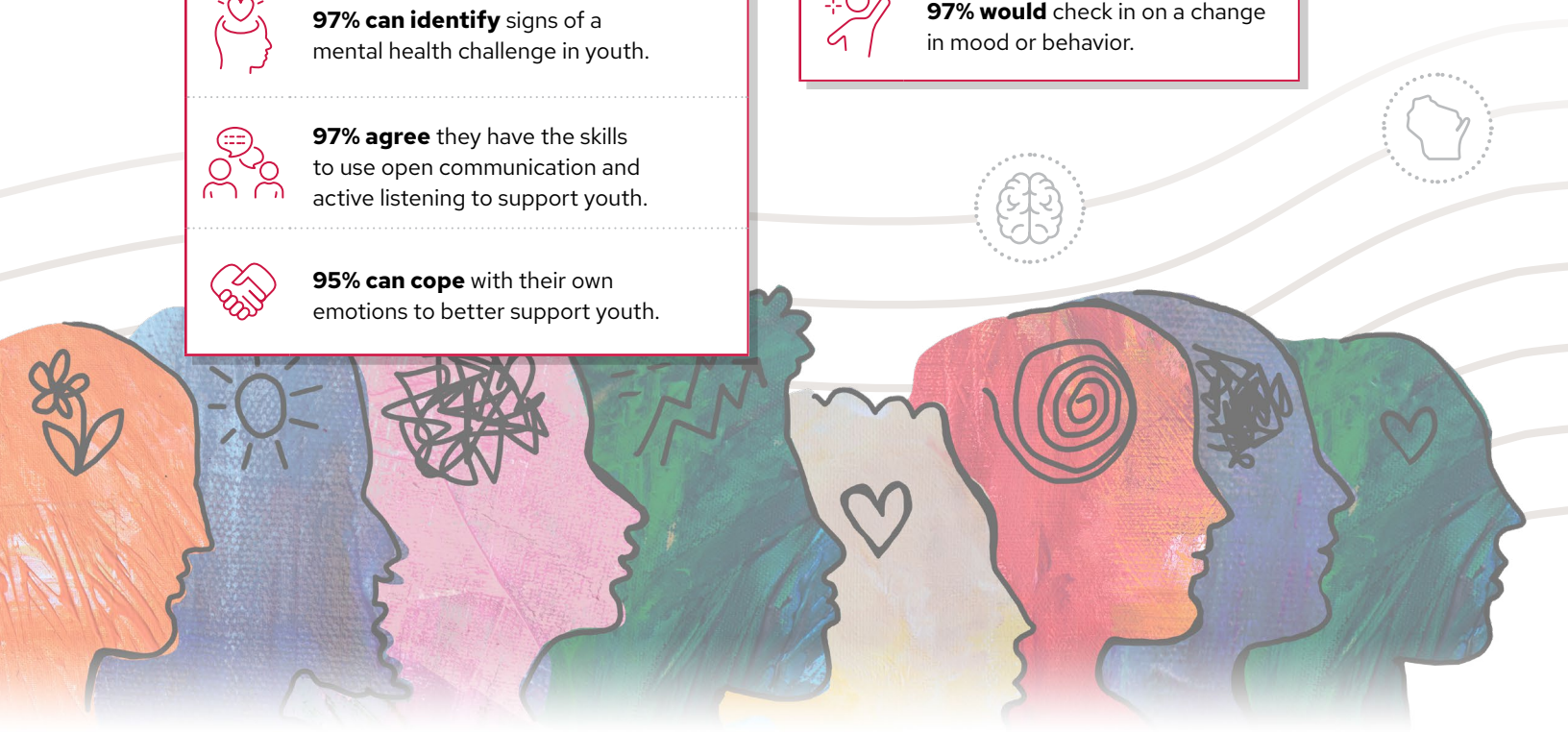
COMET Program Impact



99% are likely to ask someone how they're really doing.



97% would check in on a change in mood or behavior.





