

The background of the cover is a photograph of the Wisconsin State Capitol building. The building is a large, light-colored stone structure with classical architectural features, including columns and a prominent dome. The dome is covered in green copper and has a glass-paned upper section. An American flag flies from a tall pole on top of the dome. The sky is a deep blue with scattered white clouds. In the bottom left corner, the branches of a tree with green and some autumn-colored leaves are visible.

# WISCONSIN Counties

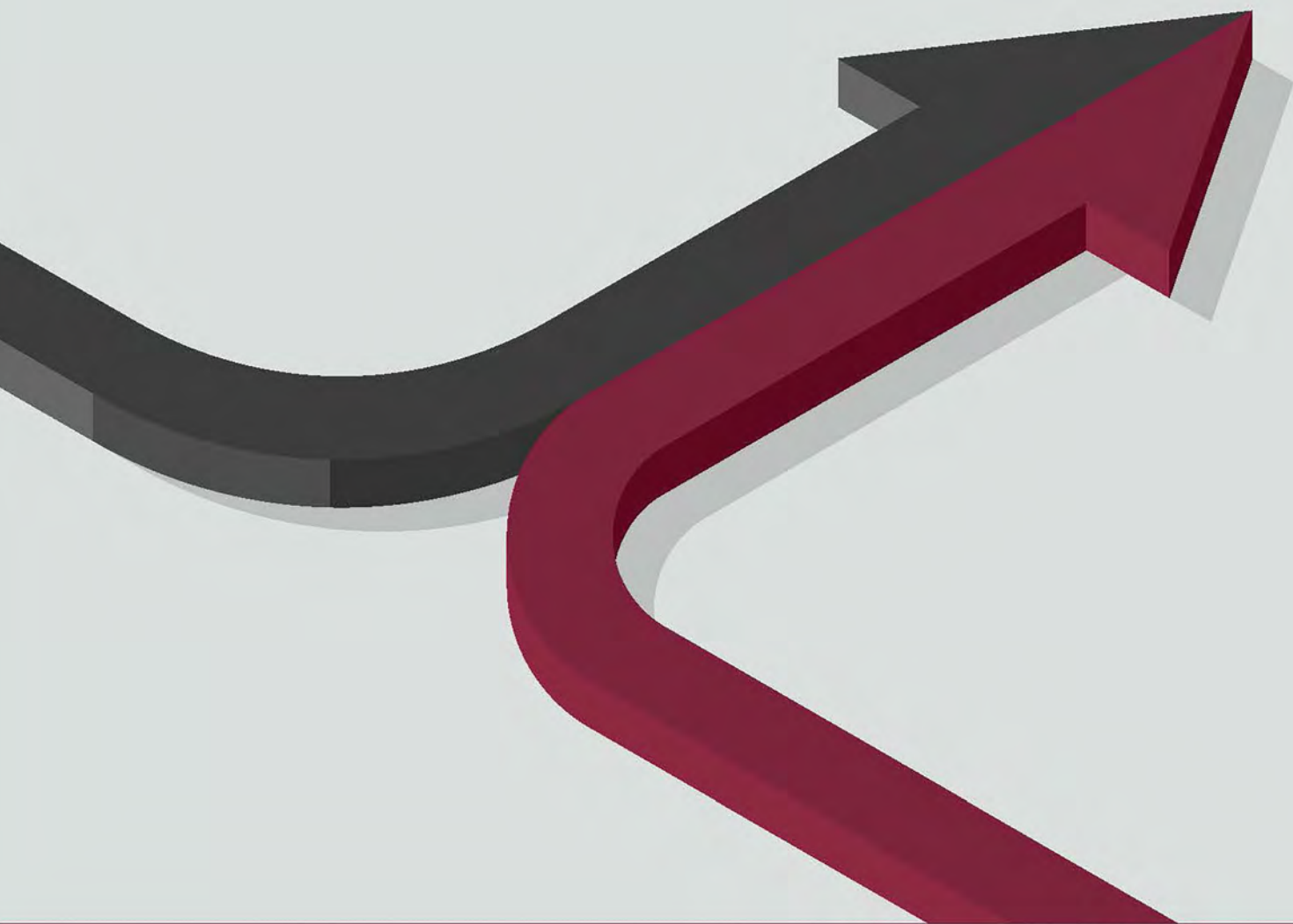
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## Serving the People

Wisconsin's county  
constitutional officers

**ALSO:** 2025-27 State Budget Signed Into Law | AI in Action, Part 3





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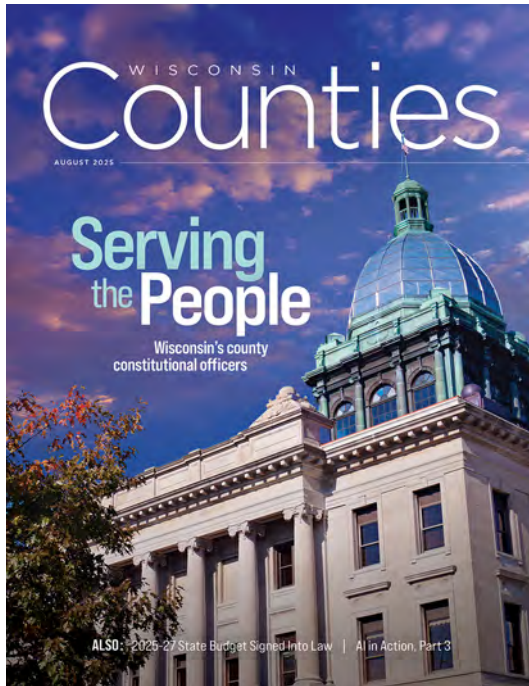
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# WISCONSIN Counties

AUGUST 2025

| Volume 89, Number 8



*Manitowoc County Courthouse*

## 6 ON THE COVER

### Serving the People

- A Unique Role: County Constitutional Officers
- County Clerks: Defenders of Democracy
- Registers of Deeds: Stewards of Land and Vital Records
- County Treasurers: The Linchpin of County Finances
- County Sheriffs: Peacekeepers and Law Enforcers
- Clerks of Circuit Court: The Cornerstone of Our Judicial System
- County Coroners: A Legacy of Service

## 4 FROM THE PRESIDENT

Learning Together as We Adapt to Today's Digital Transformation

## 22 2025-27 STATE BUDGET SIGNED INTO LAW

A win for counties

## 24 PUTTING KIDS FIRST

50 years of child support

## 28 MEET THE NEW COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Gordon Hintz of Winnebago County

## 30 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION, PART 3

Using AI safely and effectively

## 32 UNIQUELY WISCONSIN

Season Four to Highlight Some of the Best Our State has to Offer

## 34 RESEARCH ROOM

Data Points: The Gap Between Numbers and Experience

## 36 JOIN US IN SAUK COUNTY!

Updated schedule; Team Wisco; Honoring the women who redefined America's pastime

## 38 NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Upcoming events; Forward Analytics spotlights household debt; New "#LocalGovMatters" podcast; Exclusive Amazon Prime offer; O'Connell recognized; Migration reports available

## 40 FEDERAL UPDATE

Sweeping Medicaid and SNAP Overhaul Shifts Costs to Counties and Reduces Access

## 44 LEGAL ISSUES

An Introduction to Levy Limits and the Debt Service Exception



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## From the President

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Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

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# Learning Together as We Adapt to Today's Digital Transformation

In June, over 150 county, city, town and village officials convened in Appleton for the inaugural Local Government Summit. It was an energizing day of engagement, learning and discussion, focused on the transformational power of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity to intersect with nearly every aspect of local governance.

The Local Government Institute of Wisconsin, a unique partnership between the Wisconsin Counties Association, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and the Wisconsin Towns Association, hosted the event. The group works to strengthen the role of local government through collaborative problem-solving and amplify our collective voice in addressing shared challenges. The summit furthered this mission by placing AI and cybersecurity at the center of the day's discussions.

While topics such as workforce trends and civic engagement were part of the agenda, they were explored through the lens of how emerging technologies are reshaping public service and how local governments must adapt. The consistent theme: proactive governance is essential in an age of increasing complexity and risk.

The morning kicked off with a broad view of Wisconsin's economic and demographic future, paired with a clear message that the era of advanced technology isn't coming, it's already here. Local governments have a responsibility to adapt and innovate while safeguarding their operations and residents.

From automating routine tasks to improving data-driven decision-making, AI tools offer local governments immense potential to become more efficient and enhance civic

engagement. But the rapidly evolving technology comes with serious risks, especially if implementation outpaces governance. Presenters emphasized the importance of employee training, clear and thoughtful policies, and strong accountability measures as new tools are explored and put in place.

With cyber incidents occurring with greater frequency and sophistication, cybersecurity was another urgent focus at the summit. A panel of experts led a discussion on identifying vulnerabilities, strengthening preparedness, and crafting response strategies. An IT professional, law enforcement representative, insurer, and engineer helped identify actionable steps attendees can take to protect their systems and data.

The summit also highlighted the role of collaboration, especially with Wisconsin's academic institutions, in building cybersecurity capacity and preparing the next generation of public servants and technical experts. Local governments are not alone in facing these challenges. We have partners and proven models to help us move forward.

As we look ahead, I encourage all members to mark their calendars for the WCA Annual Conference, September 21-23, in Sauk County, where we will continue these critical conversations. Programming will include sessions on cybersecurity readiness, compliance in the digital age, emerging AI policy frameworks, and the latest trends affecting Wisconsin counties.

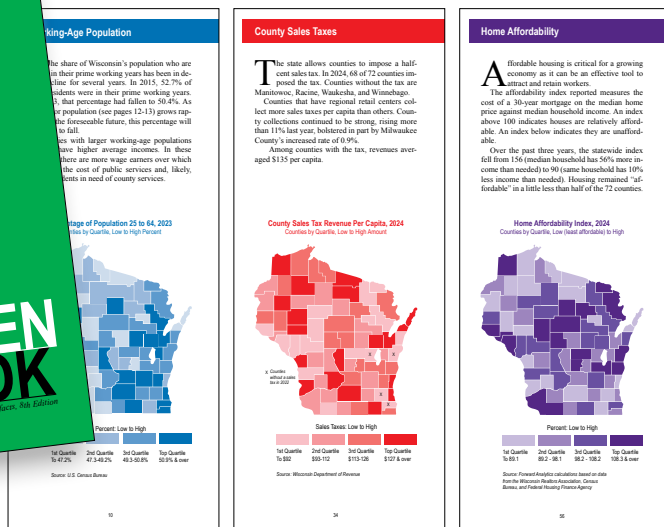
In a time of rapid change, Wisconsin counties are not standing still. We are learning together, planning together, and taking action.

See you in September. ■

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**Stay connected.** Visit [wicounties.org](https://wicounties.org) to access resources and learn about events.





## The 2025 Green Book

**For county governments to successfully carry out their mission,** strategic long-range thinking is critical, with data playing an important role. Forward Analytics, a division of the Wisconsin Counties Association, is pleased to present the 8th edition of "The Green Book, a Book of County Facts," which provides key data for each county.

The annual fact book includes information on each county's government structure, population, finances and economy. County officials can use the data for economic development planning, gauging future service needs and much more.

Visit [Forward-Analytics.net](https://forward-analytics.net) for more information and to download a copy. Each county clerk receives enough copies to distribute "The Green Book" to all county board supervisors and 10 department heads. If members would like additional copies, contact the WCA at (608) 663-7188 or [mail@wicounties.org](mailto:mail@wicounties.org).



## WISCONSIN Counties

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# A Unique Role

## COUNTY CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICERS

*By Andy Phillips, Attorney, Attolles Law, s.c.*

County constitutional officers are unique. They have no counterpart in town, village, city, state, or federal government. This makes defining the role of a county constitutional officer challenging. Are they really county officers? Other than the electorate, who do they serve? How are a constitutional officer's powers defined if the Wisconsin Constitution is silent in this regard?

