

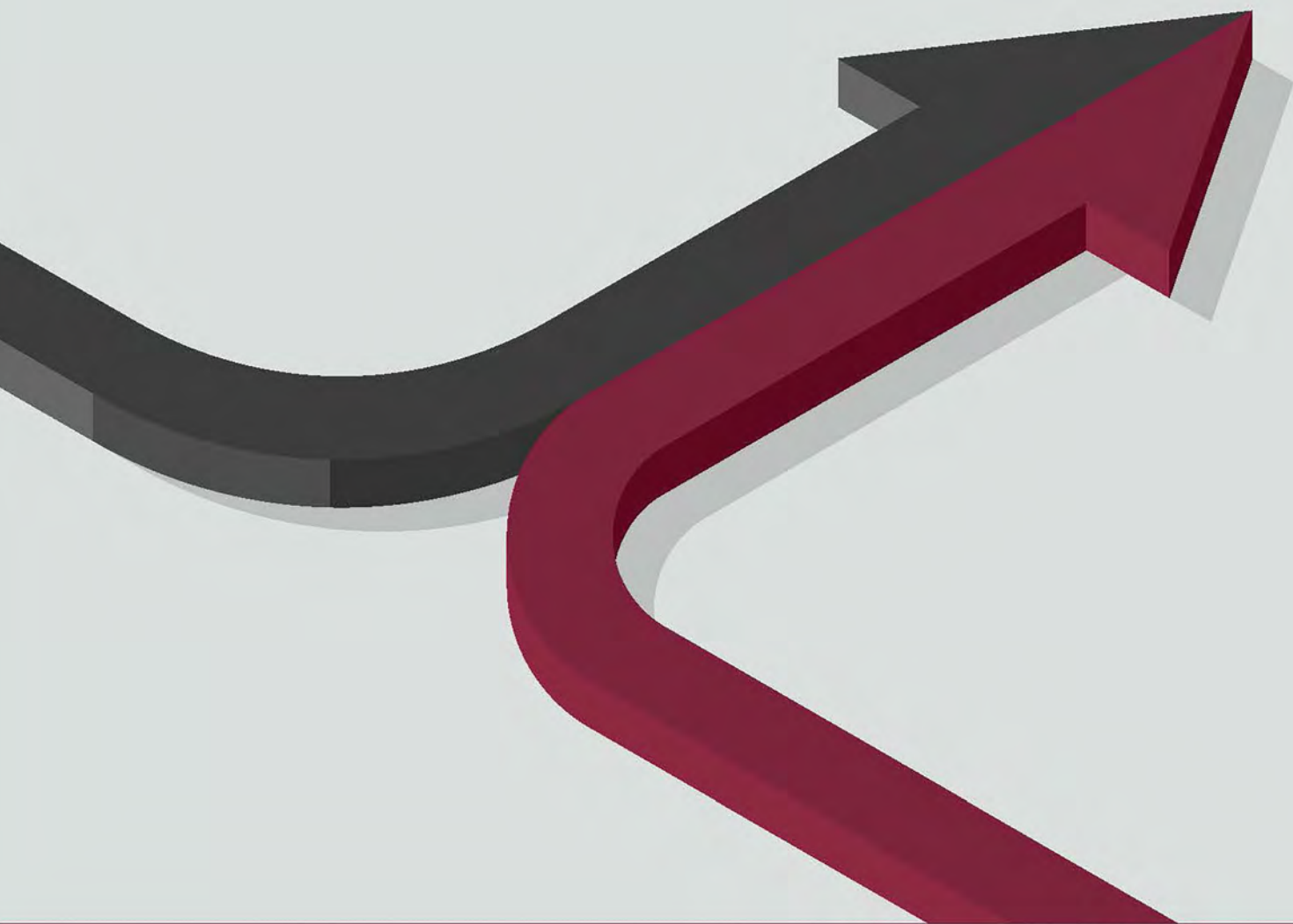


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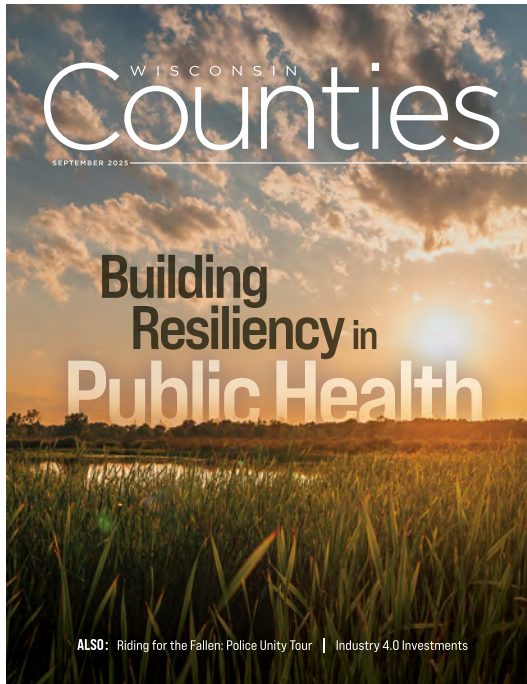
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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Join Us at the 2025 WCA Annual Conference

Each fall, the Wisconsin Counties Association Annual Conference brings together county officials from every corner of our state. It's our opportunity to reconnect, reflect, and refocus on the work ahead. This year's conference, Sept. 21–23 in beautiful Sauk County, promises to be one of the most engaging yet.

The workshop lineup is packed with timely topics that touch every aspect of county government. Whether you're looking for insight on housing development, cybersecurity, broadband expansion, juvenile justice strategies, crisis care, effective governance, or more, you'll find thoughtful, practical sessions led by experienced colleagues and policy experts. You can view the full schedule on the WCA website.

One session I'm especially excited about is a keynote from Christian Øverland, the Ruth and Hartley Barker Director and CEO of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Wisconsin is home to one of the most prestigious and forward-thinking state historical societies in the country. Founded in 1846, the Society has long been a national leader in preserving and sharing the stories that shape who we are.

At the start of the Civil War, the Society's first director Lyman Draper did something seemingly unremarkable at the time. He handed out notebooks and pencils to soldiers training at Camp Randall, asking them to record their daily experiences and send their diaries back to the Wisconsin Historical Society after the war. Draper recognized the value of the perspective of everyday people living through extraordinary times. Hundreds of diaries were returned.

That simple act of foresight created one of the richest firsthand Civil War collections in the country.

It was a visionary moment that continues to define the Wisconsin Historical Society's work today: preserving history as it happens, making it accessible to all, and helping people understand their place in the larger story of our state, our nation, and our world.

Øverland's keynote will explore this legacy and look ahead to its exciting future, including a new state-of-the-art history center under construction on the Capitol Square in Madison. When it opens in a few years, this won't just be a museum. It will be a dynamic, civic space that connects Wisconsinites across all 72 counties to their shared past in a broader American and global context. It will feature the Society's world-renowned collection – one of the most significant in North America, and only seconded by the Library of Congress – and host major traveling exhibits and a welcoming space for people to explore, reflect and contribute to our collective story.

That same spirit of vision and service drives county leaders in every part of the state. And that's why our conference matters. It's not just about policies or budgets. It's about learning from one another, drawing on our shared values, and preparing our communities for what comes next.

I hope you'll join us in Sauk County. Come to learn, connect, and be reminded of the essential role each of us plays in shaping the future and preserving the past.

See you in a few weeks! ■

Stay connected. Visit wicounties.org to access resources and learn about events.

