



Health & Well-Being Institute

DIVISION OF EXTENSION

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



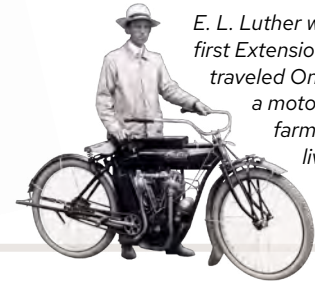
2025

Evaluation of Health Coalition Engagement



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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 collaborations and relationships to adapt the practical applications of research in addition to informing studies with community input.

extension.wisc.edu





Health & Well-Being Institute
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*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. In 2025, we experienced a significant loss of federal funding supporting our statewide FoodWise SNAP-Ed nutrition education and Covering Wisconsin health insurance navigation efforts. Providing healthy food environments and unbiased guidance on health insurance have led to better, measurable health outcomes for communities across the state. This loss of funding impacts hundreds of organizations we work with such as school districts, local governments, and community nonprofits, who are focused on serving the people of Wisconsin. Our reach and service have been lessened through these funding cuts, and with help from collaborators, we are navigating how our structures can continue to provide statewide support. We are grateful to the people and places who have stepped forward to help sustain some of these efforts. We are also grateful to those who have continued to invest in Extension's place-based programming to promote health and well-being.

Coalition engagement continues to be one of our most effective strategies for strengthening local conditions for health. Our long-standing presence in counties allows us to remain a steady collaborator. Extension educators work with communities to bring organizations together, build shared leadership, and coordinate efforts that no single group could take on alone. This year's report highlights how coordinated local action, supported by Extension's trusted relationships, helps move communities from ideas to impact.

We celebrate the dedication of our educators, specialists, and collaborators whose commitment makes this work possible. Thank you for joining us in advancing health and well-being for all Wisconsin residents. Together, we are building a healthier Wisconsin.



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

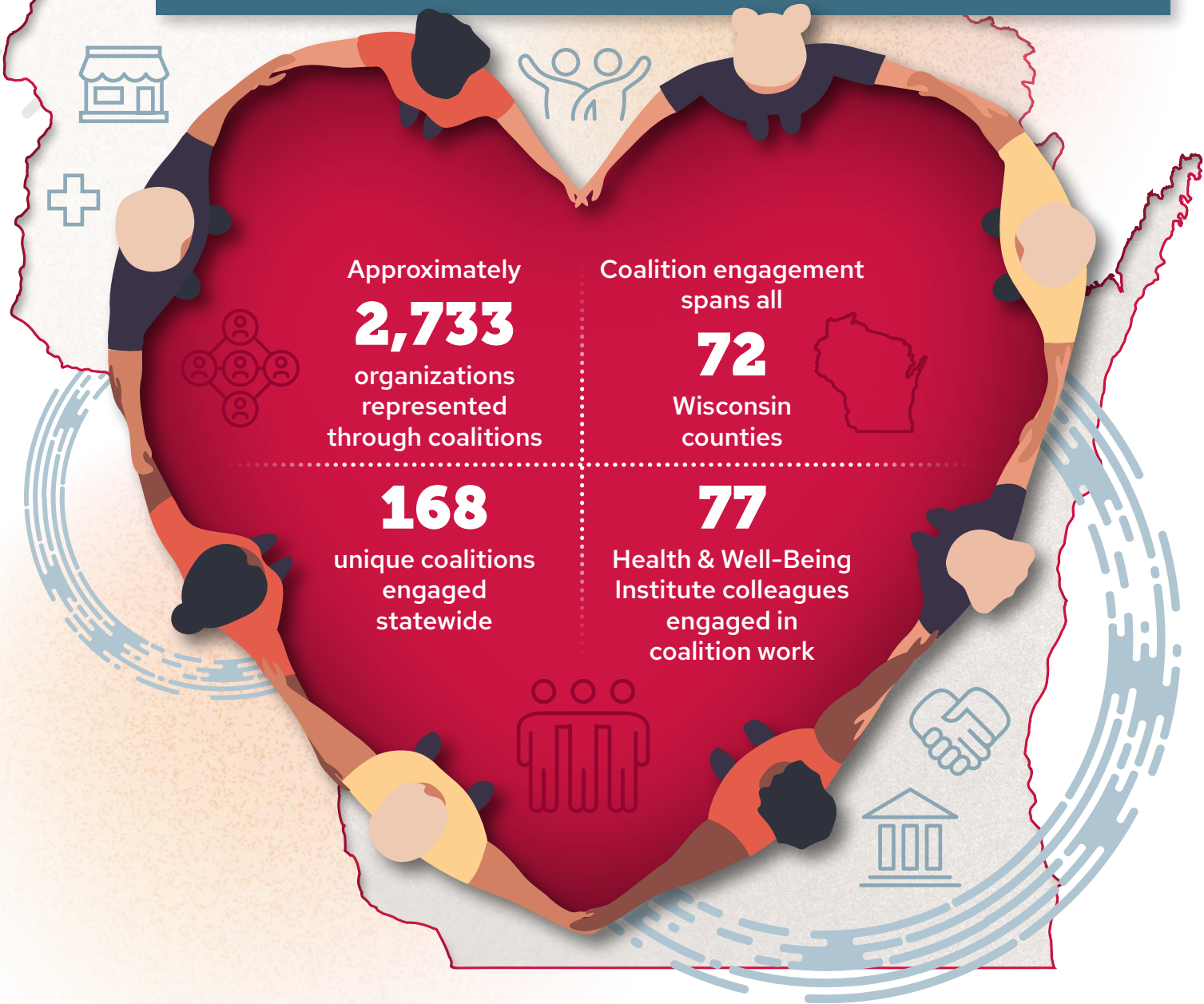
The Health & Well-Being Institute consists of four programs.