This article is intended to provide an overview of Wisconsin county organizational structure and how constitutional officers fit within that structure. But similar to many other areas of the statutes relating to counties, the state Legislature has not clearly defined the relationship between a constitutional officer, the county board and county administration.

Article IV, Section 22 of the Wisconsin Constitution provides the Legislature with the authority to “confer upon the boards of supervisors of the several counties of the state such powers of a local, legislative and administrative character as they shall from time to time prescribe.” This is the constitutional foundation for Chapter 59 of the Wisconsin Statutes, and the various other statutes defining the role of county government in Wisconsin.

As set forth in Chap. 59, each county is governed by a board of supervisors, which is responsible for exercising the “powers of a county as a body corporate.”<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking, and although not explicitly stated in Chap. 59, county boards are considered the legislative (policymaking) body in county government.<sup>2</sup> In addition to county boards,

counties are required to choose one of three forms of administration: county executive,<sup>3</sup> county administrator,<sup>4</sup> or administrative coordinator.<sup>5</sup> The administrative branch of county government is responsible for executing the county board's policy directives.<sup>6</sup>

In essence, Chap. 59 provides policymaking authority to a county board and administrative authority to a county executive, county administrator, or administrative coordinator.<sup>7</sup> In broad terms, this means county administration is responsible for directing the county workforce in a way that effectuates the county board's policy directives.

This structure, however, does not fit when applied to constitutional officers who are elected at large and have distinct statutory authority. What does this mean in terms of a constitutional officer's role in county government?

To begin to answer this question, we start with Article VI, Section 4 of the Wisconsin Constitution where county constitutional officers are recognized. Unfortunately, this provision is silent as it relates to the duties or role of constitutional officers. As a result, specific duties and roles are left to the Legislature and, in the event of a dispute, the judiciary.

There are numerous examples where the Legislature has clearly defined a constitutional officer's duties (e.g., county clerk,<sup>8</sup> county treasurer,<sup>9</sup> etc.). However, none of the

*Continued on page 8*



*Continued from page 7*

statutes providing the duties of a constitutional officer describe with specificity the nature of the relationship between a constitutional officer, the county board and county administration. This is perhaps because of the unique role a constitutional officer fills in county government.

Constitutional officers enjoy constitutional recognition and protection. Unlike many department heads in county government, their offices were not created through the exercise of a county's home rule authority.<sup>10</sup> Instead, constitutional officers serve as the local presence of the state on statewide matters of importance. For example, sheriffs are charged with enforcing state laws in addition to county ordinances. County treasurers collect state and local taxes. Registers of deeds record state land records. And the list goes on as one reviews the various statutory duties of county constitutional officers.

Constitutional officers are elected at large to perform their constitutional and statutory functions. Further, they may only be removed by: 1) by the electorate through a petition process;<sup>11</sup> 2) the county board in the case of clerk or treasurer; 3) the governor in the case of sheriff, coroner, or register of deeds; or 4) the majority of judges of the circuit court in the case of the clerk of circuit court.<sup>12</sup> In all cases except a recall by the electorate, there must be "cause," as defined in Wis. Stat. § 17.001, for their removal. Based upon these protections, there is no typical employer-employee relationship between the county and a constitutional officer.

Unfortunately, these unique characteristics can lead to confusion and opportunities for disagreement between county boards and administration, and constitutional officers. But the unique characteristics can also provide an opportunity for collaboration. Just because the statutes do not identify a constitutional officer as a department head in the county does not mean the officer should not be expected to manage a workforce or budget.

Similarly, even though the statutes fail to provide a constitutional officer with a direct reporting mechanism

to the county board or administration does not mean the officer should not work with a county board committee and administration on policy initiatives. In other words, the "gray areas" in the statutes should be viewed as an opportunity for discussion regarding roles and responsibilities within a particular county's organizational structure.

As one might imagine, given the lack of statutory clarity on roles and responsibilities, there has been a fair amount of litigation surrounding a constitutional officer's place within the county structure. An in-depth legal analysis of that precedent is technical and lengthy. For now, we encourage county boards, administration, and constitutional officers to collaborate with one another on how to best provide organizational structure to the various offices, functions, and duties within the county.

If there is a question relating to which part of county government "owns" a particular duty or power, ask corporation counsel. If further guidance is needed, please contact the WCA as we would be happy to contribute to the collaboration as well. ■

*Attolles Law, s.c. represents Wisconsin counties, school districts and other public entities in the state of Wisconsin. Its president and CEO, Andy Phillips, has served as outside general counsel for the Wisconsin Counties Association for more than 20 years.*

**NOTE:** This article was initially written for the June 2021 issue of *Wisconsin Counties* when Phillips was employed by his former law firm. The article has been edited for reprinting.

*... the "gray areas" in  
the statutes should be  
viewed as an opportunity for  
discussion regarding roles  
and responsibilities...*

1. Wis. Stat. § 59.02, et seq.
2. *Schuetz v. Van De Hey*, 205 Wis. 2d 475 (Ct. App. 1996).
3. Wis. Stat. § 59.17.
4. Wis. Stat. § 59.18.
5. Wis. Stat. § 59.19.
6. *Schuetz*, supra.
7. While an in-depth discussion of the distinctions between a county executive, county administrator, and administrative coordinator is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize several counties provide little inherent administrative authority to their administrative coordinator, which is allowable under Wis. Stat. § 59.19.
8. Wis. Stat. § 59.23.
9. Wis. Stat. § 59.25.
10. Wis. Stat. §§ 59.03, 59.51, 59.52, et seq.
11. Wis. Stat. § 9.10.
12. Wis. Stat. § 17.09.



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# County Clerks

## DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY

*By Trent Miner, County Clerk, Wood County, and Immediate Past President, Wisconsin County Clerks Association*

In a 1959 speech, then-Waukesha County Clerk Richard Sylvester, who was serving as Wisconsin County Clerks Association president, said: “After 15 years of service as a county clerk in the county of Waukesha, I begin to think that I know something about the work of a county clerk. Hardly a day passes, however, when some variation or new twist to the general pattern is added.”

That statement certainly rings true, perhaps even more so in 2025, as it pertains to one of our most public-facing duties: serving as the chief election official of the county.

State statutes detail many of the responsibilities and duties of county clerks. We serve as the clerks of the county board of supervisors, issue marriage licenses, process payment orders, record proceedings, apportion taxes, compile an annual directory, provide timber harvest notices, and administer the dog license program, among other responsibilities. However, our role in elections is arguably the most important.

Since the presidential election of 2000, numerous changes have been made at the federal and state levels to enhance the integrity of various processes used in administering elections. The federal Help America Vote Act of 2002 established several mandatory minimum standards to improve voting systems and address voter access issues identified after the 2000 election. Wisconsin county clerks took the lead in implementing these changes and in training to ensure that our municipal clerk partners also complied with the various mandates.

After the 2016 elections, the issue of election security came to the forefront. Once again, our county clerks led the way in ensuring that our county systems were secure and that the results reported from our offices on the various election nights were accurate. In many counties, additional audits were conducted to confirm the accuracy of these results.

The 2020 elections brought heightened scrutiny and, at times, several false claims that turned county clerks into



fact-checkers and rumor-control specialists. This situation made county clerks and election administrators targets of intimidation and threats. Never, in my wildest dreams, did I anticipate that county clerks would receive threat assessments directed to our offices. Despite everything, we continued to do what we do best: ensuring that the laws governing elections were upheld, that everyone entitled to cast a ballot could do so, and that all votes were counted correctly.

Through it all, county clerks continue to take the lead, training our municipal clerk partners and chief election inspectors, and ensuring that all our elections are free, fair, and accurate.

County clerks, like municipal clerks, are regarded as the “information station.” Our offices must be knowledgeable

*Through it all, county clerks continue to take the lead, training our municipal clerk partners and chief election inspectors, and ensuring that all our elections are free, fair, and accurate.*



about every county department to ensure that inquiries, whether from the public or policymakers, are directed to the correct location.

Indeed, the elected policymakers would not hold

their positions without the county clerks ensuring that their elections are conducted according to the law. This includes the offices of all county constitutional officers, none of whom can fulfill their duties without the county clerks administering and certifying their elections to office.

In numerous publications, county clerks have been labeled the “defenders of democracy.” Each of the 72 Wisconsin county clerks wears that badge with honor, as we remain a vital link between policymakers at various levels of government and the electorate. ■

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# Registers of Deeds

## STEWARDS OF LAND AND VITAL RECORDS

*By Heather Kuhn, Register of Deeds, Dunn County; Mary Denk, Register of Deeds, Clark County; and Kyle Franson, Register of Deeds, Oneida County, and President, Wisconsin Register of Deeds Association*

Wisconsin's tradition of preserving land records goes back over two centuries, well before statehood. The earliest deed in the state dates to 1793 and was officially recorded in Brown County in 1828. Acknowledging the significance of public land records, the register of deeds office was established in the county in 1836, and in 1848, the state Constitution designated it as a permanent component of every county government. Registers of deeds are elected every four years, with any vacancies filled by the governor.

Despite our long history, many people remain unaware of the vital role played by their local register of deeds. Our responsibility as constitutional officers is to faithfully carry out the statutory duties of the office, primarily outlined in Wis. Stat. § 59.43 and Chapter 69. Registers not only preserve the history of our state's land and its people, but they also hold a significant position in the legal framework that supports property rights and vital records.

Over time, records have evolved from handwritten transcripts to photocopies, scanned images, and now, fully electronic submissions, reflecting significant technological progress. These advancements have strengthened protections for our office and the people we serve, particularly in property fraud notifications and cybersecurity. Registers of deeds remain dedicated to improving service quality to support effective record management and protect constituents.

Established in 1918, the Wisconsin Register of Deeds



***Registers not only preserve the history of our state's land and its people, but they also hold a significant position in the legal framework that supports property rights and vital records.***

Association collaborates with a diverse network of partners across government and private sectors to enhance our services. Strengthening our connections with legislators has always been a priority for the association. Most

notably, this past year, we focused on ensuring that 2023 Wisconsin Act 235, known as the Judicial Privacy Act, was crafted in a manner that allows for effective implementation while also safeguarding the best interests of judicial officers.

Registers of deeds must interpret and implement Wisconsin statutes daily when recording land records, which serve as the foundation for real estate transactions, tax rolls, GIS mapping, zoning, and other essential county

functions. In 2024 alone, over \$907<sup>1</sup> billion in real property ownership records were maintained across Wisconsin.

Registers of deeds serve as custodians of vital records, including

birth, marriage, divorce, and death records. The register of deeds files these documents and has the authority to issue certified copies statewide, providing residents access to their essential records at any county register of deeds office. This accessibility is convenient for obtaining a Real ID, driver's license, insurance, marriage license, or even a new job.

As a constitutional officer, the register of deeds is dedicated to strengthening Wisconsin by safeguarding critical records and ensuring they remain accessible for generations to come. ■

1. Wisconsin Department of Revenue, 2024 equalized value of real property.





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# County Treasurers

## THE LINCHPIN OF COUNTY FINANCES

*By Scott Henke, County Treasurer, Washington County, and Past President, Wisconsin County Treasurers Association*

In the intricate machinery of Wisconsin county government, the county treasurer stands as a crucial linchpin, responsible for safeguarding public funds and ensuring the fiscal health of the community. Often working diligently behind the scenes, the treasurer's multifaceted role extends far beyond simply collecting and disbursing money. For those unfamiliar with the breadth of their responsibilities, understanding the scope of this office reveals its indispensable contribution to the efficient and transparent operation of our counties.

At its core, the county treasurer acts as the chief custodian of county funds. This encompasses the meticulous management of all incoming revenues, from property taxes and state aid to various fees and grants. Employing robust accounting practices and internal controls, the treasurer ensures the secure deposit and accurate recording of every dollar entrusted to the county. This responsibility demands unwavering attention to detail and a commitment to the highest ethical standards, building public trust in the management of taxpayer money.