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significant milestone 200 years ago when we began

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in large quantities to drive the

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We should be grateful for these
accomplishments while also looking

for our sign to pass the baton...

**Our changing
climate is
that signal.**



EXTREME WEATHER

The Impact on Our Health

*By Dr. Andrew Lewandowski, Pediatrician, UW Health; Dr. Pamela Guthman, Director, Guthman Consulting;
Abby Novinska-Lois, Executive Director, Healthy Climate Wisconsin*

Over the last decade, Wisconsin has experienced 33 billion-dollar disasters ranging from droughts and floods to tornadoes and severe storms, devastating our infrastructure and disrupting our lives.¹ The impacts of our increasingly volatile and extreme weather are visible year-round throughout Wisconsin.

Our drinking water is becoming less safe and more scarce. Unstable growing conditions threaten major crops. Weather instability allows some diseases to thrive. Extreme heat poses a significant risk to workers, infants, children, and older adults. Harmful algal blooms turn our lakes toxic. Chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and cancer, especially among children and older adults, are exacerbated.

In recent summers, it has become common for wildfire smoke to blanket the state in ways we never experienced before. The poor air quality, primarily due to Canadian wildfires, has caused sporting events to be canceled and loved ones to be hospitalized.

In July 2024, a flash flood destroyed the Manawa Dam in Waupaca County, forcing families to evacuate immediately. During cleanup, a shocked city worker said in an interview, “This isn’t even a hundred-year storm...you can’t even put a what-kind-of-a-year storm this would be...” As this article is going to print, Milwaukee and its surrounding communities have been hit by torrential rains and record-breaking flood waters. The total extent of the damage has not yet been calculated.

In February 2008, a severe winter storm dumped 20 inches of snow across southern Wisconsin, making it the snowiest winter on record for parts of the state. The

following month, President Barack Obama declared a snow emergency in Wisconsin, unlocking over \$11 million in federal relief for affected areas.² Since that winter, more than 13 federal emergency declarations requested by the state have been approved.

Counties across Wisconsin have been facing critical choices with limited resources for decades. But, as development expands and infrastructure costs rise, the financial impacts of the more frequent extreme weather events are increasingly staggering. The Center for Climate Integrity estimates that Wisconsin taxpayers will pay \$16.7 billion by 2040, nearly \$1 billion a year, to adapt to stormwater management, public health threats, and other climate-related stresses.

While climate change poses significant challenges to human health, when policymakers act on climate solutions, their constituents reap the benefits.

Adopting zoning regulations that encourage weatherized homes and energy-efficient infrastructure reduces the financial burden of repairs and disaster recovery while helping to keep energy bills and insurance costs from rising. Including sidewalks or bike lanes in road projects makes it easier for people to be more active. Maintaining mass transit options facilitates access to essential services, allows for easier evacuations, and improves air quality. Supporting nutrition education leads to increased vegetable consumption, improving health and benefiting local farmers.

As more renewable energy discussions are held, including the impacts of health care helps the public see the full costs

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7

and benefits of their choices. A UW-Madison study estimates that 100% clean energy in Wisconsin would prevent \$21 billion in annual health costs while saving 2,000 lives and preventing over 34,000 asthma attacks a year.³

In January, Wisconsin Counties explored "Building a Resilient Wisconsin" with a look at how we're monitoring the changing weather patterns and an overview of some of the emerging energy sources. This issue will examine the effects of our changing weather patterns on public health, what counties can do, and what financial tools and resources are available to support this effort.

What will your county do to protect the places you cherish and prevent irreversible harm? How will you pass the baton to future generations of Wisconsinites? ■

Dr. Andrew Lewandowski is a pediatrician with UW Health, an assistant professor at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, and a board member of Healthy Climate Wisconsin.

Dr. Pamela L. Guthman is a retired UW-Eau Claire and UW-Madison public/population health nursing professor, director of Guthman Consulting, LLC, and board member of Healthy Climate Wisconsin. Abby Novinska-Lois holds degrees in public health and environmental science and is the executive director of Healthy Climate Wisconsin.

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FEMA OVERHAUL PROPOSED

The Trump administration has proposed a significant overhaul of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. If implemented, the damage threshold used to determine when aid is allocated will increase substantially. According to an April 2025 "rebalancing" draft memo from the FEMA Review Council, the proposed changes would set the per capita indicator at four times the 2024 level, effectively limiting federal disaster declarations to only catastrophic events. This change also includes revoking relief eligibility for recreational facilities, such as "beaches, boat docks/ramps/piers, fish hatcheries, golf courses, and parks/bath houses/pools/playground equipment and athletic facilities not associated with an eligible educational facility/applicant."

The proposed revisions also eliminate mitigation programs such as the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program and the Flood Mitigation Assistance program, and exclude snowstorms from major disaster declarations, thereby removing the type of relief Wisconsin received in 2008.⁴ The result will be an unprecedented shift in disaster costs to state, county and local governments. □

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Navigating Disasters

THE ROLE OF COUNTIES

By Frani O'Toole, Emergency Preparedness Community Outreach Specialist, City of Milwaukee; Amanda Richman, Public Health Strategist, City of Milwaukee; Abby Novinska-Lois, Executive Director, Healthy Climate Wisconsin

In the summer of 2018, floodwaters washed out a town bridge in northern Wisconsin after record-breaking rains. Unable to reach a hospital or clinic and cut off from deliveries, a man dependent on an oxygen tank watched in rising panic as his oxygen supply dwindled. Local first responders pushed through, arriving in time to save his life.

This potentially life-threatening disruption in services highlights how much Wisconsinites depend on counties to prepare for emergencies and respond to disasters. By proactively engaging in advocacy, planning, preparedness, and emergency response, counties can safeguard community health and empower residents to thrive.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Federal Emergency Management Agency identified a miscommunication between police and fire personnel as contributing to the deaths of 121 firefighters during the collapse of the Twin Towers. In response, FEMA directed communities to organize their public and private sector partners into groups, such as Community Organizations Active in Disasters (COAD) or Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD). COADs, which are present in communities throughout Wisconsin, meet regularly to maintain readiness for mobilizations.

The federal government also invested heavily to improve readiness for natural and man-made threats, including through the Public Health Emergency Preparedness grant. Many of these preparedness funds were given to public health departments and city and county emergency managers, all

of whom play vital roles in responding to weather-related disasters. The grant is now being targeted for elimination.

With FEMA facing a significant overhaul and emergency preparedness funds threatened, it is more important than ever for counties to invest in strengthening their local infrastructure to coordinate disaster response and guide various community partners on how they can contribute to collective emergency preparedness efforts. County leaders can promote participation in these and other comprehensive emergency preparedness exercises by involving partners from various sectors, such as businesses, food banks, public safety officials, and other community organizations.

County officials also play a vital role in broader decision-making that enhances resilience, helping communities better withstand extreme weather. Leaders can use assessment tools from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to evaluate community vulnerabilities and then target

Tools available to help assess the risk of extreme weather and prepare your community:

- **Heat Vulnerability Index:** bit.ly/DHS_HeatVulnerability
- **Risk Assessment Flood Tool:** bit.ly/DHS_RAFT
- **Flood Resilience Scorecard:** bit.ly/DHS_FloodResilience
- **Flood Toolkits:** bit.ly/DHS_FloodToolkit
- **Green Infrastructure Toolkit:** bit.ly/CleanWI_Toolkit

State Public Health Funding Among Lowest in Nation

Local health departments serve as the frontline of disease prevention and community well-being in Wisconsin. Per Chapter 251 of state statutes, they are mandated to provide a wide range of services, including chronic disease prevention, emergency response, communicable disease control, community health services such as home visits and health assessments, as well as hazard control for substances like lead and asbestos, among other required services.