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.



COALITION ENGAGEMENT

ACROSS WISCONSIN



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 collaborators 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 communities with resources and support to address identified needs and strengthen Wisconsin communities.



Coalition Work in Wisconsin



Coalition engagement is a primary way the Health & Well-Being Institute works alongside communities to improve local health conditions. Through coalition participation, Extension staff collaborates with residents, local and Tribal public health departments, schools, community organizations, and government agencies to coordinate efforts and address complex health challenges.

Across Wisconsin, Extension-supported coalitions address nutrition security, physical activity, mental well-being, substance use prevention and recovery, community health planning, and access to health care. This work supports shared leadership, coordinated planning, and changes to local systems.



THE SITUATION

Why Extension Engages in Coalition Work

Health is shaped by the places where people live, learn, work, and play. Community conditions such as access to healthy, affordable food, safe spaces for physical activity, quality health care, and mental health support strongly influence the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Wisconsin residents. These conditions vary across communities and are shaped by local policies, resources, and community decisions. As a result, some communities experience higher rates of chronic disease, shorter life expectancy, and greater barriers to maintaining health.

Local and Tribal health departments and community organizations recognize the need to improve access to resources and create healthier community conditions for long-term well-being. However, many lack the time, resources, or capacity to take collective action.

Coalition engagement brings together organizations and residents to coordinate action and strengthen local systems to support sustainable improvements in health. The Health & Well-Being Institute engages in coalition work to support these efforts across Wisconsin communities.

ISSUES ADDRESSED

BY COALITIONS



HOW WE ENGAGE

Coalition Work in Practice

Across Wisconsin, communities rely on collaborative relationships to address health challenges that no single organization can solve alone. In 2024, the Health & Well-Being Institute supported this work through 168 coalitions operating across all 72 Wisconsin counties. About 83% of these were local or regional coalitions, while others operated at the state (14%), Tribal, or national level. These coalitions brought together an estimated 2,733 organizations from sectors including health and human services, education and workforce development, community organizations, and government agencies.

Most coalitions supported by the Health & Well-Being Institute were well established. About half were in the implementation phase, carrying out strategies and working toward shared goals, while 45% were in a maintenance phase, having achieved collective successes and continuing coordinated action. An additional 10% were in an institutionalization phase, focused on strengthening their role, influence, and long-term sustainability within the community. This distribution reflects coalition work that is sustained over time rather than short-term or project-based.