Beyond safeguarding incoming funds, the treasurer plays a vital role in disbursing county payments. Whether processing payroll for county employees, paying vendors for essential services, or distributing funds to local municipalities and school districts, the treasurer ensures that obligations are met accurately and in a timely manner. This requires close collaboration with other county departments and a thorough understanding of budgetary allocations and legal requirements.

However, the duties of a Wisconsin county treasurer extend beyond these fundamental tasks. They often serve as the county's primary investment officer, responsible for strategically investing idle funds to maximize returns while adhering to state statutes and prudent risk management

principles. This involves careful analysis of market conditions and the selection of appropriate investment vehicles to generate additional revenue for the county and its taxpayers.

Furthermore, the treasurer plays a significant role in the property tax system. They are responsible for billing and collecting property taxes, a cornerstone of local government finance. This involves maintaining accurate tax rolls, processing payments, managing delinquent taxes, and conducting tax foreclosure sales when necessary. This function directly impacts every property owner within the county and requires clear communication and a thorough understanding of relevant state laws.

In addition to these core responsibilities, the county treasurer often serves on various county committees and boards, contributing their financial expertise to policy discussions and decision-making processes. They may also be tasked with managing special funds, such as those related to foreclosures or trust accounts, further highlighting the diverse nature of their portfolio.

The role of the Wisconsin county treasurer is not static. It demands continuous adaptation to evolving state laws, technological advancements, and the changing needs of the county. Today's treasurer must be proficient in utilizing sophisticated financial software, navigating complex regulations, and communicating effectively with the public and other stakeholders.

Wisconsin county treasurers are far more than bookkeepers. They are vital financial stewards, astute investment managers, key players in the property tax system, and trusted advisors within county government. Their dedication to accuracy, transparency, and sound financial management ensures the stability and prosperity of our Wisconsin counties, making their contribution truly indispensable. ■







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# County Sheriffs

## PEACEKEEPERS AND LAW ENFORCERS

*By Todd Delain, County Sheriff, Brown County, and President, Badger State Sheriffs' Association*

**T**he role of a sheriff has deep roots in the English legal tradition. The position was originally held by a royal official responsible for keeping the peace throughout a shire (county).

When English colonists arrived in North America during the 1600s, they brought this institution with them. Early colonial sheriffs were appointed to collect taxes, oversee jails, execute court orders, and maintain law and order. As the colonies grew and evolved, so too did the office of the sheriff.

Following the American Revolution, sheriffs became elected officials, reflecting the democratic ideals of the new republic. By the 19th century, nearly every state had adopted some form of local sheriff's office, carrying on many of the same duties while also being specifically responsible for law enforcement in rural areas not served by municipal police departments.

In Wisconsin, the role of the sheriff dates back to

territorial days, with the first sheriffs appointed in Brown and Crawford counties 30 years before statehood.

Gradually, more sheriffs were appointed, playing vital roles in maintaining law and order in the sparsely populated areas.

The adoption of the Wisconsin Constitution in 1848, which

mandated that each county elect a sheriff, enshrined the office in law. A 2007 constitutional amendment extended the original two-year term of sheriffs to four years.

The courts have long held certain duties of the sheriff that are particular to the office and were established by English common law, such as decisions about jail operations or which deputy to assign to a specific



*Todd Delain*

*The courts have long held certain duties of the sheriff that are particular to the office and were established by English common law, such as decisions about jail operations or which deputy to assign to a specific investigation, as protected duties and constitutionally protected from legislative interference.*

investigation, as protected duties and constitutionally protected from legislative interference.

In Wisconsin, sheriffs' primary duties historically include patrolling unincorporated areas, operating jails, and serving as the "action arm" of the courts by providing court security, transporting prisoners, and carrying out court-issued writs, such as serving eviction notices, restraining orders, and subpoenas.

Today, most sheriff's offices also proactively work to prevent narcotics violations, participate in special task forces related to human trafficking and internet crimes against children, enhance school safety, and bolster recreational safety in parks, on the water and on ATV/UTV trails, among other duties. Some sheriffs also oversee 911 communication centers and emergency management systems.

In addition, sheriff's offices provide security when needed for state and national political candidates as they campaign in the state. While at times controversial due to the partisan nature of politics, this work is essential to upholding democracy and ensuring citizens across the



state have an opportunity to hear directly from candidates in a safe environment.

The office of sheriff is unique among law enforcement roles. As an elected official, a sheriff answers directly to the voters in their county and must campaign to win votes. However, once in office, a sheriff must step away from politics and focus entirely on the nonpartisan execution of their duties. A sheriff's duty is not to interpret the law based on political leanings, but to follow the U.S. and Wisconsin constitutions and equitably enforce the laws as written and adjudicated by the courts.

To maintain balance, a sheriff must uphold clear ethical standards and office policies that emphasize impartiality, nondiscrimination and procedural justice. These serve as internal guardrails, ensuring sheriffs, deputies and staff remain focused on the main mission of public safety.

The sheriff has a unique and historical position throughout the nation to keep the peace and bring calm during challenging times. Wisconsin sheriffs strive to live up to these ideals and bring a strong commitment to justice as they continue to work for all people. ■

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# Clerks of Circuit Court

## THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR JUDICIAL SYSTEM

*By Rebecca Matoska-Mentin, Clerk of Circuit Court, Kenosha County, and President, Wisconsin Clerks of Circuit Court Association*

Established in 1848 by the Wisconsin Constitution, the role of clerk of circuit court has long been a cornerstone of our judicial system. Elected every four years in each of the state's 72 counties through partisan elections, clerks serve as administrative agents of the courts, offering a wide array of services that support the administration of justice. Working closely with elected circuit court judges, clerks help ensure the efficient use of public resources.

The clerk's main responsibility is to act as the custodian of the court record. This involves filing court documents, taking minutes at court hearings, scheduling cases, collecting fines and fees, and ensuring the accurate entry of judicial judgments. These tasks must be performed in accordance with state statutes and the rules established by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. To handle the volume and complexity of their duties, clerks appoint deputy clerks for assistance.

Accuracy is crucial in this role. Even a minor mistake can lead to significant consequences for litigants, including wrongful incarceration, improper property seizure, or incorrect financial obligations. Court records are maintained according to retention schedules established by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Unless designated as confidential by statute or an order of the court, these records must remain open to public inspection.

Another central duty is jury management. Each year, the Director of the State Courts Office provides clerks with a list of potential jurors drawn from Wisconsin Department of Transportation records. Clerks oversee the qualification



process using questionnaires and issue summonses for jury service. During trials, clerks ensure the safety and comfort of jurors, provide accommodations when jurors are sequestered, and manage the payment of mileage and fees in accordance with state laws and local policies.

Clerks also serve as financial managers for the court system.

They work with judges and county administrators to use taxpayer funds efficiently. Additionally, clerks report revenue and expenditures to the Director of the State Courts Office. They collect court-ordered fines and fees in criminal, traffic, and ordinance cases, distributing those funds to crime victims as well as state, county, and municipal agencies. Various collection methods may be utilized, including tax intercepts, collection agencies, and wage assignments.

At the core of these duties is customer service. Clerks respond to inquiries and provide guidance on various court processes. Although staff cannot offer legal advice, they assist self-represented individuals in navigating the legal system and often help attorneys and other professional staff.

Additional responsibilities may involve managing court personnel, overseeing courtroom technology, coordinating building maintenance and security, and serving as a primary point of contact for stakeholders such as attorneys, law enforcement, child support agencies, and community members.

As vital contributors to the justice system, clerks of circuit court carry out numerous essential functions that help our courts operate smoothly, efficiently, and remain accessible to the public. ■





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# County Coroners

## A LEGACY OF SERVICE

*By Rory Groessl, Coroner, Kewaunee County, and Treasurer, Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners Association*

The position of coroner has been a cornerstone of death investigation throughout the history of the United States. Originating in medieval England, the role has evolved significantly. Today, counties employ a mix of elected coroners and appointed medical examiners, but the office remains central to forensic science and the judicial system.

The coroner's origins date back to 12th-century England, when coroners were royal officers responsible for protecting the crown's interests. Their duties included collecting taxes and fees, as well as investigating "sudden or unnatural" deaths. Homicide and suicide were considered crimes against the crown, and those guilty of these crimes forfeited their possessions to the crown, which were collected by the coroner.

The role of coroner was formally adopted from British rule and established in the United States in the early 19th century. Coroners were typically local elected citizens with no specialized training in medicine or forensic science. By the mid-20th century, the need for specialized knowledge in death investigation

and forensic science was apparent, so the focus shifted toward professionalizing the office to ensure investigative and medical expertise. There is currently significant variability in the qualifications of the position from one Wisconsin county to the next.

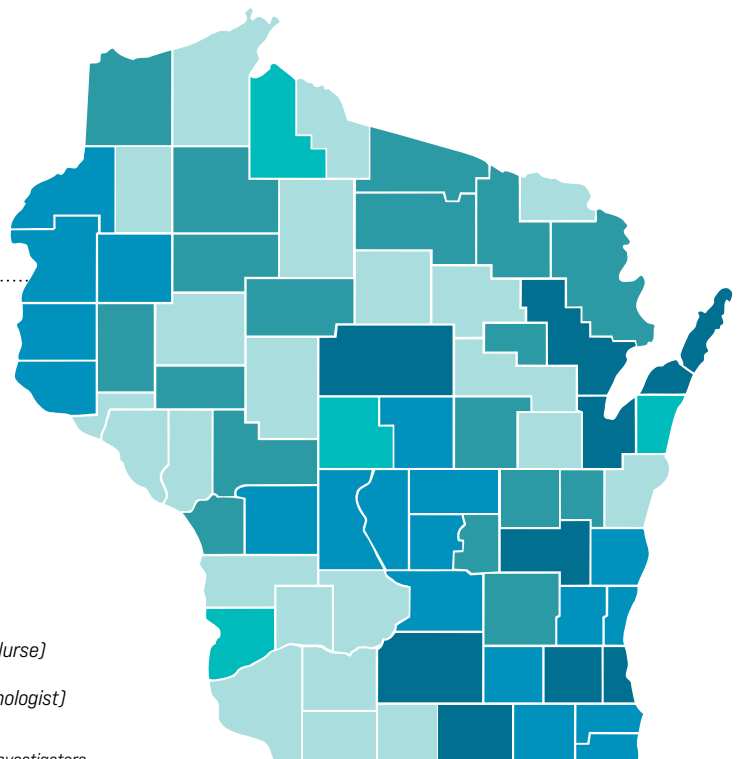
Coroners continue to be elected officials without any statutory requirements for specific training or education. Consequently, to ensure that qualified medical professionals are available to conduct death investigations, a number of counties have transitioned from the traditional elected coroner to an appointed medical examiner. Larger counties typically have full-time investigative staff and may hire a board-certified forensic pathologist (a physician specifically trained to perform autopsies, collect and analyze forensic data, and

### Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners

AS OF JUNE 2025

- Coroner
- Coroner (ABMDI or Certified Forensic Nurse)
- Medical Examiner
- Medical Examiner (ABMDI or Certified Forensic Nurse)
- Medical Examiner (Board Certified Forensic Pathologist)

\* ABMDI = Certified by the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators



SOURCE: Wisconsin Coroners and Medical Examiners Association

oversee office operations). Smaller counties generally hire individuals with varying degrees of medical or investigative experience and contract with offices that provide autopsy capabilities.

As of June 2025, 46 of the 72 counties are led by medical examiners. Nine are forensic pathologists and 19 others have forensic training. Twenty-six counties are led by elected coroners, four of whom are forensically trained.