Despite the breadth of state-mandated public health services, Wisconsin ranks near the bottom for per-person state public health funding nationally. Different sources indicate varying levels of funding, depending on whether flow-through federal dollars are included; however, the rankings consistently place Wisconsin in the lowest 10 states for state-provided public health funding.

An analysis by the State Health Access Data Assistance Center, using 2023 data, indicates that Wisconsin provides only \$19 in state public health funding per resident – the eighth lowest in the nation. In comparison, Iowa provides \$37 per person, Michigan provides \$39, Illinois provides \$43, and Minnesota provides \$80. Including specific federal grants directed to

states, along with state funding, America's Health Rankings lists Wisconsin as the 49th state for public health funding at \$69 per person.

According to the Wisconsin Public Health Association and the Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards, "statewide data shows concerning trends: our residents are less healthy, less happy, living shorter lives, and struggling with addiction."

However, currently, the only dedicated state funding in Wisconsin is \$500,000 annually for communicable disease control, which equates to less than \$6,000 per local health department. Due to the lack of state funding, Wisconsin relies predominantly on local tax levies and program-specific federal grants for public health services. As federal grants decline and public health challenges intensify, this over-reliance on local taxes will continue to strain county budgets and exacerbate a growing disparity in service quality.

According to a study published by the National Institutes of Health, for every \$1 spent across all local public health interventions, we save more than \$4. The return on investment is even greater when analyzing public health interventions nationwide, by as much as \$27 for every \$1 invested. □

improvement efforts in high-risk areas. Examples include:

- Installing stormwater drainage systems and green spaces to lower temperatures, reduce flooding, and increase biodiversity
- Equipping clinics, libraries and other public spaces with purification systems and air conditioners to minimize the impacts of heat and smoke episodes
- Setting up emergency cooling tents for summer events to protect participants

As county officials navigate how to take action, Healthy Climate Wisconsin can provide resources, technical assistance, and support to inform and guide forward-looking decisions regarding food, buildings, energy, housing, and transportation. Whether it's offering talks, sharing data and health guidance with county departments or community leaders, or connecting county leaders with health care and public health professionals, Healthy Climate Wisconsin is committed to collaborating on solutions that will help our patients and communities thrive.

Together, we can build a Wisconsin where all residents have access to safe water, clean air, and a healthy environment. ■

Frani O'Toole holds a master's degree in urban planning and is an emergency preparedness community outreach specialist for the city of Milwaukee. Amanda Richman holds a master's degree in public health from the University of Michigan and is a public health strategist for the city of Milwaukee Health Department, specializing in the built environment. Abby Novinska-Lois holds degrees in public health and environmental science and is the executive director of Healthy Climate Wisconsin.



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TOXIC WATERS AND THIRSTY FIELDS

The Ripple Effects of Changing Weather

By Dr. Jonathan Patz, Professor, UW-Madison; Dr. Jed Downs, Owner, Madison Manual Medicine

Imagine you are walking your dog along a lakeshore on a hot summer day. He runs ahead to jump in the water before you can stop him. As you get closer, you notice a peculiar smell in the air and a strange blue-green swirl in the water. After calling your dog out of the water, he starts to stumble. Concerned, you rush him to the vet. En route, you develop a headache, abdominal pain, nausea and a rash. You have just encountered a blue-green algae bloom.

Blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) played a key role in oxygenating Earth's atmosphere three billion years ago and are not harmful by themselves. They become problematic when a concentrated bloom produces toxins that are ingested, come into contact with skin, or inhaled. Warm water combined with excess nutrients, such as phosphates and nitrates, create the conditions for a bloom.

Whether from fertilizing lawns or crops, old septic systems near surface water, or feedlot runoff, algal blooms are happening more often, making our treasured lakes and waterways toxic.¹ From 2010 to 2020, Wisconsin spent over \$2.5 million on blue-green algae outbreaks alone, not counting tourism losses.²

Wisconsin's climate is becoming warmer and wetter. Across the state, temperatures have risen about three degrees, and rainfall has increased by roughly five inches,

or 17%, since 1950, according to the Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts' latest report. Loss of snow cover is changing our winters, affecting access to cultural activities and places, such as the Apostle Island Ice Caves, that Wisconsinites have enjoyed for generations.

Less snow also means less protection for crops. Droughts impact soil temperature and health. Warm, dry soil disrupts the microbial activity that protects plant health, builds resistance to pests, and aids in nutrient uptake and overall crop yield.³ Droughts also impact groundwater systems, leading to increased demand for irrigation and energy use. During the 2023 drought, Wisconsin farmers used approximately 125 billion gallons of water for irrigation, the most since the Department of Natural Resources began reporting in 2011.⁴

In addition, higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reduce the protein, calcium, iron and zinc in plants.⁵ That means less food availability at a time when people will need larger amounts of food to reach the same amount of nutrient value, leading to higher food costs and more malnutrition.

Interspersed with drought, heavy rains also impact growing conditions and farm capacity. Intense rain washes away topsoil, reduces arable land, limits planting and

harvesting, and damages farm infrastructure.

Heavy rain and flooding also pose serious risks to human health and infrastructure. Water supplies can become contaminated, stagnant water creates ideal breeding grounds for human and plant pathogens, and mold growth can cause severe poisoning and neurological problems while being costly to remove. The risks of exposure to chemicals and electrical hazards also rise with heavy rains and flooding. Power outages can further challenge residents who rely on electricity for oxygen tanks or other essential medical devices.

While concentrated heavy rainfall can overwhelm storm drains and watershed systems anywhere in the state, municipalities located in floodplains are particularly vulnerable. Gays Mills, situated along the Kickapoo River in Crawford County, relocated much of its residential housing to higher ground after experiencing intense flooding in 2008 and 2009. The village officially opened its new location in 2012, only to flood again in the fall of 2018.⁶ Buildings were damaged even though they had been constructed three feet above the floodplain.

► So what can counties do?

Counties can reduce flood risk by managing land use and watersheds. For areas where homes are already in frequently flooded areas, this might look like Monroe County's voluntary buyout program.⁷ Launched in 2021 using funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the program has successfully acquired eight properties, three of which have been transformed into community parks and green spaces that can better absorb water, reducing the risk of groundwater contamination from flooded septic systems. The affected homeowners were able to build or buy away from the flood-prone area. Although the Trump administration recently eliminated the funding, other options, such as the Wisconsin DNR Municipal Flood Control Grant Program, remain available.

To manage water contamination of municipalities and recreational waterways, counties may protect the land near streams or develop riparian forest buffers. These buffers filter nutrients, pesticides, and animal waste from agricultural runoff; stabilize bank erosion; provide shade, shelter, and food for fish and other aquatic organisms; and protect cropland and downstream communities from flood damage.

Naturalizing rivers and waterways can also help manage and reduce flood risk for communities, including urban areas. The Kinnickinnic River restoration project in the city of

Milwaukee is one example. While improving the health of the river, the project enhances residents' safety, mental health, and overall well-being through the addition of green spaces.

