

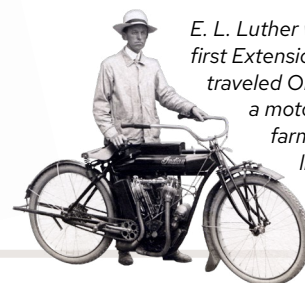
Health & Well-Being Institute
DIVISION OF EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ANNUAL REPORT

2024

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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 long-standing 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

We support health and well-being for all Wisconsinites.

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.

Our work reaches people of all ages, from young children to older adults, with effective strategies to make healthy food choices, cope with daily stress, and access health insurance and care. We partner with community organizations to collect local data and connect to tools and strategies for building healthy communities.

Our 2024 impact report highlights several examples of Health & Well-Being programming, including how the Institute's efforts led to more Wisconsin families enjoying locally grown foods, expanded opportunities for physical activity, and created life-changing connections to health treatment. We also showcase how we support Wisconsin's workforce through recovery-friendly workplaces and the launch of our Regional Community Health Team. We celebrate the many contributions of our statewide network of community-based educators, specialists, and partners who make this work possible.

Thank you for joining us in our efforts to promote health and well-being for all Wisconsin residents. Together, we are building a healthier Wisconsin.

Your partner in health,



Amber E. Canto

AMBER CANTO, MPH, RDN

Assistant Dean and 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**.



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, community health promotion, mental well-being, substance use prevention and recovery, and access to health insurance and 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 2024

5 PROGRAMS IN 72 COUNTIES

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

9,656 individuals enrolled in either Medicaid or in local health plans with financial assistance from HealthCare.gov.



97,013 consumers helped with health insurance enrollment and health insurance questions.



74,595 individuals reached by strategies to support opportunities to access healthy food and engage in physical activity.



933 partners engaged across Wisconsin.



579 clients helped through health justice services.

46,045 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 resources.



Community Health

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





Harvest of the Month: Encouraging Kids and Families to Eat More Wisconsin-Grown Fruits and Vegetables

Challenge

Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables is important for healthy child growth and development and can reduce the risk of chronic health conditions later in life. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, half of children aged one to five years don't eat a vegetable daily, and one in three don't eat a daily fruit. Schools play a key role in improving access to healthy foods and introducing children to new fruits and vegetables.

Approach

To increase fruit and vegetable consumption among Wisconsin students, the Health and Well-Being (HWB) Institute launched the **Wisconsin Harvest of the Month** (HOM) campaign in 2020. Each month, the campaign highlights a seasonal, Wisconsin-grown fruit or vegetable in school meal programs, supports healthy eating education, and strengthens connections with Wisconsin farmers. HOM encourages kids and families to eat more Wisconsin-grown fruits and vegetables and promotes local food purchases in schools.

HOM provides schools with materials that feature 20 Wisconsin-grown fruits and vegetables in English and Spanish, including cafeteria promotions, classroom education, and family resources. HWB educators bring HOM fruits and vegetables into classrooms for nutrition lessons and taste tests. Extension also partners with

schools to incorporate HOM produce into meals and snacks, creating lasting changes in school cafeterias.

To reinforce these efforts, **FoodWise** launched a HOM social media campaign in 2021–24 for parents and caregivers of elementary students. The campaign used Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat ads to encourage families to eat more seasonal, Wisconsin-grown produce and directed them to a website for more information.

Results

In 2024, the HOM campaign reached 194 unique sites across 46 Wisconsin counties, engaging over 101,311 individuals. Schools featured an average of nine fruits and vegetables each year and 66 percent of the produce came from local Wisconsin farms. Taste tests, classroom activities, and family engagement, supported by local Health and Well-Being Institute FoodWise educators, helped expand access to fresh produce, particularly in schools serving families with limited income.

Between 2021 and 2024, 30 percent of food service staff reported increased knowledge of sourcing Wisconsin-grown produce, and 36 percent said they expanded their use of local produce in schools. Additionally, 66 percent of schools reported that students were more willing to try new fruits and vegetables and 57 percent said students ate more fruits and vegetables during school meals because of HOM.

In 2024, the social media campaign reached 103,303 people on Facebook, 83,577 on Instagram, and 70,497 on Snapchat. Of those surveyed, half said they are somewhat or very likely to add Wisconsin-grown fruits or vegetables into their meals because of HOM.



HOM connects students, schools, and families with Wisconsin fruits and vegetables and encourages healthy food choices and healthy families.



Said students were more willing to **try new** fruits and vegetables



Said students **ate more** fruits and vegetables during school meals



97,013 locations + **46** WI counties



101,311+ individuals engaged



Building Strength, Expanding Access: Multilingual StrongBodies

Challenge

Physical activity is essential for maintaining mobility, independence, and overall health, especially for older adults. However, access to structured physical activity programs can be limited by language barriers, geography, and availability of in-person classes.