Coalitions supported by Extension Health & Well-Being Institute staff also collaborated in meaningful ways. Over one-third (36%) of coalitions operated at a **collaboration** level, where members built one another’s capacity rather

than working independently. Another 26% reported **shared leadership**, meaning organizations set aside individual interests to focus on shared community goals. These collaborative structures support accountability, continuity, and coordinated action across sectors.

Health & Well-Being Institute staff play an important role in coalition work across the state. More than half serve as participants, and one in four hold leadership positions. In 11% of coalitions, Health & Well-Being staff served as the primary convener, forming or sustaining the coalition. In these roles, staff connected organizations, facilitated trust-based working relationships, and contributed subject matter expertise.

Extension staff also fosters shared leadership and work to ensure coalitions reflect the communities they serve. About 28% of coalitions consistently involve community members in planning strategies, while 53% do so occasionally. Increasing opportunities for community participation leverages local expertise and builds community power.

Health & Well-Being Institute’s leadership helps overcome barriers, build shared accountability, and create systems that respond to local needs. As a result, communities across Wisconsin are forming stronger collaborative relationships and more resilient systems, laying the foundation for healthier lives for all residents.

Health & Well-Being staff on coalitions

“ I have a good balance of interaction with my community, listening to their thoughts and opinions and being able to bring those to spaces where people can make more change, such as coalitions.”

“ [I] try to encourage the coalitions to consider how best to include the voices of the people they are trying to serve—whether those are food pantry users or people experiencing homelessness or other groups.”

“ I have strong skills in facilitation, which helps within the coalitions that I serve in more of a leadership role.”

“ I feel that I’m able to bridge differing opinions and keep meetings moving while still allowing space for all voices to be heard.”





RESULTS

Coalition Impact Across Focus Areas

Healthy Food Access

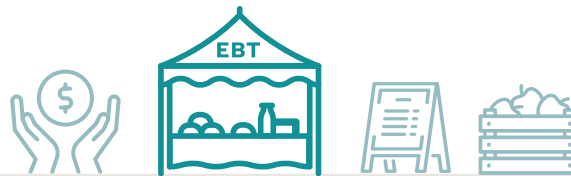


In Fond du Lac County, the Healthy Fond du Lac Steering Committee and Community Health Empowerment Fund advanced a countywide Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE)

initiative to connect locally grown food with child care settings, improving young children’s access to nutritious foods. This work began when local stakeholders presented a Farm to Early Care and Education idea at Wisconsin’s first *Community Health Shark Tank*, a forum that brings community teams together to pitch local health solutions and receive funding and technical support.

Following the Shark Tank, participants launched pilot efforts to connect local producers with early childhood programs and hired a Farm to ECE Coordinator to support the work. The project also became part of a year-long Empowering Community Health Learning Collaborative, which provided funding, evaluation support, and access to content experts to help participants strengthen systems and plan for long-term sustainability.

Through coalition coordination, local producers were connected with child care centers, resulting in about 400 children having more consistent access to locally grown fruits and vegetables. Extension helped bring stakeholders together, supported funding efforts, and connected the project with evaluation and content experts, helping child care programs build local food purchasing practices.



In Central Wisconsin, FoodWise supported the formation of a regional farmers market collaborative to address barriers to using SNAP benefits at farmers markets. While many markets wanted to serve SNAP participants, the cost, administrative work, and lack of shared support made EBT programs (the ability to accept SNAP benefits at markets) difficult to sustain, especially in smaller and rural communities. Rather than addressing these challenges one market at a time, Extension helped stakeholders step back, examine the issue across the region, and identify common needs.

With Extension facilitation, farmers market managers, public health staff, and university researchers worked together to test solutions and coordinate support. This work led to the creation of a Regional Farmers Market Collaborative Coordinator role supported by a USDA farmers market grant administered in Wood County. The coordinator provided hands-on assistance with EBT setup, financial management, training, and resource sharing across multiple markets. Through regular meetings and peer learning, market managers reduced isolation and burnout while strengthening their ability to offer SNAP and nutrition incentive programs. This regional approach helped smaller and rural markets sustain programs they couldn’t maintain alone.