One thing is certain: Wisconsin waterways are a vital part of our way of life and our state's economic future. It's in our best interest to protect the land and water that make our state special. ■

Dr. Jonathan Patz is a UW-Madison Vilas Distinguished Achievement professor and the John P. Holton Endowed Chair of Health and the Environment. Dr. Jed Downs has been practicing osteopathic medicine for the past 20 years and owns Madison Manual Medicine in Madison.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR ENERGY DECISIONS

By Dr. John Meurer, Professor Emeritus, Medical College of Wisconsin; Dr. Joan Schiller, Chair, Oncology Advocate United for Climate and Health; Dr. Joel Charles, Medical Director, Kickapoo Valley Medical Clinic

This summer, wildfire smoke from Canada blanketed Wisconsin, giving parts of our state the worst air quality in the nation. Residents with asthma or heart conditions were warned to stay inside. Two summers ago, the wildfire smoke was even worse. Outdoor events were canceled and emergency departments saw surges in lung disease flare-ups and heart failure. But it's not just big events affecting our air and health. Warmer temperatures are extending allergy seasons and exacerbating conditions such as hay fever and sinus infections.

► Outdoor and indoor air quality

Air pollution is a statewide concern. According to the American Lung Association, the cities of Sheboygan and Milwaukee rank 24th and 26th, respectively, for the worst ozone pollution among 228 U.S. cities.¹ Northern and central counties, including Eau Claire, Taylor and Brown, have recorded some of the highest particle pollution days in the state. (To see your local air quality, visit airnow.gov or map.purpleair.com.)

Indoor air quality matters just as much. Homes, schools, factories, and farms can harbor pollutants such as radon, mold, volatile organic compounds, and particulates from cooking, heating, and manufacturing. For instance, research has shown that pollutants can leak from gas stoves even when they are not in use and worsen asthma as much as exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.²

The science is clear. Burning fossil fuels, such as coal and natural gas, produces greenhouse gases and pollutants that harm human health and cause climate change. Methane, ozone, fine particulate matter and other air pollutants from fossil fuels are linked to asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, heart

attacks, strokes, systemic inflammation, early death, and even premature births.

We no longer need to sacrifice community health for our energy system. We have the tools and technology to build a more resilient and affordable system through a combination of distributed and large-scale renewable energy, energy storage, microgrids, transmission upgrades, energy efficiency, and demand-response programs.

Wisconsin's current energy system is overwhelmingly powered by fossil fuels (91%) imported into the state, making it vulnerable to power outages and market volatility.³ By expanding energy sources, we can enhance reliability during extreme weather as well as strengthen self-reliance, the job market, and local wealth as more county and household income stays in the community.

► The energy we choose matters

There are signs that an energy transition is underway. Dairyland Power Cooperative, a major energy provider in rural Wisconsin, for instance, was awarded a \$600 million federal grant last year from the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act to support its efforts to expand wind, solar, nuclear and hydropower. With the grant affirmed in April 2025, the cooperative's initiatives are expected to lower energy costs for its customers by 42% over the next decade while creating local jobs and supporting economic development.⁴ Researchers have estimated that clean energy developments, such as solar and wind projects, create more jobs per megawatt in construction, installation, and maintenance than fossil fuels.⁵

► The role of county leaders

County boards, zoning boards, and planning commissions often play a crucial role in decisions about energy

infrastructure. Good decision-making requires weighing both the short-term financial gains and the long-term health, environmental, and economic sustainability.

Some rural counties have leveraged revenues from solar and wind developments to improve schools, expand broadband infrastructure and keep more income circulating in their communities. In Lafayette County, the Quilt Block Wind Farm is generating over \$588,000 in annual revenue, more than \$500 per resident.

Counties have the most direct decision-making roles in projects under 100 megawatts, through zoning approvals, land sales, and ordinances. The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin reviews larger projects, but counties can influence outcomes through public hearings and by negotiating local government agreements or payments. Boards can also lead by example by approving solar installations on county buildings, supporting distributed energy that enhances local resiliency, and staying up to date with trusted sources of information to respond to the public's questions.

Bayfield County, for example, built a microgrid powered by solar and batteries on its courthouse and jail, which is expected to save approximately \$15,000 on energy bills each year. The project was funded with assistance from a PSC grant and can serve as a backup energy source for the public in the event of an electricity outage during extreme weather conditions.⁶

Counties can also take steps to improve air quality by promoting energy retrofit programs, enforcing modern building codes, and raising public awareness.

THE ENERGY USE OF DATA CENTERS

Local decisions regarding AI and data centers are also choices about energy and air quality. For the first time in decades, national energy demand is on the rise, largely driven by data centers. MIT researchers estimate that by 2028, energy use for artificial intelligence is projected to equal the power needs of 22% of U.S. households.⁷

According to reporting by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, a new Microsoft data center under development in Racine County could require the amount of energy needed to power 300,000 homes, more than the total in Milwaukee or Madison. Other proposals like Cloverleaf in Ozaukee County, which would be the nation's largest data center, are expected to draw power equivalent to that of Los Angeles, the second-largest city in the U.S.⁸ □

► A healthier energy future

Air and energy decisions are health decisions. Wisconsin municipal and county leaders are at the front lines of this transition. With thoughtful planning, clean energy can be a win for local health, the environment, and county budgets. ■

Dr. John Meurer is professor emeritus of pediatrics and community health with the Medical College of Wisconsin. Dr. Joan H. Schiller is the chair of Oncology Advocate United for Climate and Health and is an internationally recognized expert in lung cancer clinical research, with over 200 peer-reviewed publications. Dr. Joel Charles is a family practice physician at Vernon Memorial Healthcare and the medical director of the Kickapoo Valley Medical Clinic.

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Skating on Thin Ice

INFECTIOUS DISEASES RISE AS TEMPS WARM

By Dr. Bruce Krawisz, Pathologist, Marshfield Clinic Research Institute; Dr. Andrew Lewandowski, Pediatrician, UW Health; Dr. Pamela Guthman, Director, Guthman Consulting

Despite two urgent care visits, an 11-year-old boy struggles with an unusual headache. His mother knows something is wrong. She calls the family pediatrician to get another evaluation. The pediatrician sends the family to the emergency room, suspecting meningitis, an infection around the brain and spinal cord. Testing confirms an infection by *Borrelia* bacteria, the agent that causes Lyme disease. The boy is admitted to the hospital with Lyme meningitis, a life-threatening condition, and starts to improve with intravenous antibiotics. The family breathes a sigh of relief.

Dealing with infectious diseases is a key aspect of public health. From Medicaid waiver programs to disease tracking, Wisconsin residents are fortunate that our county public health infrastructure has services to provide accurate health information. Those resources will need to be supported and expanded as infections increase in the state.

Since the discovery of Lyme disease 40 years ago, the illness has become the most common vector-borne disease in the United States. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, “Wisconsin had 6,379 cases of Lyme disease in 2023, the highest on record. On average, approximately 4,000 cases were reported annually from 2018 to 2022. The number of reported Lyme disease cases has tripled over the past 15 years.”¹

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is also reporting moderate to high spread of the alpha-gal syndrome, which can cause people to be allergic to meat and certain proteins. The disease that

causes the syndrome is primarily spread by the Lone Star tick, which began appearing in Wisconsin in 2013, but has also been found in the more common black-legged and wood ticks.²

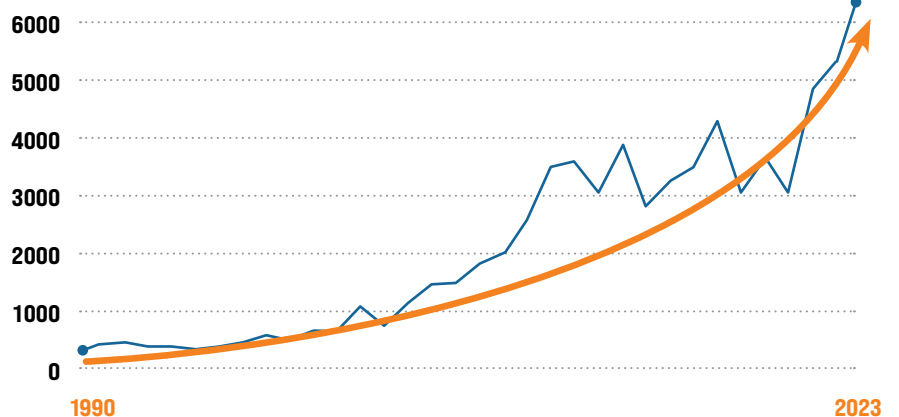
What’s behind that rapid rise? Part of the answer is heat. Wisconsin’s winter nighttime low temperatures have already increased 4°–7° F since 1950, with northern counties experiencing larger shifts. Milder winters increase tick winter survival, while longer summers increase the chance people encounter ticks.