Approach

StrongBodies, an evidence-based strength training program supported by UW–Madison Extension, helps communities across Wisconsin stay active and healthy and promotes social connection. To expand access, Extension partnered with University Place at PBS Wisconsin to record new StrongBodies classes in English, Spanish, and Hmong/Hmoob — Wisconsin's most commonly utilized languages. Extension coordinated program leaders, class participants, translation services, and cultural adaptations to ensure the content was engaging and accessible. University Place provided studio space, professional production, editing, and subtitle support.

The new English-language StrongBodies video launched in January 2024, followed by the Spanish version, *GenteFuerte: Entrenamiento de Fuerza de por Vida*, in May, and the Hmong/Hmoob version, *Lub Cev Muaj Zog: Ua Kom Muaj Zog Mus Ib Sim Neej*, in October. Extension

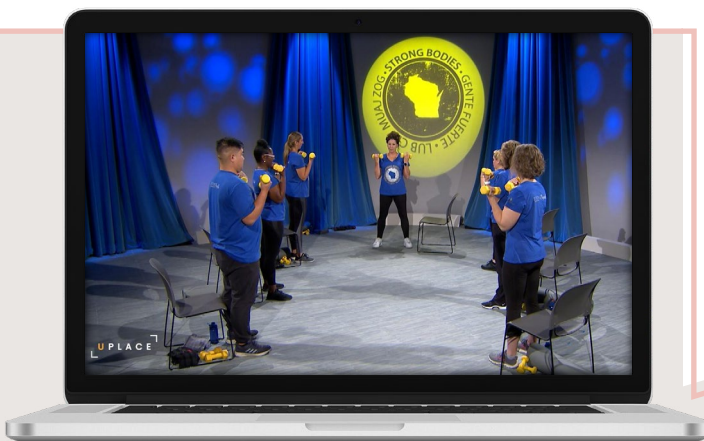
and PBS Wisconsin's Community Engagement Department hosted launch events in Green Bay and La Crosse, featuring live classes, outreach booths, and community activities.

Results

The newly recorded StrongBodies videos are housed on the PBS Wisconsin website and have been promoted through Extension's website, social media channels, newsletters, and networks of StrongBodies instructors and participants. The English video aired four times in 2024 on the Wisconsin Channel, with more broadcasts planned for 2025.

In addition to online engagement, the in-person events drew strong community participation. The Green Bay event, hosted in partnership with Downtown Green Bay, Inc., featured a *GenteFuerte* class at the Saturday Farmers Market, a PBS Wisconsin outreach booth, and family-friendly activities. The La Crosse event, led by a Hmong bilingual educator, invited local Hmong-speaking community members to participate in a live *Lub Cev Muaj Zog* class.

These multilingual resources have expanded accessibility for non-English-speaking communities, increasing opportunities for people across Wisconsin to engage in strength training and improve their well-being.



Extension partnered with Wisconsin Public Television to record new StrongBodies classes. StrongBodies is available online in **English**, **Spanish**, and **Hmong** at PBS University Place.

StrongBodies Digital Engagements*

9,201 StrongBodies views (English)

778 GenteFuerte views (Spanish)

356 Lub Cev Muaj Zog views (Hmong/Hmoob)

*Since 2024



Restoring Trust in Health Coverage: The Impact of Covering Wisconsin Navigators

Challenge

Getting, keeping, and using health insurance is a challenge for many Wisconsinites. Confusing and conflicting information makes it hard to know who to trust. Scams and out-of-state agents may sign people up for programs that don't provide the care they need. Understanding the out-of-pocket costs and finding in-network providers are additional barriers. Navigating these systems can be time-consuming, and by the time someone receives an expensive bill or learns their provider is out of network, they may feel discouraged and delay or forego needed care.

Approach

Covering Wisconsin Navigators are stationed around the state and are essential in helping residents from all 72 counties access health care.

Navigators are federally certified and state-licensed to provide free, unbiased assistance with securing health insurance, finding financial help, and accessing timely care. They help people review health plan options, enroll or renew coverage, resolve billing and coverage issues, and file appeals.

Navigators also work within communities to raise awareness and train professionals at local organizations on Medicaid programs, Affordable Care Act plans on HealthCare.gov, and how to recognize and avoid health insurance scams. Fraudulent health insurance enrollments have surged in the past year, and Navigators are leading the fight against these scams in Wisconsin.