The coroner's duties are outlined in Chapter 979 of the Wisconsin Statutes. Coroners and medical examiners are responsible for conducting independent investigations into sudden, unexpected, or unexplained deaths as well as all deaths following a non-natural event (i.e., homicide, suicide, or accident). They examine evidence at death scenes, evaluate medical records, collect blood and/or body fluids, perform detailed exams and decide whether to request an autopsy for further investigation.

Coroners and medical examiners routinely collaborate

with forensic pathologists, toxicologists, law enforcement officials, district attorneys, public health agencies, organ/tissue procurement organizations, victims and

decedent families. They are ultimately tasked with developing an opinion on the cause and manner of death, issuing death certificates, approving cremation permits, and responding to requests for disinterment. They may also be required to testify in court or at an inquest if ordered by a district attorney or judge.

The coroner/medical examiner system has undergone significant changes from its early days as an extension of the British crown to its current role as a vital component of the justice system. Accurate death investigations carry considerable legal implications and provide valuable information to families. The importance of accurate death certificates is evident through their impact on public health data, public policy, and individual insurance claims. As forensic science advances, the role of the coroner will undoubtedly continue to evolve. ■

*Accurate death investigations carry considerable legal implications and provide valuable information to families.*

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# 2025-27 State Budget Signed into Law

## A WIN FOR COUNTIES

*By Kyle Christianson, Marcie Rainbolt, Chelsea Shanks and Collin Driscoll, Government Affairs, Wisconsin Counties Association*

And just like that, the state budget process came and went — bringing many wins for Wisconsin counties.

Every odd-numbered year, the state government convenes in Madison to piece together a biennial budget that will dictate spending levels for the next two years. This hectic process brings together the governor, the state Legislature, stakeholders like the WCA, and Wisconsinites from every corner of the state. From the governor's budget address in February to the statutory deadline to have the budget finished by July 1, lawmakers are inundated throughout the process with feedback on what the final product should include.

The process for this budget, which covers July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2027, had many similarities with the previous budgets that the Republican-controlled Legislature passed and Gov. Tony Evers signed into law. Evers introduced his budget proposal, Republicans removed hundreds of his provisions, and the two sides overcame numerous impasses and ultimately struck a grand bargain. The result this year was the signing of 2025 Wisconsin Act 15 during the wee morning hours of July 3. So, what's in the final budget bill?

The \$111.1 billion biennial budget makes momentous investments into programs that benefit the everyday lives of Wisconsin citizens. Some of these top-level investments include \$361 million for the child care industry, \$1.4 billion in spendable revenue for K-12 schools — including the largest increase in special education funding in state history,

and \$250 million for the UW System. It also provides a middle-class income tax cut that will result in an average savings of \$180 for 1.6 million Wisconsin income taxpayers.

In addition to these larger investments, some of the major budget priority wins fought for by the WCA include:

### ► Circuit court funding

The WCA's number one request in this budget was more funding for our circuit courts, otherwise known as the state circuit court system, which counties operate on the state's behalf. Going into this budget process, Wisconsin counties were on the losing end, footing the bill for roughly 80% of the costs of what should be a 50/50 partnership with the state. The WCA lobbied extremely hard on this issue, and it paid off with an increase of \$10 million per year in the Circuit Court Cost Appropriation. In addition, our advocacy work has generated support for separate legislation to increase fees, fines, and forfeitures, and allow counties to retain a greater portion of what they collect.

### ► Transportation

Transportation funding has been, and likely always will be, an issue that simply never goes away. The unfortunate reality is that extreme weather conditions aid in the deterioration of our roads and maintenance costs continue to rise. The WCA focused on three critical transportation programs. As a result of our efforts, we were able to secure an additional \$30 million for Routine Maintenance

## The \$111.1 billion biennial budget makes momentous investments into programs that benefit the everyday lives of Wisconsin citizens.

Agreements (RMA), a 3% increase in both years of the biennial budget for General Transportation Aids (GTA), and an additional \$100 million in Local Road Improvement Program-Supplemental (LRIP-S) funding, of which the counties will receive roughly \$35 million. On top of these asks, we were able to secure a \$30 million investment for local governments to repair and replace 6-20-foot bridges that are in poor condition or worse.

### ► County conservation staffing funding

Throughout the last few budgets, the WCA has prioritized increasing state funding to meet the statutory goal for County Conservation Staffing Grants. The goal is for the state to support 100% of the first position in every county conservation department, 70% for the second position, and 50% for the third and additional staff positions. In 2025, the appropriation only had enough funding to support the first position in each county and part of the second position. This budget increases that investment



**FOR A COMPLETE LIST**  
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by \$7.5 million, providing sufficient funding for the first, second and third positions in all counties.

### ► Juvenile corrections daily rate

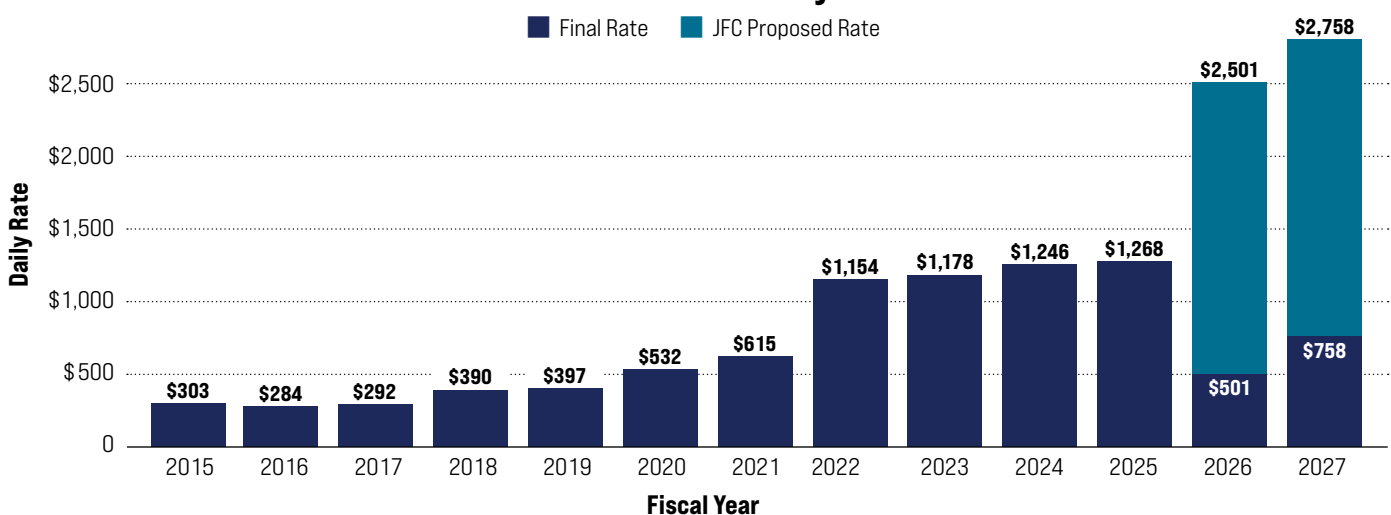
As many counties know, it is very expensive to send serious juvenile offenders to a Type 1 juvenile corrections facility like Lincoln Hills. Over the last 10 years, the youth

corrections rate has risen from \$303 per day in 2014 to \$1,268 per day in 2024 — an increase of over 400%. As less individuals are placed at these locations, the daily rate continues to climb. As a result, the budget bill passed by the Legislature would have increased the daily rate to \$2,501 in 2025-26 and \$2,758 in 2026-27. The WCA

worked with the governor's office to garner a partial veto that actually decreases the daily rate to \$501 in 2025-26 and \$758 in 2026-27.

While these are major wins for Wisconsin counties, this breakdown only touches the surface for all the beneficial county items included in the 2025-27 biennial budget. Visit the WCA website for more information. ■

### Youth Corrections Daily Rate





50 YEARS OF PROGRESS

# Putting Kids First

## 50 Years of Child Support

*By Pamela Pipkin, Child Support Director, Monroe County, and Past President, Wisconsin Child Support Enforcement Association*

**A**ugust marks Child Support Awareness Month — an effort to raise awareness about the importance of child support in securing a better future for children and families. This year, we celebrate a significant milestone: 50 years of the national child support program.

Since its creation in 1975, the program has evolved from a financial enforcement tool into one of the nation's most effective anti-poverty initiatives and a cornerstone of family stability. The Department of Children and Families administers the program in Wisconsin, and 71 county and nine Tribal agencies operate it. Together, we served over 341,000 children and collected \$841 million in economic support in fiscal year 2023.

Child support has a real impact, closing the poverty gap by an average of 44% in our state. More than two-thirds of children in low-income families in Wisconsin live with a single parent. For the low-income families who receive child support, the payments make up 42% of household income. Children who receive child support are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to enter the criminal justice system.

Having worked in child support for over 35 years, I've

seen firsthand how far we've come. Our mission has broadened. Today, child support agencies provide needs-specific resources to assist families while encouraging family self-sufficiency through community collaborations. We connect parents with employment, training, and treatment courts to help them build strong, healthy relationships with their children. We've become more inclusive, family-centered, and service-oriented.

### ► Today's focus: Implementing THRIVE

After 30 years of using the Kids Information Data System (KIDS) to collect and distribute payments, Wisconsin is preparing to launch a modern replacement called THRIVE. This long-awaited system will bring 21st-century technology and usability to families and staff, enhancing our ability to serve children better.

The work of child support is about more than dollars and cents. It's about ensuring kids grow up with the stability and opportunities they deserve. Here's to the next 50 years of putting kids first. ■

*Pamela Pipkin is the child support director for Monroe County and a past president of the Wisconsin Child Support Enforcement Association.*



# THRIVE: A Modern Child Support System

*By Dustin Feeney, Director of Workforce Development, Kenosha County,  
and Past President, Wisconsin Child Support Enforcement Association*

A new child support system, THRIVE, is being developed and is eagerly awaited by professionals across the state. The new system will enhance our capacity to deliver efficient, high-quality client services while ensuring that children and families receive necessary financial and medical assistance. In addition to state and contracted personnel, over 60 staff members from 24 counties and four Tribal programs, representing each region across the state, have participated in the development of THRIVE.

Although the current Kids Information Data System (KIDS) is federally certified, it lacks essential modern functionalities like drop-down menus and point-and-click user interfaces. The system relies on business processes and methodologies from the 1990s. Today's standard functionalities, such as automated workflows for managing, monitoring, and directing work, as well as dashboards that summarize participant and case data, cannot be easily or cost-effectively integrated into this outdated system. By utilizing advanced technologies, THRIVE will enhance services for Wisconsin families and offer greater flexibility in implementing new federal and state requirements while minimizing the risk of unintended data breaches.

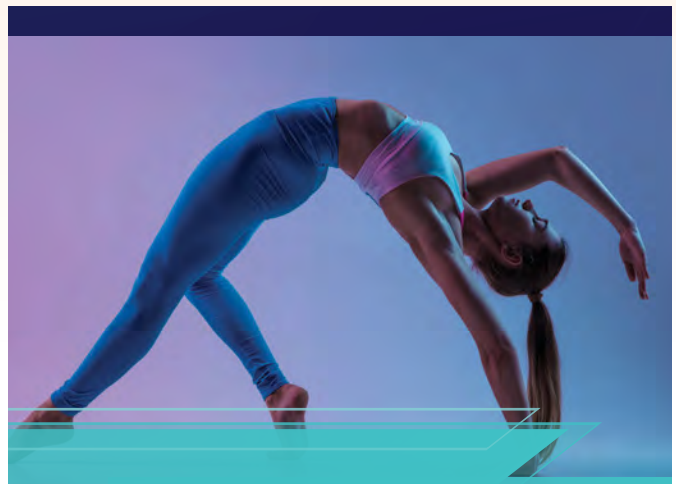
Caseworkers spend considerable time performing manual workarounds, resolving issues and errors, and managing an outdated system rather than collaborating with families and bringing cases to compliant status. It typically takes new child support professionals, many of whom are younger than the KIDS system, about two years to become proficient with the current mainframe system that relies on COBOL programming from the 1960s and 70s. The lengthy training period reduces productivity and hinders the recruitment of new staff.