Recent studies suggest that more than half of human infectious diseases are expected to become more aggressive as temperatures continue to warm.³ As a warmer world spurs changes in precipitation and heat patterns, land use, and human movement, the risk of water-borne, food-borne, and air-borne infectious diseases is rising alongside the risks of vector-borne pathogens, undermining disease control efforts.⁴

Cases of West Nile encephalitis, a brain infection caused by the West Nile virus that can lead to severe neurological disease, may rise in Wisconsin as well. The virus circulates

Cases of Lyme Disease (*B. burgdorferi*)

in Wisconsin, 1990-2023



Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services.



LEARN MORE

Find the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Vectorborne Disease Toolkit at bit.ly/DHS_Vectorborne.

between birds and mosquitoes, with humans contracting it through the bites of infected mosquitoes. As with ticks, warmer temperatures enhance mosquito survival and lengthen the mosquito season.

Higher temperatures also accelerate bacterial growth in food and water. Warmer air holds more water vapor, which can lead to heavier rainfall and increased flooding. Floods are a leading cause of gastrointestinal disease outbreaks in the United States, primarily due to *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and other microorganisms from animal and human waste contaminating local water supplies. *Listeria* and *Salmonella* cause intestinal infections, often called “food poisoning,” with *Listeria* also linked to brain infections and serious pregnancy complications.

As infections increase, so do the demands on health care services, including public health. Counties are called upon to provide direct services as well as connect with local health professionals, investigate and monitor

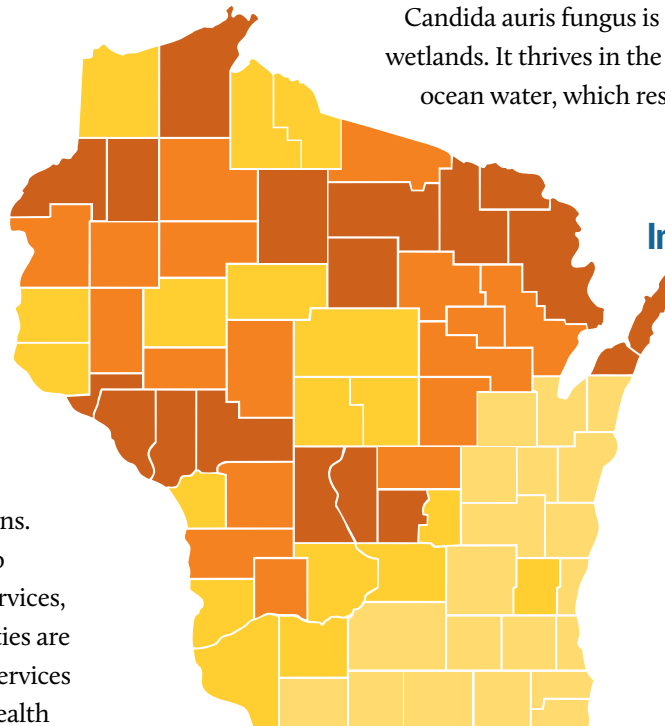
conditions, and issue public health warnings.

These climate conditions can spur the development of novel diseases.

Consider fungi. They have long been responsible for significant losses in crops and insect populations but have traditionally not been viewed as major threats to human life. That’s changing.

Candida auris fungus is typically found in tropical coastal wetlands. It thrives in the high salt concentrations of ocean water, which resemble the salt levels in human

Continued on page 18



Incidence of Lyme Disease (*B. burgdorferi*) in Wisconsin, 2023

Cases per 100,000

- 18 - 76
- 77 - 207
- 208 - 286
- 287 - 619

*Cases are reported by county of residence, which may not be county of exposure

Adapted from a Wisconsin Department of Health Services map.



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Continued from page 17

blood. The combination of high salt tolerance and increased temperatures led to the first recorded human infection in 1996 in South Korea, followed by another in Japan in 2009. In the United States, the first *Candida auris* infections were detected in 2016. That number rose to approximately 4,500 cases reported by the CDC in 2023, with mortality rates over 30%.⁵ While the narrative is still unfolding and requires further research, it suggests that rising global temperatures may have contributed to the emergence of this new infectious disease.⁶

County leaders can take proactive steps today by preparing health departments, emergency services, and community leaders for the changing conditions. Initiatives such as removing stagnant water at county sites, providing tick and mosquito education and protection for outdoor workers, and installing information at county parks and other frequently visited locations can save lives today. ■

Dr. Bruce Krawisz is a pathologist at the Marshfield Clinic Research Institute. Dr. Andrew Lewandowski is a pediatrician with UW Health, an assistant professor at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, and a board member of Healthy Climate Wisconsin. Dr. Pamela L. Guthman is a retired UW-Eau Claire and UW-Madison public/population health nursing professor, director of Guthman Consulting, LLC, and board member of Healthy Climate Wisconsin.

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Protecting People and Places: A Conservation-Health Partnership

As climate change intensifies extreme weather patterns, threats to water quality are escalating. In response, WI Land+Water's Health and Conservation Committee is creating pathways to protect communities from the growing risks of environmental health challenges.

Launched in 2018, the committee is a collaboration between WI Land+Water and the Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards. This innovative partnership connects conservation professionals with public health leaders to share knowledge, align efforts, and develop joint strategies to safeguard community well-being.

The committee began by focusing on nitrate contamination in drinking water — a concern heightened by shifting precipitation patterns, more frequent extreme weather events, and evolving agricultural practices. These complex and interconnected issues require collaborative solutions. To that end, the committee convenes quarterly virtual meetings, bringing together experts from county conservation offices, local health departments, universities, and state agencies.

One such effort is underway near the village of Athens, where the Marathon County Conservation and Health departments have partnered with the Wisconsin Rural Water Association. The project encourages farmers to protect drinking water sources by converting row crops in wellhead protection areas to perennial grasses and helps residents with private wells access grants to improve water quality.

Currently, the committee is focused on building opportunities for collaboration between conservation and public health to help Wisconsin communities remain resilient.

To learn more, contact Christina Anderson at WI Land+Water or visit wisconsinlandwater.org/members-hub/committees. □

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The director of the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy, Maria Redmond (third from the left), tours Stainless Foundry & Engineering in Milwaukee, learning about energy efficiency and sustainability in industry.

OFFICE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND CLEAN ENERGY



Engaging Communities and Empowering Counties

By Winston Thompson, Lead by Example Analyst, Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy

Wisconsin consumes nearly six times more energy than it produces, sending billions of dollars out of state each year to import coal, oil, natural gas, and electricity. As the state confronts the growing impacts of climate change – and to keep Wisconsinites’ hard-earned dollars in the local economy — it is more critical than ever for Wisconsin to invest in clean energy and resilient infrastructure to secure a livable future for all communities.