Great Lakes Rural Opioid Technical Assistance-Regional Center (ROTA-RC) Project

Public Health Challenge

There is limited access to substance use and mental health education in rural Great Lakes communities.

Approach

The **Great Lakes ROTA-RC project** addresses this challenge by creating a virtual learning community. Through partnerships with Cooperative Extension in U.S. Health and Human Services Region 5, the initiative hosted live webinars featuring specialists in prevention, treatment, recovery, and harm reduction. These events are tailored for professionals, para-professionals, volunteers, and students across various fields. To ensure continuous access, the webinars are archived in a virtual library on the project’s website and shared through social media platforms.

Social Media Outreach

A successful social media campaign to support Great Lakes ROTA-RC and advertise events and resources on topics related to substance use disorders and mental health had a reach of 265,679 individuals across Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. It garnered 3,059 link clicks to the Great Lakes ROTA-RC’s website.

Results

In its first year, the program hosted 22 virtual education events, bringing critical education and sustainable resources that support both immediate and long-term learning needs, to 1,142 individuals in rural areas with topics including substance use prevention and recovery, mental health recovery topics (youth focus), general organization and resource information, and cultural outreach programming.





Deliberative Dialogue Project: Achieving a Healthy Community for All

Public Health Challenge

Local and tribal health departments (LTHD) face challenges making progress with community health discussions when using terms like “health equity” that have become polarizing and politicized in many areas. They struggle with creating a safe space for open dialogue and ensuring that all voices are included in these important conversations.

Approach

LTHDs do not need more health equity training — they need spaces where community members and decision-makers can collaboratively explore what defines a healthy community. LTHDs should not carry this responsibility alone, but they need to be active participants in the process.

To address these challenges, **Extension partnered with public health organizations statewide** and held six deliberative dialogue sessions in three Wisconsin counties. These dialogues were facilitated using an issue guide the group created around what makes communities healthy — without using polarizing language. This method aimed to cultivate trust between community members, Extension educators, decision-makers, and LTHDs by facilitating conversations on the complex topic of community health. The sessions sought to understand community perceptions of health equity

and work toward a shared understanding to advance health and reduce disparities. A key goal was to identify lessons that could be applied to other communities.

Results

Extension educators in three counties — Adams, Jackson, and Marinette — partnered with their LTHD to hold six deliberative dialogues. Seventy-five participants from all three counties engaged in these dialogues, demonstrating the method’s effectiveness in bringing community members together to address challenging community issues. Participants reported increased confidence in their ability to hold civil discussions, with renewed interest in creating healthier communities. As one participant from Adams County noted, “We are interdependent and cannot solve these issues without one another.”

This project highlighted deliberative dialogue’s potential for fostering collaboration and respect in addressing complex health concerns. The lessons learned offer a blueprint for replicating the approach in other communities. In 2024, Extension is partnering with LTHDs and the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service to expand training aimed at enhancing community capacity for deliberative dialogue and focusing on its application in Community Health Assessments and Community Health Improvement Plans.

Team Members

UW–Madison Population Health Institute • Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service • Wisconsin Public Health Forward/Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards • UW–Madison Division of Extension Health & Well-Being educators in Adams, Jackson, and Marinette counties • UW–Madison Department of Family Medicine and Public Health • Adams County Health and Human Services Department • Jackson County Public Health Department • Marinette County Health and Human Services Department

Who We Are

Driving positive change for a healthier Wisconsin, one community at a time.

At Extension’s **Health & Well-Being Institute**, we’re on a mission to make Wisconsin a healthier place to live. We tackle the big challenges — like food security, preventing chronic diseases, improving mental health, and accessing health insurance — through research-informed programs. Whether you’re in a city or a rural area, we’re here, working side by side with communities to ensure everyone in Wisconsin has the chance to live a healthier life.



Health & Well-Being Institute staff reach all corners of Wisconsin.

Find a Health & Well-Being Institute team member near you at **people.extension.wisc.edu**.



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University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension Health & Well-Being Institute • 432 N. Lake Street • Madison, WI 53706

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