THRIVE will enhance the child support program in Wisconsin from the customer's perspective while

improving access to data and allowing for more informed decision-making. The modern platform will automate child support collections, reduce participant inquiries about their orders, and deliver real-time account information through mobile applications. By modernizing the child support program and related automated systems to align with national best practices, Wisconsin's children and families will receive the support they need to thrive. □

#### Sources:

- Wisconsin State Project Team, "Thrive: Child Support Modernization (CSM) Project," Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, July 23, 2024.
- Child Support Partner Resources, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families.



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# The Evolution of the Child Support Program

*By Pamela Pipkin, Child Support Director, Monroe County, and Past President, Wisconsin Child Support Enforcement Association*

**The federal child support program began on Jan. 4, 1975,** when President Gerald Ford signed the Social Services Amendments of 1974 into law to reduce the need for public assistance. Calling it “a major piece of domestic legislation,” Ford emphasized its role in strengthening federal-state partnerships.

## ► Initial legislative and technological advancements

Over the following decades, the program evolved through legislative and technological advancements. In 1981, Congress introduced the Federal Income Tax Offset Program, which provided a significant step forward in enforcement by allowing the interception of tax refunds to collect overdue support. The 1984 Child Support Amendments added tools such as automatic income withholding, the Federal Parent Locator Service, property liens, and credit arrears reporting.

By 1988, states were required to establish standardized guidelines for setting and reviewing support orders, with further law changes a few years later to improve coordination across state lines. In 1996, the Welfare Reform Act transformed the program by automating enforcement through systems like the National Directory of New Hires and enabling license suspensions for nonpayment. That same year, Wisconsin launched a statewide, automated child support system, the Kids Information Data System (KIDS), that is still used today to collect and distribute payments.

Centralized payment processing became mandatory nationwide in 1998, followed by Wisconsin’s elimination of percentage-based orders in 2001 and the adoption of the National Medical Support Notice in 2002 to ensure health insurance coverage for children. Changes to federal

regulations in 2004 allowed for the creation of Tribal child support agencies.

## ► Recent digital modernization

During the last 20 years, efforts have focused on digital modernization. Wisconsin implemented electronic disbursement (2007), electronic income withholding (2015), and e-filing through the Circuit Court Automated Program (2016). The federal Flexibility, Efficiency, and Modernization Rule of 2016 improved fairness for low-income parents and reduced barriers to compliance. Implementing an electronic document exchange in 2019 allowed for ease in sending documents to other states. In Wisconsin, the new WiKids document generation system in 2018 led to an interface with CCAP in 2022.

On the program’s 50th anniversary in January 2025, President Joe Biden signed the Supporting America’s Children Act, granting Tribal child support programs access to federal tax data and expanding states’ ability to use contractors.

As the child support program enters its second half-century, it continues to evolve, driven by innovation and a steadfast commitment to securing a better future for children and families across the nation. □

### Sources:

- Solomon-Fears, Carmen, “The Child Support Enforcement Program: A Legislative History,” Congressional Research Service, Mar. 21, 2016.
- Morgan, Laura, “Child Support Enforcement in the United States and the Role of the Private Bar,” Child Support Subcommittee, Family Law Section, American Bar Association.
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- Child Support Partner Resources, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families.



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# Meet the New County Executive

## GORDON HINTZ OF WINNEBAGO COUNTY Dedicated to Public Service

Born and raised in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, the new Winnebago county executive has taken a long and winding path through government — from the Badger State to D.C. and California, and back again — but has never strayed far from the principles learned at his family's dinner table.

"My parents were both university professors who were engaged in the community," Hintz said. "My mom served on the Oshkosh Board of Zoning Appeals, and my dad was on the city council. The dinner table was regularly a discussion of contemporary issues and how things worked in our community."

That early exposure to civic life planted a seed. "I have always been motivated by the belief that government has a positive role in creating opportunities in people's lives," he said. "At each stop along the way, I wanted to make a difference."

After graduating from Oshkosh North High School, Hintz earned a Bachelor of Arts in political science from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. From there, he headed to Washington, D.C., where he worked for Wisconsin's U.S. Rep. Jay Johnson, who represented the 8th Congressional District, and U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl.

Returning to his home state, Hintz earned a master's degree from the La Follette School of Public Affairs at UW-Madison before heading west to serve as a management assistant and later a budget analyst for the city of Long Beach, California.

Eventually, Wisconsin called him back once more. He taught American government at UW-Oshkosh for a year before launching a successful run for the Wisconsin State Assembly in 2006. He served for 16 years, including three years on the influential Joint Finance Committee and four years as Assembly minority leader. After leaving the Legislature, he spent two years working on workforce development for the Wisconsin Laborers' District Council.

In 2024, he decided to come full circle. "I saw an opportunity to bring stability and professionalism to my home county and began campaigning for county executive," Hintz said. "Elected by the people of Winnebago County, I have spent these past few months immersing myself in all county responsibilities and initiatives."

As county executive, he sees both significant challenges and enormous opportunities. "County government plays an



*Gordon Hintz*

## **“County government plays an essential role in providing necessary services to residents and visitors. But I remain struck by how many people are unaware of what county government does.”**

essential role in providing necessary services to residents and visitors,” he said. “But I remain struck by how many people are unaware of what county government does.”

From human services to veterans’ benefits, Hintz says many eligible residents simply don’t know help is available. “I’m committed to promoting our work and getting our services out of the office and into the communities we serve.”

Housing, in particular, stands out as a growing area of concern. “We are seeing more demand for housing services, from construction to homelessness services,” he said. “Housing stability is often a critical component in people’s lives, and it can be a determining factor in whether someone needs other county services.”

Hintz also sees potential in the county’s diverse makeup. “Winnebago County has a great mix of quality urban, suburban, and rural communities in a dynamic part of Wisconsin,” he said. “Our county government needs to demonstrate it provides efficient, effective services and look to partner with municipal, private, and nonprofit groups on opportunities to promote future development and economic growth.”

Of course, the work isn’t without its obstacles. “We have challenges regarding funding, aging infrastructure, and workforce shortages,” Hintz acknowledged. “The key is not getting overwhelmed by the day-to-day and staying focused on implementing a vision with achievable goals.”

That vision includes long-term planning and collaboration. “I’d like to implement a multi-year facilities plan for the county, successfully redevelop the former UW-Fox Cities campus to preserve its cultural amenities and create new tax revenue, and enhance the levels of cooperation with municipalities throughout Winnebago County.”

Hintz believes in clear communication, listening to diverse viewpoints, and setting high expectations. “I strive to be approachable and consistent,” he said. “I don’t believe in micromanaging department heads. I value their

expertise and creative problem-solving and encourage them to share perspectives beyond just their department.”

Ultimately, Hintz hopes his career in public service will be remembered for his efforts to make government as transparent and accessible as possible. “Effective public engagement is crucial for fostering a responsive and accountable administration,” he said. “Engaging the public not only builds trust but also enhances the legitimacy of governmental actions.”

And while his résumé is packed with impressive public service credentials, Hintz revealed one proud accomplishment that may come as a surprise: “I was the 2003 U.S. Air Guitar West Coast Champion.” ■

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## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ACTION PART THREE

# Using AI Safely and Effectively



**This is the final part of a three-part series** on generative artificial intelligence (AI) use in Wisconsin county government. It outlines the available training from the UW-Madison Division of Extension and offers suggestions on policy development to ensure safe and effective AI use in local government.



*By William L. Oemichen, J.D., Professor of Practice-Law and Local Government Law Educator, UW-Madison Division of Extension*

Last fall, the UW-Madison Division of Extension and the Southwest Regional Planning Commission began developing an AI education and training curriculum for local units of government at the request of Iowa County Administrator Larry Bierke.

Bierke was following generative AI advancements closely and wanted county employees to be prepared to leverage the technology to improve program efficiency and effectiveness while also understanding the associated risks and mitigation strategies. This effort led to AI education and training for county department heads and key staff and then the adoption of a county board policy to train all 200 county employees.

### ► Training available for county government

The resulting Extension “AI-101” training, now available to all counties, is a 2.5-hour course with five key objectives: 1) identify what generative AI is and articulate examples of where it is already present in staff members’ daily lives; 2) demonstrate how AI can be used to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of county programs; 3) describe the common risks associated with generative AI and corresponding mitigation strategies; 4) practice different prompting methods to achieve quality AI chatbot output; and 5) analyze AI output for accuracy, bias, and quality. The training includes an advanced assignment intended to familiarize employees with generative AI, along with

several hands-on exercises throughout the course.

An “AI-201” course has been developed to provide customized training for individual county departments, featuring more detailed examples and exercises. The first AI-201 course will take place in Bayfield County this month. Extension is also developing a more advanced training program, “AI-301,” scheduled for rollout next year.

### ► County AI-use policy development

Counties should establish a policy governing the use of generative AI that includes essential elements to ensure county employees understand how to use generative AI effectively and maximize its potential while minimizing the risk of inappropriate disclosure of confidential information.

The policy should require employees to be trained in AI usage before they are allowed to utilize tools like ChatGPT or Copilot.

The policy should define what constitutes “permissible use of AI” at work. This may involve utilizing AI to enhance writing quality when drafting grant applications, meeting minutes, policies, citizen surveys, presentations, press releases, and position papers, as well as researching, analyzing, or summarizing non-sensitive county documents and reports. The policy should inform county employees that they are fully responsible for their work, including when using generative AI. They will be



accountable for any incorrect facts or citations in county documents and cannot use AI as a justification for errors.

The policy should explicitly prohibit county employees from using personal generative AI accounts for county business, including attaching any county information or data to a prompt made in the employee's personal account. Likewise, county policy should explicitly forbid employees from using county generative AI accounts for personal matters or storing personal data or documents in a county AI account.

The policy should also explicitly prohibit employees from entering personally identifiable information and other sensitive, confidential, or regulated data in an AI prompt. In addition to it being unethical, it may violate state and/or federal law. The federal Health Insurance

Portability and Affordability Act (HIPAA), for instance, mandates that individual health information be protected. Including such information in a prompt likely violates federal law. Irresponsible practices, such as failing to verify output accuracy or using AI in scenarios that may present an ethical or operational risk, should be forbidden.

Finally, the policy should outline the disciplinary measures that may be enforced if violations occur.

Generative AI offers numerous potential benefits to county government. Properly trained county staff adhering to a well-written generative AI-use policy will help ensure that county governments maximize the advantages of AI while minimizing risks. ■

*William L. Demichen, J.D. is a professor of practice-law and an educator with the Local Government Education program at the UW-Madison Division of Extension.*



The first article in this series, which was published in the June issue, provided an overview of AI. The second article, published in the July issue, explored how counties and other local governments are using artificial intelligence to improve service delivery and increase operational efficiency.