Recognizing the impact of a changing climate on jobs, communities, and the economy, Gov. Tony Evers established the Wisconsin Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy in 2019 via executive order. “We don’t have to choose between mitigating climate change and protecting our environment and affordable energy and economic development... we can and will do both,” said Evers in the announcement. The executive order set a target for the

state to transition to 100% carbon-free electricity by 2050 and to meet the carbon reduction goals outlined in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.



To reach these goals, the OSCE developed Wisconsin’s first Clean Energy Plan, which is projected to create over 40,000 jobs by 2030, lower energy bills for families, and reduce reliance on out-of-state energy sources.

The OSCE supports the initiatives by actively engaging communities, empowering counties and other local governments, and spearheading sustainability efforts across state agencies.

► Supporting local governments

The OSCE aims to support and elevate local sustainability efforts, recognizing that many communities, such as the 28 cities, villages, and counties that make up the members of the Wisconsin Local Government Climate Coalition, have

The OSCE developed Wisconsin's first Clean Energy Plan, which is projected to create over 40,000 jobs by 2030, lower energy bills for families, and reduce reliance on out-of-state energy sources.

established their own climate and resiliency initiatives.

One such example emerged in 2024, when the OSCE submitted a U.S. Department of Energy grant application on behalf of Bayfield County and the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. The project focuses on energy improvements in rural and remote areas, incorporating a resilient microgrid system that integrates solar, battery storage, electric vehicle charging stations, and critical electrical upgrades.

Having tribal, county, and town partners at the table, the initiative is designed to bring long-term energy security and economic opportunity to rural Wisconsin communities that are often excluded from large-scale infrastructure investments. Beyond leading applications, the OSCE also assists local governments with letters of support that increase project competitiveness.

► **Resources for local governments to lead by example**

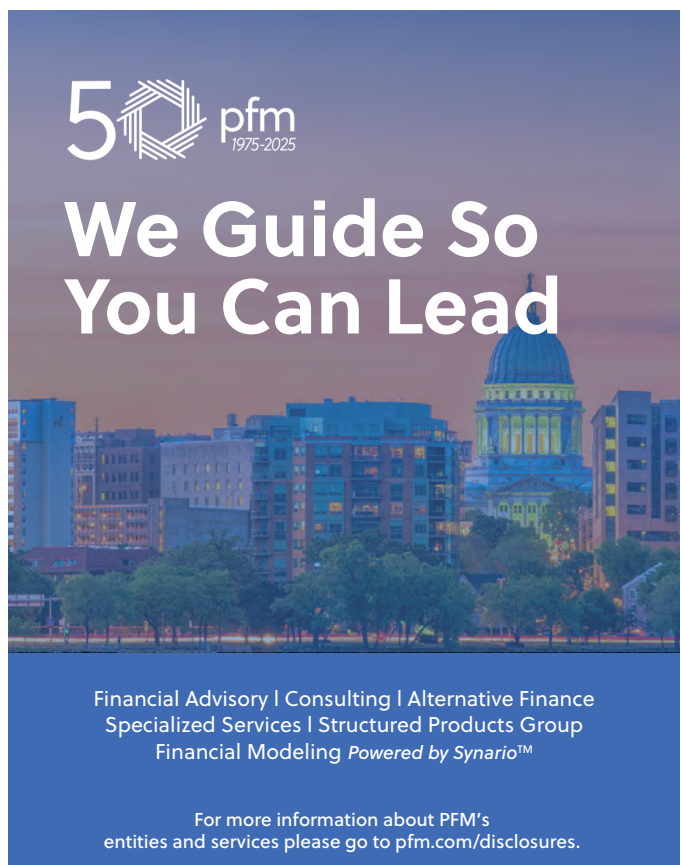
In addition, the OSCE champions a “lead-by-example” initiative that helps Wisconsin state agencies implement sustainability practices in their operations, modeling climate leadership. These efforts reduce emissions, lower costs, and motivate other entities to take action.

The state of Wisconsin, as an enterprise, seeks to expand on-site renewable energy, transition to alternative fuel vehicles, procure sustainable goods, and improve energy efficiency in state buildings. While state-focused, many of these tools are likewise helpful for local governments, including:

- **Non-competitive federal funding:** The state of Wisconsin, as well as multiple local governments, have applied for elective-pay eligible tax credits, which are federal non-competitive funds for tax-exempt entities to help reduce the costs of renewable energy and EV projects. Although the funds remain available, recent changes to federal law have accelerated the phase-out of these tax credits, making it important to act before they expire.
- **Alternative fuel vehicles:** Agencies are analyzing their fleets to proactively replace older vehicles with hybrids and EVs and installing charging infrastructure. The OSCE has developed an alternative fuel fleet informational sheet to assist all government entities using state vehicle contracts.

- **Environmentally preferable purchasing:** Wisconsin state and local governments spend billions of dollars on goods and services annually. In an effort to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars, governments should consider the lifecycle and environmental impact of what they are purchasing as opposed to just the upfront cost. Currently, the OSCE is working with the State Bureau of Procurement to explore ways to increase the number of environmentally preferable products on contract within the state's procurement process and plans to expand efforts to educate purchasers about the benefits of sustainable products.
- **Sustainable capital projects:** Given the millions of square feet of office space overseen by Wisconsin government, new buildings and renovations must meet high efficiency and sustainability goals. The Department of Administration Division of Facilities Development

Continued on page 22

A graphic celebrating PFM's 50th anniversary (1975-2025). It features a large '50' with a stylized gear-like '0' and the PFM logo. The background is a blue-tinted image of the Wisconsin State Capitol building at night. The text 'We Guide So You Can Lead' is prominently displayed in white. Below this, a list of services is provided: Financial Advisory, Consulting, Alternative Finance, Specialized Services, and Structured Products Group. It also mentions 'Financial Modeling Powered by Synario™'. At the bottom, it directs readers to pfm.com/disclosures for more information.

50 pfm 1975-2025

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created Sustainability Guidelines for new capital projects (available at bit.ly/DOA-Sustainability-Guidelines). While designed for state government projects, these guidelines can also be adapted for use in local government.

► Leading innovative community engagement

With its work rooted in collaboration, the OSCE formed the Wisconsin Climate Action Navigators (WI CAN) using a Climate Pollution Reduction Grant from the Environmental Protection Agency. The initiative unites nonprofits, businesses, governments, and individuals to strengthen community involvement and inform OSCE priorities.

WI CAN played a key role in developing the Wisconsin Emissions Reductions Roadmap, a short list of near-term action items that, if adopted, will continue to move Wisconsin forward in combating climate change and its harmful impacts, and contribute to the state's

comprehensive climate action planning effort. These plans provide a comprehensive long-term roadmap for reducing greenhouse gas emissions across key sectors.

What makes WI CAN a truly reciprocal initiative is its incubator funding, which provides members with seed grants for projects aligned with WI CAN's mission. Members have applied for the financing, ranging from implementing tree canopy projects to developing toolkits

for engagement with the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin. The OSCE is currently in the process of awarding these grants.

Through WI CAN, the OSCE has helped spark community projects

while gaining critical feedback on clean energy and climate initiatives. WI CAN is quickly becoming a model for community engagement for state and local governments across the country. ■

Winston Thompson is the Lead by Example analyst for the Office of Sustainability and Clean Energy in the Wisconsin Department of Administration.