Results

Last year, our outreach, education, and enrollment assistance contributed to a record-breaking number of health insurance enrollments on HealthCare.gov. A total of 313,579 Wisconsin residents selected Marketplace health insurance plans, an 18 percent increase over the previous open enrollment period.

Our Navigators personally assisted 97,013 Wisconsinites with health insurance issues, including enrolling 9,656 individuals in Medicaid or local health plans with financial assistance from HealthCare.gov. Additionally, we spoke with 15,653 individuals at events across the state.



Covering Wisconsin
Navigators personally assisted
97,013 Wisconsinites
with health insurance issues.

“ I recently helped a woman with stage 4 cancer who had been scammed to buy a plan that didn't cover her treatments. She was so upset, she had just given up. Luckily, her daughter found my number and I was able to help her get covered so she can get the treatments she needs. This agent sold a policy for \$294, but it was not a qualified health plan. When she called the agent to get her money back, he tricked her again into signing another contract instead of canceling the plan. There was a lot to untangle, but I was able to get her a qualified health plan from HealthCare.gov that covers her treatments. I also got the agent's ID number from the junk plan paperwork and have filed a complaint with our state regulator. We are still working on getting her money back.” – **COVERING WISCONSIN NAVIGATOR**

covering
Wisconsin
Connect to Care, Engage in Health





Connecting Clients to Life-Saving Treatment: Health Justice Clinic

*At the Health Justice Clinic, we take a holistic approach to advocacy, ensuring clients get the care they need. This is a story of how a **Center for Patient Partnerships** and **Health Justice Clinic** student advocate helped a client access life-saving cancer treatment.*



The Challenge of Accessing Treatment

Susan needed cancer treatment at the Mayo Clinic that could save her life, but as the sole caregiver for her sister, who required 24/7 care, moving to Minnesota for treatment seemed impossible. To make it work, she needed two things: a caregiver for her sister, and funding to cover the cost of nearly \$68,000 for 100 days of care in Minnesota. In Wisconsin, Medicaid's IRIS (Include, Respect, I Self-Direct) program covered her sister's care at home, but Susan wasn't sure if IRIS would pay for care in another state.

Advocacy in Action: Finding a Solution

As part of the **Health Justice Clinic**, student advocates, also known as navigators, work alongside clients to navigate complex health care and insurance challenges, ensuring they receive the care they need. In Susan's case, accessing life-saving treatment required creative problem-solving and persistence.

For weeks, Susan and her navigator contacted disability and aging services, home care agencies, and nursing homes in both states. They explored grants and other housing options but kept hitting roadblocks. "Finally, we caught a break," the navigator recalled. "An IRIS Consultant, Rachel, discovered that out-of-state agencies could become IRIS vendors to be reimbursed by WI Medicaid for temporary moves like Susan's. Our persistence and teamwork had paid off!"

With this breakthrough, Susan found a care agency with available staff, housing in Rochester, and prepared for treatment. During the last week of summer term, she received the news: her cancer treatment was scheduled.

Reflecting on the experience, the navigator shared, "This is just a small window into a complex case where health justice meant a woman receiving life-saving treatment despite being unable to afford a critical component."



“ As a navigator, I gained knowledge about community partners that close the gaps in care experienced by our underserved communities. I valued the impact from connecting folks to programs that worked to fill their needs. This experience now serves me well as a Referrals Coordinator on the MEDiC Council at University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, where I coordinate patient referrals. I have come full circle, connecting patients with community resources as a medical student that I learned of as a resource navigator. I am committed to helping our patients receive the best care no matter their circumstances.”



— NOAH, CURRENT MEDICAL STUDENT, FORMER HEALTH JUSTICE CLINIC NAVIGATOR



Center for Patient Partnerships
Research, Education, Advocacy, Justice.



WeCOPE: Building Self-Management Skills for Emotional, Mental, and Physical Well-Being

Challenge

Managing stress and maintaining emotional well-being are ongoing challenges for many individuals, particularly in the face of life's uncertainties. Research has shown that chronic stress negatively impacts both mental and physical health, increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, and other health conditions. In Wisconsin, communities have expressed a need for accessible and effective strategies to help individuals build resilience, cope with stress, and improve overall well-being.

“Last year was tough for many reasons. WeCOPE was a lifeline in a rough sea.”

— WECOPE PROGRAM PARTICIPANT

Approach

WeCOPE (Connecting With Our Positive Emotions) is an evidence-based program designed to teach participants practical strategies for managing stress and building emotional resilience. This seven-session program is rooted in positive psychology and mindfulness, helping individuals identify and strengthen their personal coping resources. Through guided discussions, interactive activities, and self-reflection, individuals learn skills like gratitude, self-compassion, positive reappraisal, and problem-solving. One participant shared, “It helped me to recognize more tools I could use to help me cope with stressful situations.” WeCOPE is offered both in person and virtually, making it accessible across Wisconsin.