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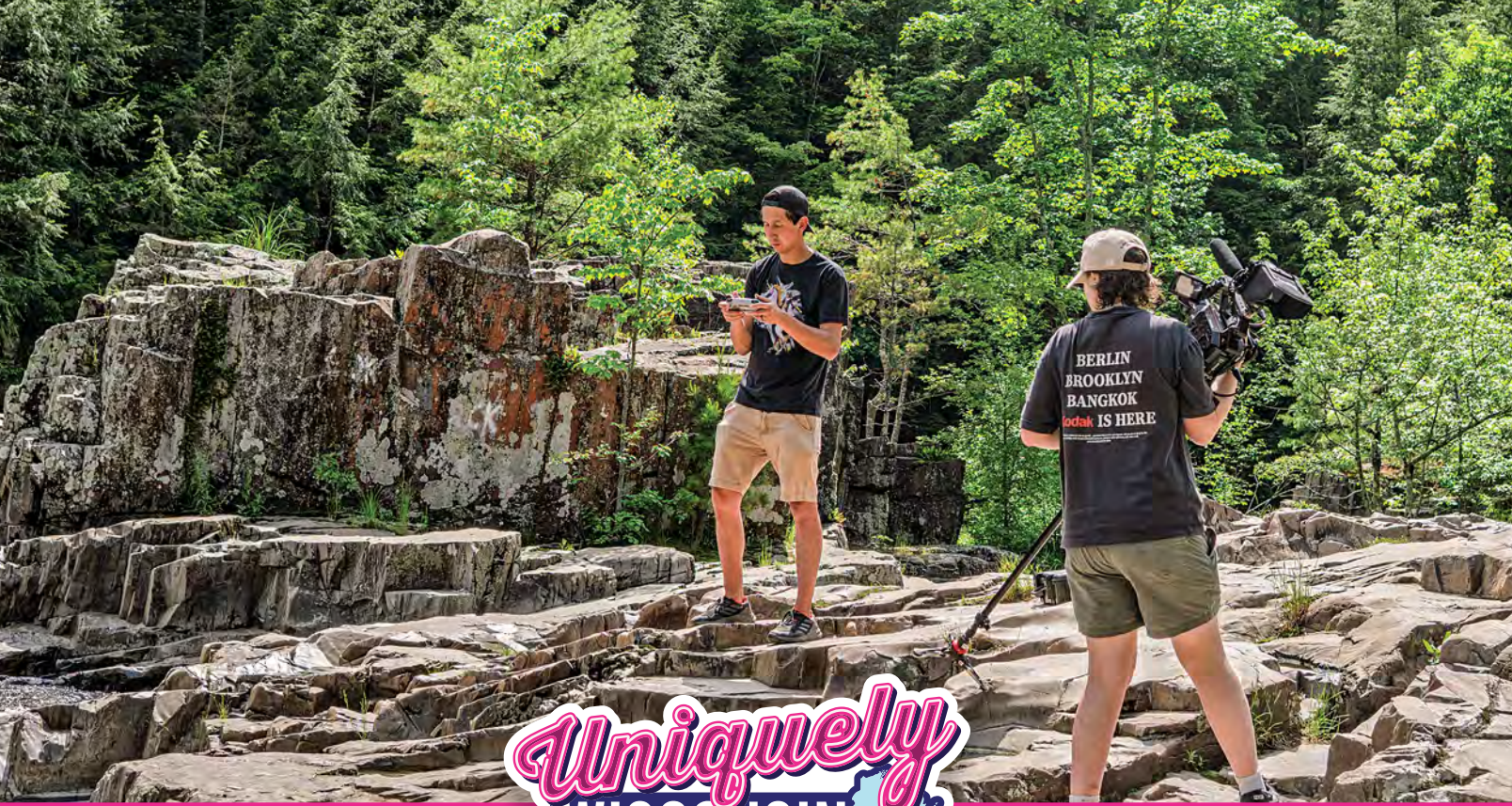
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*Uniquely Wisconsin film crew at the Dells of the Eau Claire County Park in Marathon County*

# Season Four to Highlight Some of the Best Our State has to Offer

*By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications*

With season four of Uniquely Wisconsin kicking off on Sept. 9, the counties of Brown, Marathon, Outagamie, Pierce, and Washington will showcase some of the best our state has to offer.

## ► Brown County

In addition to a veteran's story under development, Brown County's stories will feature:

**Seroogy's:** Nestled in De Pere, Seroogy's has been a cherished destination for handcrafted chocolates since 1899 – predating even the Green Bay Packers. With storefronts in De Pere and Ashwaubenon, this family-owned business has thrived for over a century, blending tradition, community, and quality ingredients into every piece of candy.

**Reforestation Camp:** Brown County's E.J. "Ollie" Smith Reforestation Camp stands as a testament to

environmental restoration, innovative rehabilitation, and community engagement. Its evolution from barren land to a thriving recreational hub is intertwined with the pioneering spirit of individuals like Aurelia Barth and the establishment of the NEW (Northeastern Wisconsin) Zoo.

## ► Marathon County

**Ginseng Farming:** In the lush fields of Marathon County, lies a thriving legacy that has spanned generations – the story of American ginseng farming. At the heart of this narrative is Hsu's Ginseng, a family-run farm that has grown into one of the country's largest producers, led by Will Hsu and his family. We will explore the deep roots and cultural significance of ginseng, from its origins to its place as a globally sought-after product.

**Children's Imaginarium:** There are 15 children's museums across the state, but one exists in a league of its own — the



Children's Imaginarium in Wausau. The museum boasts an impressive array of interactive exhibits promoting science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), a multipurpose STEM lab, and even space for parties and events. This makes it the perfect place for families to connect and learn about the world of STEM, and how it impacts their lives and futures right here in Wisconsin.

**Dells of the Eau Claire:** Visiting the Dells of the Eau Claire near Wausau is an experience to remember. We'll explore the stunning natural beauty, rich geological history, and diverse recreational opportunities of this unique location in Marathon County.

### ► Outagamie County

In addition to a Friends of CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) story under development, Outagamie County's stories will feature:

**Givens Farm Estate & Woolly Green Grazers:** In the heart of Outagamie County, the Givens Farm Estate serves as a timeless setting for life's most meaningful moments, hosting events large and small. Here, the local Woolly Green Grazers may be found shaping the landscape as only sheep know how.

**History Museum at the Castle:** The History Museum at the Castle is one of the most fascinating places in Outagamie County, if not all of Wisconsin. Not only does the stunning museum have a rich, mysterious history of its own, but the institution today is committed to inspiring the discovery and appreciation of the region's unique past and present cultures.

### ► Pierce County

**Vino in the Valley:** Meet Larry Brenner, the charismatic and visionary owner of Vino in the Valley, an outdoor restaurant tucked into the lush hills of Pierce County. His journey began not far away. Brenner was born and raised in the nearby town of Ellsworth, a close-knit community that cares deeply about its natural beauty and its local businesses.

**Megan Langer:** Pierce County has its own superhero, and her name is Megan Langer. She's a mother, investor, board member of multiple Prescott-area committees, and owner-

operator of the Harbor Hotel, the Cove Guest House, the Port of Prescott Hotel, Balsam Cabins with Pontoons, and the soon-to-be-renovated Orange Dragon Art Gallery.

**Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery:** More than just a cheese producer, Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery is a living, breathing legacy over 110 years in the making. What began as a handful of local farmers banding together has grown into a thriving cooperative, still proudly owned by the very people who make it all happen.

### ► Washington County

**Volunteer Firefighters:** When the call goes out at the Slinger Fire Department, volunteer firefighters respond. We'll take a look at the department's history since its origins in 1888, showcasing historical photos, old uniforms, and the original ladder from their first fire truck.

**Celebration of Community Through Art:** In West Bend, you'll find a vibrant community that makes and supports some of the best art you can find in Wisconsin. Local, statewide and sometimes even national artists come to experience or participate in the many events, exhibits and installations you can find in town.

**Chandelier Ballroom:** There is no other building quite like the Chandelier Ballroom in Hartford. Built in 1928, the massive octagonal venue has served countless communities across several generations for nearly 100 years. We'll explore how the Chandelier Ballroom made it onto the National Register of Historic Places, and how it continues to be one of Washington County's most beloved cultural cornerstones.

"These upcoming Uniquely Wisconsin stories are incredibly rich and really highlight the development of the brand and the importance of what counties want to showcase," said Mark Rose, president of Discover Mediaworks.

WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell added, "Uniquely Wisconsin has become a nationally recognized and award-winning brand, putting a spotlight on the people and culture of Wisconsin. In 2025, we are now seeing some counties appear in the Uniquely Wisconsin series for a second time with new and interesting stories. Uniquely Wisconsin is an adventure of which Wisconsin counties are very proud." ■

To see season four stories when they debut in September, as well as the first three seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at [youtube.com/DiscoverWI](https://youtube.com/DiscoverWI) and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen on your favorite podcast player to "The Cabin," which features counties in the program. Join Uniquely Wisconsin for season five by contacting Mark O'Connell at the WCA or Mark Rose at Discover Mediaworks.



## DATA POINTS:

# The Gap Between Numbers and Experience

There are certain official government figures that can impact public policy in significant ways. In the June 2025 Research Room column, we used the federal poverty measures as an example of how some of these figures are not always as simple or straightforward as they may seem.

In this column, we continue that discussion with a focus on another data point that commonly drives public policy — inflation calculated from the consumer price index. The December 2024 Research Room column went in depth about what the CPI is, and more importantly, what it is not. This article delves into why this inflation measure often seems out of sync with the “lived experience” of many people.

### ▶ A CPI refresher

Every month, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes monthly CPI figures. At its base level, CPI is an index that measures the average prices of consumer goods and services. Thus, the fluctuation in CPI reflects the change in the price of consumer goods and services.

CPI inflation is frequently discussed in local, state and national media. It affects many policy decisions, including changes in the federal funds rate. Low inflation numbers allow the Federal Reserve to stimulate growth by lowering this rate, which in turn, would typically lower the cost of borrowing for individuals, businesses, and state and local governments. In periods of high inflation, that growth tool is effectively taken away.

The CPI is also used to adjust Social Security benefits, some pensions, federal income tax brackets and some state income tax brackets. In many cases, worker wages are tied

directly or indirectly to inflation. With these factors in mind, and the frequency with which the CPI is discussed, one might think it is the best figure to measure rising costs faced by the typical consumer. That is true to some extent, but not all consumers are typical.

### ▶ Differences by income and demographics

The CPI, as typically referenced in most forms of media, refers to the CPI-U, or the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers. It measures prices of a “basket of goods and services,” which is a representative sample of products used by most consumers. It is measured every month to determine how price levels are changing. The BLS assigns different weights to each product and category in the basket. While useful in examining trends, this figure has limitations.

### ▶ Consumption patterns

The BLS assigns weights to goods and services in the “basket.” These weights are indicators of relative importance. Food is given a weight of around 14%, meaning that changes in food prices will account for 14% of the change in the total CPI-U. Housing is responsible for 25-35%, depending on whether utilities and household services are included, and transportation is given a relative importance of around 16% if vehicle purchases, fuel, and maintenance are included. Medical care, such as hospital services and prescription costs, is given a weight of around 8-10%.

These relative weights, typically updated every December by the BLS, keep the CPI-U measurements consistent over time. However, individual consumers are impacted differently by



**...despite its importance, the CPI-U has limitations because it applies to the typical consumer, and by definition, not all consumers are typical.**

price changes in each category based on their level of income, geographic location, and age groups, among other factors. Housing expenditure by level of income is a good example.

### ► Income

A recent study by the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University showed that in 2023, the median renter spent 31% of their household income on rent and utilities, up from 29% in 2019, just prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This figure matches the weights assigned by the BLS when measuring the CPI-U. Yet, lower-income households typically spend a greater share of their income on housing and utilities. According to the same study, in 2019, lower-income renters paid 68% of their household income toward rent and utilities. By 2023, this figure reached 80%.

While the BLS gives housing 25-35% relative importance when calculating the CPI-U, lower-income households pay more than double that percentage toward their rent. This means that an increase in housing costs will have a much greater impact on lower-income households compared to those earning the median income.

### ► Urban vs. rural

In public discourse, the CPI-U is often used as the “default” measure of inflation because, according to the BLS, it applies to around 93% of all households in the country, which are mostly urban (hence, the “urban” in the “All Urban Consumers” denoted by the “U” in CPI-U). The 7% of households unaccounted for in this measure are mostly rural. The distinction is important because urban and rural consumers may pay different prices for the same goods and services.

While a measure that applies to most urban consumers is relevant, public policy driven by such a measure may disproportionately impact rural consumers. For example, mortgage rates for rural consumers are influenced, in part, by the federal funds rate, which is driven, in part, by the CPI-U. While the CPI-U may not measure price changes for rural households, they are still directly affected by public policy impacted by the same CPI-U.