CONNECT WITH OSCE

The OSCE welcomes collaboration and supports individuals and organizations statewide. For more information about these resources, contact them at OSCE@wisconsin.gov.

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A few of the riders with the trailer that accompanies the Wisconsin contingent on their route to D.C.

Photos by Dave Junion

Riding for the Fallen

Wisconsin Team Joins Thousands in Police Unity Tour

Each May during Police Week, more than 2,000 cyclists gather for a solemn journey of honor and remembrance: the Police Unity Tour. Over four days and nearly 300 miles, riders from across the country make their way to Washington, D.C., where they converge at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial to honor officers who have died in the line of duty.

The Police Unity Tour began in 1997 with a simple yet powerful motto: “We Ride for Those Who Died.” What started as a modest event has grown into a nationwide movement of endurance, reflection and healing for law enforcement and friends and family of the fallen. Among the participants are riders from Wisconsin, each with a story and a purpose.

Wisconsin’s contingent, usually 30 to 35 strong, is part of the tour’s Chapter 9, which starts the ride in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, just north of Philadelphia. Each chapter begins

from a different location and converges in D.C. Along the way, they are escorted by motorcycle officers, and sometimes, a police helicopter that flies overhead to ensure their safety.

► A ride with purpose

Stephanie Hanson, a longtime prosecutor with the Washington County District Attorney’s Office, has been riding since 2018. Her reasons for participating are both professional and deeply personal. “We ride for those who have died,” she said. “When the ride seems tough, we think of those officers and their survivors — that will pull you through anything.”

Hanson rides in memory of Deputy Dan Glaze, a Rusk County sheriff’s deputy killed in the line of duty in 2016, as well as Washington County Deputy John Mark (“Spike”) Schmitt, who died in an automobile crash in 1998. Hanson’s husband, a retired law enforcement officer, once worked alongside Schmitt. Hanson’s stepson has followed in his

father's footsteps and is now a police officer.

Hanson was the first prosecutor from Wisconsin to participate in the tour. "There aren't many women who do this," she said. "You meet people you didn't know you needed until you're there." Since her first ride alongside a friend who is a dispatcher and lost a colleague, Hanson has become part of a close-knit group of women riders. "Everyone of them would run toward danger," she said. "They're so strong and tough."

Physically, the ride is exhausting, with riders cycling 10- to 15-mile segments through rain, heat, and cold. Emotionally, it is just as intense. At various stops, riders hold brief ceremonies and lay wreaths at departments that have lost an officer.

Each rider wears a bracelet engraved with the name of a fallen officer and gives it to the family at the end of the ride. "It's a small token, but it's an expression of our condolences and our gratitude," Hanson said.

► Honoring and healing

Marathon County Sheriff's Office Lieutenant Cory Gladden was drawn to the tour after attending Police Week in 2018 to honor Detective Jason Weiland of the Everest Metro Police Department, who had been killed the previous year responding to a shooting spree in Rothschild and Weston. Watching the Unity Tour riders inspired Gladden to take up cycling.

This year, he completed his fifth tour. Gladden trains three to five times a week and helps coordinate fundraising efforts for the North Central Wisconsin Riders.

Participating in the tour requires more than just commitment. Each rider must raise at least \$2,100 to cover the direct costs of the ride, with a portion supporting the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial. Participants are also responsible for their flights, additional hotel stays, and equipment.

Each year, Gladden participates in memory of officers lost the previous year, as well as for Weiland, Glaze, and Marathon County Deputy Jeffrey Sheets, who died in the line of duty in 1994. "It is essential to honor the officers who made the ultimate sacrifice and remember the families of the fallen," he said.

"The support we receive during the ride is incredible.



► Joe Kurer's mother and sister, wearing the bracelets given to them by riders, take a moment to remember him at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.

Stopping at various agencies, talking with the families of the fallen, and connecting with other law enforcement professionals who have experienced loss is therapeutic," he said. "The pain and suffering we endure during the ride will never compare to that of the survivors."

The most meaningful moment for him is still the final ride into the memorial. "No matter how many times I ride, I still get chills riding in," he said. "The sights, sounds and emotions are amazing."

► A commitment to remember

Jim Judkins, a corrections officer with the Washington County Sheriff's Department, has participated in the tour for the past six years. "It's important to honor fallen officers and to show the families that their loved ones will not be forgotten," he said.

Judkins trains year-round to prepare for the physical demands of the tour. "I ride a stationary bike in the winter and ride outside as much as possible when the weather permits," he said.

For Judkins, one of the most powerful parts of the journey is meeting the people most directly impacted. "A tour

Continued on page 26

Continued from page 25

highlight is talking to family and friends of fallen officers and learning more about them,” he said. “It gives the ride meaning beyond the physical challenge.”

► A spiritual journey

Retired Fond du Lac Police Lieutenant Tina Braun joined the tour in 2013, motivated by the death of her colleague, Officer Craig Birkholz, in 2011. Since then, Braun has taken part nearly every year. “I find the ride to be very spiritual,” she said. “You’re riding with purpose, a shared sense of camaraderie with people you don’t know. Those who ride have the same mindset and purpose. It’s amazing to be a part of it.”

Braun rides for a different fallen Wisconsin officer each year, some lost recently, others long ago. “The ride is very challenging, physically and mentally,” she said. “We try to help provide the families of the fallen with closure and love.”

She recalls the emotional effect of seeing children lining the roads to cheer on the riders. “The support from people who don’t know us is always incredible,” she said. “We’ve had three fathers whose sons died in the line of duty ride with us. Two of



them still rode last year. They ride as part of their healing, and they are the reason we ride.”

► A father’s mission of the heart

One of those fathers is Bill Kurer, a purchasing manager for Washington County. He joined the Police Unity Tour in 2023 to honor his son, Fond du Lac police officer Joseph Kurer, who died in 2021.

“This event is important to me because it’s an opportunity to raise awareness of how many officers lose their lives while selflessly serving their communities, and more personally, because our family lost our son,” Kurer said.

Kurer attended Police Week for the first time in 2022 as a survivor, watching from the memorial as 2,000 riders arrived.

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“You’re riding with purpose, a shared sense of camaraderie with people you don’t know.

Those who ride have the same mindset and purpose.

It’s amazing to be a part of it.”

— Tina Braun, retired Fond du Lac police lieutenant

“It was overwhelming,” he said. “I wasn’t an avid rider, but when someone asked if I wanted to participate, I just said yes.”

He trained for nine months, riding more than 1,200 miles to get ready. “I over trained, but it eased my mind knowing I could make it through,” he said. “My wife said that being physically prepared would help carry me when the emotions kicked in, and she was right.”

One moment from that first ride stands out. “On day two, we climbed a huge bridge. I looked down at the photo of Joe that my daughter had attached to my bike bag, and I felt like we were conquering that climb together. He was my motivation.”

Having completed three rides, Kurer still feels Joe’s presence every time. “Joe was a gentle spirit, kind-hearted, and faith-filled, a selfless servant to others. He loved being a police officer. I’d trade it all to have him back. But, since we can’t, I’m very grateful for this healing experience.”

► An unforgettable arrival

On the final day, all riders gather in a stadium parking lot before making their ceremonial entrance into the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial together.

The event features candlelight vigils, international tributes, and high-ranking keynote speakers. The families of the fallen officers whose names are being added to the memorial that year are escorted from their hotel by a police motorcade. At the ceremony, they read each officer’s name, ring a bell, light a candle, and pass that candlelight from person to person until the entire National Mall glows.