UW-MADISON EXTENSION



Physical Activity



In Rock County, Extension-supported coalition work through the Health Equity Alliance of Rock County helped schools create new ways for students to be active before the school day begins. School health assessment data and post-COVID conversations pointed to growing concerns about social isolation, attendance, and limited daily movement. In response, coalition members piloted a Walking School Bus program. Walking School Bus programs provide organized support to help kids get to school in active, safe ways.

Between 2023 and 2025, five schools participated, with routes serving between 12 and 30 students at a time, depending on the school and season. What began as a pilot quickly became something schools and families relied on. One school reported attendance improving from once a week to four days a week for some students, with overall attendance increasing from 83% to 90%. Routes were intentionally designed to include students who were frequently late or absent, and families shared that children were eager to get out of bed and join the group. As one parent shared, “mornings used to be very difficult, but now it’s no problem at all. My child is up and ready because she wants to join the walkers.”

Beyond physical activity, the Walking School Bus created connection and learning opportunities. Older students supported younger walkers, friendships formed along the route, and schools added learning moments such as nutrition lessons with FoodWise, animal safety education with the Humane Society, and fitness preparation for school mile runs. Coalition members also noted that the program strengthened trust with schools and opened new opportunities for collaboration. Several schools have continued the program, showing its value beyond the pilot phase.



One school saw a 7% increase in attendance.	Kids loved the friendship, conversations, and burning off energy.	Older students served as role models for younger students.
Adults appreciated the positivity and fresh air to start the day.	13–23 students joined the Walking School Bus each day.	Walking School Buses prevented and reduced chronic absenteeism.



Health Insurance and Care

Across Wisconsin, health insurance navigators help people access and enroll in health insurance coverage. Federal funding cuts reduced the state’s navigator workforce by more than half, leaving many communities with fewer options for enrollment assistance. In Milwaukee, Covering Wisconsin collaborated with the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership to respond. The Milwaukee Health Care Partnership is a Milwaukee-based coalition of health care providers, government agencies, and community organizations working together to increase health care coverage, access, and care coordination for vulnerable populations. They developed and delivered training to help community-based organizations become Certified Application Counselors – trained and certified individuals who help consumers understand their health insurance options and enroll in coverage through the Marketplace and Medicaid – and continue serving residents through Open Enrollment.

In July 2025, Covering Wisconsin staff built the training and hosted a virtual session that drew approximately 40 live participants. Organizations participating in the training included federally qualified health centers, United Way, and social service programs connected to public health. The one-hour session covered two

pathways: what it takes for an organization to become a Certified Designated Organization – a formal designation that allows community organizations to provide health insurance enrollment assistance – and the requirements for individuals to become licensed Certified Application Counselors, including 16 hours of state education, federal training, and a certification exam.

The Milwaukee Health Care Partnership connected Covering Wisconsin with organizations outside its existing network that were interested in expanding their roles. Among those energized by the training was an organization serving the Ho-Chunk tribal nation. They followed up with questions and expressed a strong interest in expanding beyond Medicaid enrollments to include Marketplace enrollments. For organizations that had previously received federal funding to provide navigator services and lost that funding due to the cuts, the training provided a path forward. Those who transitioned to Certified Application Counselor status reported seeing more people during open enrollment as a result.

Covering Wisconsin and the Milwaukee Health Care Partnership plan to offer the training again this year, with updated content to reflect the current funding landscape and reach more organizations across the state.



Mental Well-Being



In Washburn County, the Care-Giver Coalition responded to social isolation among aging individuals identified in the Community Health Assessment. The work took place in a fully rural county with a higher-than-average aging population (31% compared to 19% statewide) and no public transportation. These conditions increased barriers to connection and access to support for caregivers and aging individuals. Extension worked with coalition members to turn assessment findings into action through coordinated outreach and caregiver-focused programming.