The cost of food, as measured and weighted by the CPI-U, is a good example of this discrepancy. A recent study by the Rural Sociological Society showed that rural consumers

pay as much as 10% more for food than urban households, not including the increased transportation costs to get to a grocery store. The BLS assigns a relative importance of around 14% to food when calculating the CPI-U, but any changes in prices will have a disproportionate impact on rural households because more of their income already goes toward food as compared to urban households.

### ► Age

Spending patterns also vary with age. Younger households are more likely to have children, and therefore, will typically spend more on child care and food. Perhaps the biggest difference in household spending relative to age is spending on health care, such as doctor visits, prescriptions, and hospital services. This type of spending is given a weight of around 8-10% by the BLS when calculating the CPI-U.

The median household spent just over 7% of its household income on health care in 2022, which is consistent with the weights assigned by the BLS. Yet, on average, older households, specifically those on Medicare, require more, and thus, spend more on health care. In the same year, Medicare households spent nearly double the median (just under 14%) of their household income on health care. Indeed, about 30% of Medicare households spent more than 20% of their household income on health care (about four times the rate of non-Medicare households). Despite the weights assigned by the BLS, changes in prices of goods and services related to medical services and health care will disproportionately impact older households.

### ► The CPI is limited

This article is not meant to paint the CPI-U as an unimportant or irrelevant figure. Indeed, the CPI-U is meticulously calculated by the BLS every month using tens of thousands of data points. The CPI-U applies to the vast majority of American households and is very useful in driving overall public and economic policy. Instead, this article highlights that, despite its importance, the CPI-U has limitations because it applies to the typical consumer, and by definition, not all consumers are typical. ■

*Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.*

## Wisconsin Counties Association

# 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE *GAME DAY*

September 21-23, 2025 | Kalahari Resorts & Conventions | Wisconsin Dells, WI

# Join Us in Sauk County!

## — REGISTRATION AND ROOM BLOCKS OPEN —

**SUIT UP AND GET READY** to join Team WisCo at the 2025 WCA Annual Conference, September 21–23 in Wisconsin Dells.

We will team up to bring you state and federal speakers, workshop sessions, and networking opportunities to help you explore the important issues facing Wisconsin county officials.



## UPDATED SCHEDULE

### ► SUNDAY, SEPT. 21

- 1 – 5:30 p.m. Registration
- 3 – 3:30 p.m. Credentials Pick-up for 2025 WCA Annual Business Meeting
- 3:30 p.m. 2025 WCA Annual Business Meeting
- Evening Dinner on Your Own

### ► MONDAY, SEPT. 22

- 7 a.m. – 5 p.m. Registration
- 7 – 8 a.m. WCA Breakfast
- 8 – 9 a.m. Concurrent Workshops
- 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. WCA Exhibit Hall Open
- 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. Opening General Assembly
- 12 – 1 p.m. Exhibitor Luncheon
- 1 – 2 p.m. Concurrent Workshops

- 2 – 3:30 p.m. Exhibit Hall Game Day Challenge
- 3:30 – 4:30 p.m. Concurrent Workshops
- 4:30 – 6 p.m. Exhibitor Reception
- 6 – 7:30 p.m. WCA Dinner

### ► TUESDAY, SEPT. 23

- 6:45 – 7:45 a.m. Women in Government Breakfast
- 7 – 10:30 a.m. Registration
- 7 – 7:45 a.m. Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation Breakfast
- 8 – 9 a.m. Concurrent Workshops
- 9:15 – 10:15 a.m. Concurrent Workshops
- 10:30 – 11:30 a.m. Concurrent Workshops
- 11:45 a.m. – 1:15 p.m. Closing General Assembly and Lunch

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit [wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org).





## PITCH PERFECT: Honoring the Women Who Redefined America's Pastime

**Step up to the plate** this September at the WCA Annual Conference and meet four extraordinary trailblazers who helped redefine what it means to “play like a girl.” These living legends from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League — Maybelle Blair, Mary “Sis” Moore, Jeneane “Lefty” Lesko, and Dolly “Lippy” Ozburn — each brought heart, grit and unmatched skill to America’s pastime during a pivotal era for women in sports. From dominating the mound to turning double plays and touring the country with the All-American All-Stars, these women shattered stereotypes and swung open doors for generations to come. Their stories aren’t just history; they’re inspiration in motion. Don’t miss this rare opportunity to hear their powerful voices and celebrate their incredible legacies.



Lance Pliml, Wood County Board Chair



**Join us as we celebrate** Wisconsin’s rich sports culture while emphasizing the values of teamwork and leadership in county government. Just like athletes working together toward victory, county officials must collaborate to lead their communities toward success.

We encourage attendees to show their team spirit by wearing apparel from your favorite sports teams — high school, college or professional — to foster county pride and camaraderie.

We want to see your sports spirit! After registering, you will receive an email encouraging you to send in a photo from your past — whether you were on the field, in the stands or coaching from the sidelines. We’ll showcase these memories to highlight the role of teamwork and leadership in sports and in government.



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Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

- October 22
- November 19
- December 17

### What Just Happened? August “In the Board Room” to Focus on Recent Court Decisions

Join us for the August installment of “In the Board Room” with Andy Phillips and Attolles Law on Wednesday, Aug. 27, for an update on major court decisions at the state and federal levels.

In recent weeks, the U.S. Supreme Court and the Wisconsin Supreme Court have issued decisions with broad implications for counties and the public. Join us for the August session of “In the Board Room,” where the Attolles

Law team will discuss these decisions, provide insight as to how they impact your county, and discuss what else may be on the horizon as important issues continue to make their way through the judicial system.

To attend the live webinars, pre-registration is required at [bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom25](http://bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom25) to receive the webinar link. There is no cost to register. The webinars are recorded and posted on the WCA website at [wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org). □

### Required State Humane Officer Training Sept. 22-26 in Madison

When calls come in reporting an animal in distress, the responsibility to respond lies with county-appointed humane officers or law enforcement professionals with the training and legal authority to assess, intervene and resolve these often emotionally charged situations.

To develop these skills, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection hosts an annual 40-hour training course, which is mandatory for newly appointed, non-law enforcement humane officers and optional for others.

The 2025 training will be held September 22-26 at the DoubleTree by Hilton in Madison and costs \$575. The registration form is available at [bit.ly/HumaneOfficerTraining](http://bit.ly/HumaneOfficerTraining). For more information, call (608) 516-2664 or email [yvonne.bellay@wi.gov](mailto:yvonne.bellay@wi.gov).

### New “#LocalGovMatters” Podcast Features Jefferson County Administrator



Join “#LocalGovMatters” co-hosts, WCA President & CEO Mark O’Connell and WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson, as they sit down with Jefferson County Administrator Michael

Lucky. He discusses his new role, important county initiatives, and exciting economic development efforts that are positioning Jefferson County for success today and in the future.

Use the QR code to find the podcast at [localgovmatters.wicounties.org](http://localgovmatters.wicounties.org) or find it on streaming platforms such as Apple and Spotify. Subscribe to make sure you don’t miss an episode.



### Wisconsin County Migration Profiles

A team of staff and collaborators at the UW-Madison Applied Population Lab has produced a new series of research briefs focusing on migration trends during the 2010s for all 72 Wisconsin counties. The site encourages policymakers to use the reports to “draw comparisons between age groups and decades within your county, and to relate your county to other county, state, and national trends.” Learn more and view your county’s profile at [apl.wisc.edu/shared/wisco-netmigration](http://apl.wisc.edu/shared/wisco-netmigration).

## WCA's O'Connell Recognized for Local Government Leadership

At the annual conference of the Wisconsin City/County Management Association in June, WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell was presented the 2025 WCMA President's Award with League of Wisconsin Municipalities Executive Director Jerry Deschane. According to the WCMA, O'Connell and Deschane "have collaborated for many years on a legislative update provided

to WCMA summer and winter conference attendees. The updates provide insight into the impact of state and federal legislation on the local level. Their humor, wit, and give-and-take banter are always a highlight of the conferences. WCMA is pleased to honor them and thank them for their years of service to professional local government management." □

### Monday County Leadership Meetings | EVERY MONDAY AT 11 A.M.

This weekly virtual meeting features updates from the WCA Government Affairs team and Attolles Law, association announcements, and guest speakers, such as state agency staff and legislators. A link to the virtual meeting is emailed to WCA members each week.

#### Frugal Badgers? Forward Analytics Spotlights Household Debt

The latest Forward Analytics Spotlight dives into household debt trends across Wisconsin, showing that the state continues to live up to its frugal reputation.



In 2024, Wisconsin's debt-to-income ratio was the 11th lowest in the country and 3rd lowest among bordering states, showing only a minor increase since before the pandemic. Wisconsinites also rank among the lowest in the U.S. for per capita credit card and auto loan debt, though delinquency on auto loans has risen in recent years. Mortgage payments remain relatively affordable, averaging just under 20% of household income — one of the lowest ratios in the country. Even student loan burdens are comparatively lighter, with Wisconsin borrowers holding the 8th lowest average debt nationally.

Despite rising costs, Wisconsin households continue to exhibit financial discipline and resilience. To access the Spotlight, visit [forward-analytics.net](https://forward-analytics.net).

#### Attend an August Agriculture Community Engagement Tour

**Four tours, four modern dairies.** Attend an ACE® Twilight Meeting and learn how you can influence your community's agricultural resources. Each meeting starts with a dairy tour at 6 p.m., followed by ice cream at 7 p.m. and open discussion until 8:30 p.m.

- **Buffalo County:** Monday, Aug. 25 at Lindstrom Valley Farms, W2184 Cty Rd K, Durand
- **Monroe County:** Tuesday, Aug. 26 at Chapman Farms Dairy LLC, 21509 Gladeview Ave, Tomah
- **Manitowoc County:** Wednesday, Aug. 27 at Grotegut Dairy Farm Inc., 7427 Newton Rd, Newton
- **Jefferson County:** Thursday, Aug. 28 at Rosy-Lane Holsteins, N8106 Cty Hwy X, Watertown

The ACE® Twilight Meetings are hosted by the Professional Dairy Producers and co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Wisconsin Towns Association. The meetings are free and open to the public.

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**Prime Exclusive Offer  
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WCA member counties and their departments are now eligible to sign up for a free Amazon Business Prime membership that includes free and fast shipping, a pre-approved line of credit, and a 25% discount on select office, maintenance, repair, operational and IT products. WCA members can also leverage a competitively awarded contract by OMNIA Partners to purchase on Amazon Business across all categories for additional savings. Contact the WCA for more information.



# Sweeping Medicaid and SNAP Overhaul

## Shifts Costs to Counties and Reduces Access

In July, President Donald Trump signed House Resolution 1 into law, marking the completion of the federal budget reconciliation process. Dubbed by the administration as the “One Big Beautiful Bill,” the sweeping legislation delivers a broad overhaul of federal spending priorities.

According to the National Association of Counties, important positive provisions of H.R. 1 for counties include delaying a new federal nursing home staffing rule until 2034, increasing tax credit availability and reducing private bond matching requirements to support low-income housing, and extending the New Markets Tax Credit to foster community development. Importantly, the legislation did not alter the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds, protecting a crucial tool that counties use to finance infrastructure projects.

Notably, the Congressional Budget Office projects that H.R. 1 will increase the federal deficit over the next 10 years by \$3.4 trillion. One of the most substantial areas of spending is a significant increase in federal immigration enforcement. Among other related funding provisions, the final legislation provides \$45 billion for building new immigration detention centers (a 62% larger budget than the entire federal prison system) and nearly \$30 billion for enforcement operations, a three-fold increase, to carry out the Trump administration’s mass deportation agenda.