Said they continued using skills learned in WeCOPE



Said WeCOPE had a lasting positive effect on their well-being

Results

The impact of WeCOPE is clear. In a 2024 follow-up survey, **94 percent of respondents** said they continued using skills learned in WeCOPE, including mindfulness, gratitude, and self-compassion. Participants also reported improved emotional regulation, stronger social connections, and a greater ability to navigate stress. Additionally, **91 percent of respondents** agreed that the program had a lasting positive effect on their well-being. As one participant put it, “I am very glad I completed the WeCOPE program. It is a program that would be beneficial to anyone. We all need a little help from time to time to deal with what is going on in our personal lives, work lives, and the world around us.” These findings highlight WeCOPE’s role in fostering long-term resilience and promoting healthier communities across Wisconsin.





Creating Recovery Friendly Workplaces for a Healthier Workforce

Challenge

Substance use disorders impact millions of Americans, with an estimated 23 million in recovery. Stable employment is key to sustaining recovery, yet stigma and workplace policies often create barriers. Many employers lack the resources to support employees in recovery, leading to missed workforce retention opportunities, increased health care costs, and economic instability.

Approach

The **Recovery Friendly Workplaces** (RFW) initiative in Marinette County helps businesses support employees in recovery. A collaboration between UW–Madison Extension and Biehl Bridges to Recovery, RFW provides businesses with tools to assess policies, train staff, and implement recovery-supportive workplace practices. Funded by the Wisconsin Partnership Program, the program is led by the Health & Well-Being Institute.

Peer Recovery Coach and RFW trainer Beka Bussineau highlights the stigma that individuals with past criminal records often struggle to find jobs. RFW helps employers see the value in second chances. The program supports both workplace safety and employee well-being, helping people stay employed while recovering. Research shows that businesses save an average of \$3,200 per employee in treatment-related costs and \$536 in health care expenses.

Results

RFW is making an impact in Marinette County. In August, the Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTTC) Marinette Campus earned Recovery Friendly Workplace certification, reinforcing its commitment to an inclusive, stigma-free environment for employees and students.

Waupaca Foundry Plant 4, the largest employer in Marinette County to earn Recovery Friendly Workplace certification, is another major success. The foundry achieved bronze certification through RFW by updating policies and training to support employees in recovery. This included launching an Employee Assistance Program and wallet cards with local resource information.

By supporting recovery-friendly policies, RFW fosters healthier workplaces, strengthens economic stability, and reduces barriers for individuals in recovery. With employers like Waupaca Foundry leading the way, more employers may follow, opening new opportunities to make lasting, positive changes for employees and the community.



Strengthening Community Health Across Wisconsin: The Regional Community Health Team

Overview

The **Regional Community Health Team (RCHT)** is an initiative of the Health & Well-Being Institute to provide training, technical assistance, and resources to strengthen community-based partners' ability to address health priorities. Launched in Spring 2024, the RCHT expands HWB's statewide reach and impact in advancing community health.

The RCHT provides **training, technical assistance, and capacity building** to local and Tribal health departments, community-based organizations, and coalitions in support of community health assessment and planning processes. The program focuses on three key areas:

Regional Community Health Team Focus Areas



Authentically engaging community in health assessments, planning, and decision-making



Enhancing community health assessment activities



Turning data into action using evidence-based strategies

The RCHT aligns with statewide public health efforts, supports public health system transformation, and advances the [Wisconsin State Health Improvement Plan](#).

Key Highlights and Accomplishments

Since launching in March 2024, the RCHT hired a supervisor and three regional coordinators serving the Southwest, Northeast, and Northwest regions of Wisconsin. These roles are initially intended for rural areas with limited community health resources.

In 2024, the RCHT led trainings on food security, coalition-building, community assessment, and data-driven grant writing. The team also provided technical assistance for county health departments engaged in deliberative inquiry and qualitative data analysis, coalitions developing strategic plans, and multi-sector partners evaluating programs.

Partner Engagement

Since April 2024, the RCHT has prioritized partner engagement to understand Wisconsin's community health landscape. The team intentionally collaborates with Extension colleagues and community partners at local, regional, and statewide levels to assess needs and refine priorities.

Through partner engagement, the RCHT identified key opportunities to provide technical assistance and capacity-building in 2025.

Contact communityhealth@extension.wisc.edu to learn more about RCHT services.

Statewide Partners

Our statewide partners include the UW Population Health Institute, Wisconsin Association for Public Health, Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards, and Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health's Office of Policy and Practice Alignment.

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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