



Bringing Community Members to the Table

How Extension Is Strengthening Local Voice in Public Health Planning

Challenge

Across Wisconsin, the people most affected by local health decisions often have little influence on how those decisions are made. The state's 2023-2027 State Health Improvement Plan called for residents to have more influence over the decisions that affect their own health, and research shows communities with a strong voice in health planning see better outcomes. Local and Tribal health departments and community coalitions often lack the training and tools to engage community members in health assessment, planning, and decision-making.

Approach

UW-Madison Extension Health & Well-Being Institute established the Regional Community Health Team to help close the gap. The four-member team provides training, technical assistance, and capacity building to local and Tribal health departments, coalitions, and community organizations across Wisconsin. In 2025, the team led 12 statewide training workshops for 183 participants on topics including qualitative data analysis, community engagement strategies, and focus group facilitation.

With support from the Wisconsin Institute of Citizenship and Civil Dialogue, the team began piloting deliberative dialogue: an evidence-based approach where residents with different views work through trade-offs to reach shared priorities. In Clark County, the team worked with the Clark County Health Department and 30 local organizations to pilot this approach around youth health and wellness, helping frame local issues, develop discussion guides, and facilitate conversations with 16 community members.

The team led a similar process with Oneida Nation on mental health, working with 12 local organizations to identify issues, build discussion guides, and facilitate conversations with 34 community members and Tribal staff.

These sessions helped local organizations integrate community input directly into their Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIPs) and strengthened local capacity to lead productive conversations on complex health issues.

The team also provided technical assistance to 168 organizational and coalition groups statewide, including the Farmer Angel Network, the Sauk County Partnership for Prevention, and the Aging Coalition of Door County, sharing evidence-based resources and facilitating community health planning activities.

Results

The Clark County deliberative dialogue helped participants build their understanding of local health issues and confidence in having civil conversations about challenging topics. Facilitators also confirmed that the results would guide development of the county's Community Health Improvement Plan.

- **100%** of Clark County participants reported improved understanding of local health issues
- **92%** felt more confident that their community could engage in civil conversations about challenging topics

In Oneida Nation, all participants valued the input of others and reported improved understanding of community health issues. Facilitators said the process fostered meaningful participation and guided development of the Community Health Improvement Plan.

Across the broader training program, results show that participants gained skills and confidence to involve community members in public health decision-making:

- **94%** of training participants agreed or strongly agreed that they increased their readiness to incorporate community input into public health decision-making
- **99%** reported gaining practical tools and tips to support their community health work
- **~81%** of participants represented local or Tribal health departments

Together, these results show how training and technical assistance help local and Tribal organizations and health departments bring community perspectives into health planning, giving residents a greater role in shaping the priorities that affect their health.