The most direct and immediate impacts for counties are likely to come from the extensive changes to Medicaid, administered as BadgerCare Plus and other programs in Wisconsin, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), administered as FoodShare in Wisconsin. These changes are expected to impose substantial new burdens on counties, especially in states like Wisconsin, where counties play a frontline role in delivering public benefit programs.

### ► Overall cuts

Medicaid is a joint federal–state program that offers health insurance to low-income families, seniors, pregnant people, individuals with disabilities, and children, playing a critical role in the U.S. health care safety net. Nationwide, more than 70 million people are enrolled, including over a million residents in Wisconsin.

According to the National Association of County Human Services Administrators, “while detailed cost estimates from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office are not yet available, its analysis of earlier iterations suggests that the measure would cut Medicaid spending by nearly \$1 trillion over 10 years, which, combined with changes to the Affordable Care Act, will lead to nearly 12 million individuals losing their health insurance.” An additional analysis by Manatt Health estimates the overall health care cuts at more than \$1.2 trillion.

SNAP, the nation’s most extensive nutrition assistance program, currently serves approximately 42 million Americans and 700,000 Wisconsinites each month. For decades, the federal government has paid the full cost of SNAP benefits and covered 50% of administrative expenses. H.R. 1 dramatically reconfigures this arrangement. According to the NACHSA, “cuts to SNAP are projected to be roughly \$186 billion over 10 years, with nearly 3 million individuals losing access to the program.”

It is essential to note that as analysts develop a deeper understanding of the final language of the bill, including whether certain provisions apply to specific states based on whether they expanded Medicaid, the estimates of funding cuts and coverage losses likely will change.

In addition, the bill gives discretion to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and individual

**Every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates approximately \$1.54 in local economic activity.**  
**Reduced participation could impact grocers, farmers' markets,**  
**and small businesses, especially in rural areas.**

states on some implementation decisions. For example, the federal department needs to determine what documentation will be accepted for eligibility decisions, and states may choose to require additional eligibility checks. As a result, the final rules may necessitate significant system upgrades or other substantial changes at the state and local levels.

► **Medicaid: Cost shifts and coverage reductions**

Due to changes in H.R. 1, the Kaiser Family Foundation projects that Wisconsin could lose 10% of its federal Medicaid funding over the next 10 years.

For enrollees, H.R. 1 imposes work requirements for Medicaid recipients aged 19 to 64 (up from 54 currently), with some exceptions. H.R. 1 also adds new out-of-pocket costs for low-income enrollees and limits retroactive coverage.

Under the new law, states will be required to verify compliance at each eligibility redetermination and may impose additional eligibility checks. According to the NACHSA, this increased complexity will require counties to hire and train more staff, update data systems, and assist residents as they adapt to new work and documentation requirements.

Additionally, H.R. 1 prohibits states that did not expand Medicaid, including Wisconsin, from assessing new provider taxes on a class of services if they do not already have them in place at the time of the bill's enactment.

In anticipation of the federal changes, Gov. Tony Evers and the Wisconsin State Legislature quickly united at the end of June to finalize the state's 2025-27 biennial budget before H.R. 1 was signed into law. To make sure hospitals in the state did not lose access to a crucial federal matching opportunity, the new state budget features a significant increase in the hospital assessment program.

The adjustment will nearly triple the current hospital assessment, generating an estimated \$1.1 billion in new federal dollars annually. Approximately 30% of the funds will be allocated to the state Medicaid trust fund, with the remaining \$770 million to be distributed to hospitals.

It should be noted that H.R. 1 creates a program to support

rural hospitals to help offset the Medicaid cuts. However, the allocated \$10 billion per year for five years for the nation's approximately 1,800 rural hospitals will not be comparable to the amount they had been receiving from Medicaid.

► **SNAP: New costs and reduced access**

In an earlier analysis, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services estimates that H.R. 1 could cost the state more than \$300 million per year in SNAP funding. These cuts mainly result from shifting benefit and administrative costs to states and counties, tightening work requirements, and penalizing even minor payment errors.

Under the new law, the federal share of administrative costs will decrease from 50% to 25%. In Wisconsin, it is estimated that assuming 75% of the administrative costs will shift the burden to the state and counties by \$51 million annually. The Wisconsin County Human Service Association estimates that about \$12.25 million of that amount will fall directly to counties to cover.

Under the new law, counties would need to triple their local spending to maintain their current level of federal support. Instead of \$1 of county spending drawing down \$1 of federal funds, it will now take \$3 of county spending to get the same result.

As with the Medicaid changes, the bill expands work requirements for SNAP recipients, raising the age range for able-bodied adults without dependents from 18-54 to 18-64. It also removes recent bipartisan exemptions for veterans, homeless individuals, and youth aging out of foster care. Parents of children aged 14 and older will now be subject to work requirements, regardless of whether they have a child with a disability. In Wisconsin, these changes could impact thousands of recipients and lead to a surge in referrals to the FoodShare Employment and Training program.

Wisconsin counties currently exempt from the work requirements because of limited job opportunities, including

*Continued on page 42*

Continued from page 41

Adams, Bayfield, Douglas, Florence, Forest, Iron, Marquette, and Menominee, could lose those waivers. The new law sets a 10% unemployment rate threshold. The DHS estimates that if these waivers are eliminated, at least 2,300 new recipients in the state would need case management.

States also may have to begin contributing to SNAP benefit payments, with contributions ranging up to 15% based on their error rates. Wisconsin's error rate was less than 4.5% in 2024. These errors result from changes in income or minor processing mistakes, not fraud. If the state's error rate remains below 6%, it will not have to provide a cost share under the new law. However, by lowering the threshold for determining errors, the new law makes it more likely that the error rate will increase. If it rises to 6% or higher, the state will be required to provide a cost-sharing of 5% to 15% depending on the error rate. Based on the DHS's data indicating that the state's 2024 SNAP expenditures were \$1.4 billion, a 5% cost share would be \$70 million.

H.R. 1 also eliminates the SNAP-Ed (SNAP Education and Obesity Prevention Program), which funds FoodWise, a UW-Madison Division of Extension program that offers

nutrition education in nearly every Wisconsin county. More than 120 educators assist thousands of low-income residents every year in building healthier habits and stretching their food dollars. Eliminating this program will weaken efforts to educate SNAP recipients, improve public health, and reduce chronic disease.

Beyond the administrative strain, reduced SNAP benefits will likely have a ripple effect through Wisconsin's economy. Every \$1 in SNAP benefits generates approximately \$1.54 in local economic activity. Reduced participation could impact grocers, farmers' markets, and small businesses, especially in rural areas.

### ► Looking ahead

While the "One Big Beautiful Bill" aims to reduce federal spending, its cost-shifting provisions could have a profound impact on counties. In addition to the cuts to safety net programs, H.R. 1 and other ongoing initiatives are reducing or eliminating federal development grants, emergency management funding, financial support for public lands, and much more. ■

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County Manager, Polk County

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Internal Management Consultant, City of Englewood, NJ

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ANDY PEDERSON  
Village Manager, Village of Bayside, WI



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Sure I can check about adding a pool to your backyard. First, please can you tell me your address? To help us serve you better, we'll use your location to find the best pool for you.



## LEGAL ISSUES RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

# An Introduction to Levy Limits and the Debt Service Exception

*By Andy Phillips and Ben Conard, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.*

Wisconsin counties face growing budgetary pressures due to increasing costs and state mandates combined with stagnant revenues. A county's largest revenue source comes from its operating levy (i.e., property tax revenues), which is calculated each year pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 66.0602. Subject to certain exceptions, a county's annual operating levy may generally only be increased by its "valuation factor." Importantly, there are certain allowable exceptions to the levy limit that permit counties to levy property taxes in excess of their levy limits to fund such exceptions. One of the most significant exceptions to the general rule is for a county's general obligation debt service.<sup>1</sup> This exception is often referred to as a county's "debt levy" and is levied separately from its operating levy.

This article will provide a brief introduction to the statutory levy limit and the debt levy exception.

### ► Overview of Wis. Stat. § 66.0602

Wis. Stat. § 66.0602 establishes a formula to determine the levy limit of political subdivisions, which include cities, villages, towns and counties. The formula generally restricts annual property tax levy increases to the percentage change in equalized property valuations, adjusted for net new construction. Specifically, the statutory levy limit for a given year is calculated based on the prior year's levy, adjusted by its valuation factor, which is a percentage equal to the greater of either

the percentage change in the political subdivision's January 1 equalized value due to new construction less improvements removed between the previous year and the current year, or 0%. A political subdivision may not increase its previous year's property tax levy by more than its valuation factor, except for certain allowable exceptions.

### ► The debt service exception

Perhaps the most notable exception to the statutory levy limit is the debt service exception, which is often referred to as the "debt levy." Under Wis. Stat. § 66.0602(3), political subdivisions are permitted to levy additional property taxes specifically to pay for "debt service." Debt service means



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“debt service on debt issued or reissued to fund or refund outstanding municipal or county obligations, interest on outstanding municipal or county obligations, and related issuance costs and redemption premiums.”<sup>2</sup>

The debt levy is an important tool available to counties facing challenges with their operating levy and their ability to fund mandatory and discretionary services. Indeed, counties are increasingly utilizing their debt levy to increase their property tax levy and fund budget necessities. Of course, utilizing the debt levy comes with the additional cost of borrowing, so counties should discuss these costs and other issues related to borrowing with their finance officers and corporation counsel.

There are also a host of constitutional and statutory rules and regulations that counties must follow when

issuing debt. While a detailed analysis of such requirements is outside the scope of this article, one of the most important aspects to note is the type of expenditures a county may finance through the issuance of debt. Significantly, counties may generally issue debt to finance capital improvements, including “the acquisition, leasing, planning, design, construction, development, extension, enlargement, renovation, rebuilding, repair or improvement of land, waters, property, highways, buildings, equipment or facilities.”<sup>3</sup>

While many capital improvements may be once-in-a-generation projects (e.g., a new county courthouse), counties can find ways to issue debt to finance current and ongoing budgetary needs. So long as the expenditure meets

*Continued on page 46*



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Continued from page 45

the definitions contained within Wis. Stat. § 67.04, the expenditure may be considered debt and the county may levy outside of the standard operating levy limit.

For example, to save costs, many counties have explored or begun leasing large equipment, such as snowplows and fleet vehicles, rather than purchasing them. Recently, the Wisconsin Department of Revenue issued guidance confirming that a county's lease liabilities for fleet vehicles would constitute debt service under Wis. Stat. § 66.0602, and, therefore, would be levied as a part of the county's debt levy so long as such lease is secured by the full faith and credit of the county and constitutes general obligation debt. Of course, the devil is in the details in that the lease agreement must contain precise language clarifying that the lease payments are backed by the county's full faith and credit (i.e., general obligation debt), so such agreements must be reviewed in detail by a county's financial team and corporation counsel.

The foregoing are just a limited number of examples of how a county may utilize its debt levy to relieve some of its budgetary pressures. County officials should discuss these issues as part of their annual budget process.

## ► Conclusion

While Wisconsin counties often face difficult budgetary decisions due to the statutorily imposed levy limit, the debt service exception serves as a vital tool, allowing counties to levy additional tax revenues in addition to the general levy. County officials may consider potential capital improvements within their budgetary priorities and determine whether it would be beneficial to issue debt to finance these items, thereby freeing up operating levy funds to pay for other mandated services and/or priorities.

If you have any questions surrounding your county's debt levy, other exceptions to the levy limit, or the requirements for a county to issue debt, please do not hesitate to contact the WCA or Attolles Law, s.c. ■

*Attolles Law, s.c. works on behalf of Wisconsin counties, school districts and other public entities across the state of Wisconsin. Its president & CEO, Andy Phillips, has served as outside general counsel for the Wisconsin Counties Association for more than 20 years.*

1. Wis. Stat. § 66.0602(3)(d)2.
2. Wis. Stat. § 66.0602(1)(a).
3. Wis. Stat. § 67.04(1)(ar).

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