In 2024, the coalition hosted a countywide caregiver conference attended by 55 caregivers. Sessions focused on connection, stress management, and access to local resources. Topics included scam prevention, the therapeutic role of music, and practical caregiving strategies. Interactive breakout sessions included caregiver improvisation, a painting class, and chair yoga with a sound bath. To reduce barriers to participation, the coalition distributed safety and preparedness resources such as emergency contact visor cards, caregiver seatbelt covers, medical alert bracelets, and emergency preparedness toolkits. Coalition members reported that caregivers felt less anxious and more comfortable leaving their homes and engaging in community activities.

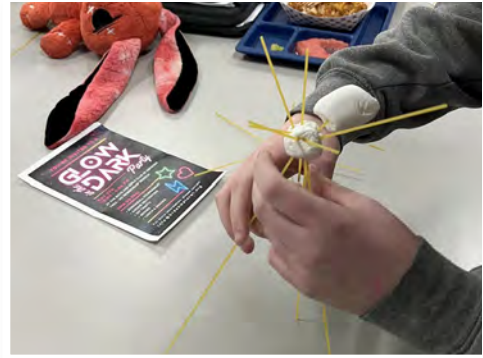


Drug and Alcohol Use Prevention and Recovery



In Winnebago County, the Breakwater Coalition recognized that prevention works best when youth have consistent spaces to connect, have fun, and make healthy choices. Extension supported the coalition in creating these opportunities through weekly youth groups at a middle school and biweekly meetings at the Boys & Girls Club. Over the past two years, youth-led activities reached more than 575 participants, with participation doubling in the last year. Young people planned three community events, including a volleyball tournament and game nights.

The students show up eager and engaged. In feedback surveys, students described the group as “my favorite time of the week.” Extension co-facilitated youth groups, helped students plan activities, and coordinated strategies with coalition members. Since 2019, Oshkosh has seen a 35 percent decrease in lifetime marijuana use and a 12 percent decrease in lifetime alcohol use among high school students. Coalition members report that these regular activities and relationships help youth feel supported and connected, strengthening prevention efforts before substance use begins.



In Adams County, Extension supported the Drug Free Adams County Coalition in addressing stigma related to substance use disorders, including opioid, methamphetamine, and alcohol use, while expanding access to prevention education and local resources. In September 2024, the coalition hosted the **Breaking the Chains: Understanding Addiction community event**, which brought together 53 community members for learning, discussion, and connection.

The event included a keynote presentation, a locally produced video featuring residents with lived experience, and resource tables from local organizations, including Adams County Health and Human Services, Noble Community Clinics, Three Bridges Recovery, Friendship Connection, and public health and tobacco prevention organizations. The conversations and materials shared at the event led coalition members to develop a stigma-reduction training to support continued learning in the community. The event also strengthened collaboration with Three Bridges

Recovery, a nonprofit that trains and coordinates recovery coaches and certified peer support specialists, leading to an expansion of recovery coaching and peer support services in Adams County. This brought new voices into the coalition and helped the community move toward more supportive, recovery-focused responses to substance use.





Community Health



In Clark County, the Extension Regional Community Health Team worked with the Clark

County Health Department and 30 local community health organizations to pilot a deliberative dialogue focused on youth health and wellness. Extension supported the development of discussion guides and facilitated structured conversations with 16 community members to identify local priorities and approaches for improving youth health.

Evaluation results show that 100% of participants reported improved understanding of local health issues, and 92% felt more confident in their community's ability to engage in respectful conversations about complex topics. All facilitators confirmed that the results of the deliberative dialogue would guide development of the county's Community Health Improvement Plan. This connected community voice directly to county health planning, ensuring youth priorities would shape local action.



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COMMUNITY IMPACT SUMMARY

Extension's coalition work helps Wisconsin communities take on health challenges that no single organization can solve alone. Through long-term relationships and steady presence in counties, Extension staff bring people together, share expertise, and help coalitions move from identifying problems to making progress. The examples in this report show what that looks like in practice: more children eating locally grown food, families getting health insurance, students walking to school together, caregivers finding support, and communities expanding recovery services. This is what becomes possible when communities have a trusted collaborator helping coordinate the work over time.



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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