“It’s so emotional seeing everyone at the memorial,” Braun said. “Families lay wreaths and place photos of the fallen, and children leave notes.”

Despite the challenge, Wisconsin’s riders keep coming back year after year. “I’ll keep riding for Dan Glaze until his son is old enough to do it,” Hanson said. Kurer echoed that sentiment, explaining that he’ll keep riding “as long as I’m able.”

The Unity Tour serves as a powerful reminder of the risks officers face and the strength of the communities that support them. “We ride for them,” said Gladden. ■



Chapter 9 of the Police Unity Tour, which includes the Wisconsin contingent, receives a police escort on its route from Pennsylvania to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, D.C.

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Campers prepare to fill in the bank with transplanted willow shrubs to reduce erosion.



Discovering Nature, Building Futures

Youth Conservation Camps Open Doors for the Next Generation

By Kristin Teston, Communications Director, Wisconsin Land+Water

High school student William Gregersen pulled his canoe into the cool waters of the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage in Iron County, joining fellow campers from across Wisconsin for a day of habitat restoration work.

“We removed willow shrubs to help improve the nest area for waterfowl and replanted them in a different location to prevent erosion,” Gregersen explained. “I felt like I was making a true difference.”

His experience embodies the core mission of WI Land+Water’s two conservation camps, which have connected middle and high school students with nature and career

opportunities for over a decade. Held in June, the camps blend outdoor education with meaningful conservation projects and introduce young people to natural resource professionals and potential career paths.

“They’re not just learning about environmental science. They’re actively participating in habitat restoration, water quality monitoring, and wildlife management with professionals in the field.”

— Kim Warkentin

This year’s programming featured two significant research initiatives that gave students hands-on experience in groundwater monitoring and habitat restoration.

Middle school campers became water quality investigators, using a specialized groundwater model to visualize the hidden water systems beneath Wisconsin’s surface. Working with equipment installed by University

of Wisconsin researchers, students operated piezometers to extract water samples directly from groundwater near the Wisconsin River. They then analyzed the samples for phosphorus levels, learning

firsthand how scientists monitor water quality and detect pollution that could affect drinking water, wildlife, and entire ecosystems.

For many students, the camps offer their first taste

of independence and hands-on learning outside the classroom. Devyn Seidl, heading into 7th grade, signed up hoping to learn canoeing but discovered much more. “My favorite parts of camp were the campfires and night games, like Ghost in the Graveyard,” Seidl said. “I also really liked building survival shelters and the fire-starting competition. Camp was educational in a fun way. I can identify tree species now, and I learned I can be on my own and build my social skills.”

The high school camp takes career exploration further, with students working directly with natural resource professionals. High school campers received hands-on job training from Jenna Malinowski, a senior wildlife biologist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in Iron County. Students cleared overgrown willow shrubs to restore healthy waterfowl nesting habitat on the Turtle Flambeau Flowage, then replanted the shrubs on a steep hillside for erosion control. Malinowski shared insights about her career while students worked alongside her on this critical restoration.

“These projects give campers a taste of real conservation work,” explains Kim Warkentin, youth education director for WI Land+Water. “They’re not just learning about environmental science. They’re actively participating in habitat restoration, water quality monitoring, and wildlife management with professionals in the field.”

“What I learned at the camp will help me try to find more volunteering opportunities in conservation, have a better understanding of tribal history, and help me provide for butterflies,” Gregersen noted.

While the educational value is clear, WI Land+Water recognized that camp costs can be prohibitive for many families. The organization established a scholarship program to increase student participation, beginning with the Brad Matson Memorial Conservation Camp Scholarship, created to honor a dedicated advocate for youth conservation programs.

“Brad loved to lead canoe trips at our high school camp,”



Middle school campers got hands-on experience analyzing water samples.

said Warkentin. “Establishing this scholarship was important to our conservation community and gives any student who wants to attend our camps the opportunity to experience nature, learn about conservation, and make lasting friendships and memories.”

When applications exceeded expectations, the organization expanded its approach to work directly with counties and other organizations to offer scholarships.

Many county land and water conservation departments offer

scholarships for both camps. This collaborative model reduces the cost or allows for free attendance for youth from communities across Wisconsin’s diverse geography, from urban centers to rural farming communities.

“It’s a fantastic way to support students in their local

Continued on page 30

Who has energy options to fit my needs?

Constellation, the endorsed energy supplier for WCA, offers comprehensive energy solutions and a variety of pricing options for electric, natural gas, and renewable energy products for organizations of any size, in every competitive energy market across the U.S.

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▲ Deyvn Seidl pulls a groundwater sample from the Wisconsin River.



▲ William Gregersen (left) carries a bundle of willow shrubs.

Continued from page 29

communities and provide outdoor opportunities for many whose families might not have the financial ability to send their child to camp,” said Warkentin. “It’s a great investment at the local and statewide level. These students might decide to go to school for natural resources or become a future county conservationist, wildlife biologist or researcher. At the very least, we hope they will learn to love and become stewards of our beautiful state.”

Other organizations that provided camp scholarships include the Fond du Lac County Audubon Society, Sawyer County Outdoor Projects & Education (a nonprofit, youth-focused organization), and Transcendent Technologies (a

company specializing in land records software).

Gregersen enthusiastically recommends the camp experience. “I would tell anyone who wants to attend

camp that they should, since it is an amazing experience filled with fun and conservation.”

Whether you’re a student interested in attending the middle or high school conservation camp, a family seeking scholarship information, or an

organization or individual wanting to support these camps, WI Land+Water invites you to get involved. ■

Kristin Teston is the communications director for the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association (WI Land+Water), a non-profit, membership organization that supports the efforts of around 450 land conservation committee supervisors and 370 conservation staff in 72 county land and water conservation department offices.



LEARN MORE

Visit wisconsinlandwater.org/camps for more about camp opportunities, scholarship applications, and ways to support the next generation of conservation stewards.

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INDUSTRY 4.0

NE Wisconsin Manufacturers Invest in Technology

By Ann Franz, Executive Director, NEW Manufacturing Alliance

The NEW Manufacturing Alliance has released the third installment of its Industry 4.0 Talent & Technology study. The findings reveal that manufacturing companies in northeast Wisconsin, having largely stabilized or improved since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, plan to increase their investment in Industry 4.0 technologies and the talent needed to support them.

The study defined Industry 4.0 as the ongoing transformation in manufacturing that integrates technologies into operations. These technologies include cloud computing, analytics, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and the Internet of Things (which allows objects and devices like a refrigerator to use the internet).

“This isn’t just about automation. It’s about transforming the way we work and compete,” said Ann Franz, executive director of the NEW Manufacturing Alliance, which works to promote manufacturing and

employment growth in the region. “These tools enable increased automation, predictive maintenance, and data-driven optimization across systems.”

► Investment in technologies

Cybersecurity topped the list of technologies attracting significant investments in the study, with 94% of manufacturers investing in cybersecurity in 2024, and 70% intending to continue increasing that investment over the next three years.

“There’s a growing awareness that cybersecurity isn’t optional, particularly if you’re involved in sensitive areas such as health care,” said Scott Janssen, whose company, James Imaging Systems, works

with public and private clients throughout Wisconsin, including counties. “We’re helping organizations implement AI tools that track document activity (e.g., who has copied what and whether they were authorized), optimize printer productivity, reduce unnecessary printing, and help prevent



internal and external security breaches before they happen.”

Other top technologies drawing attention in the survey were the industrial Internet of Things, cloud computing, machine integration, and AI, including its generative forms that can create text, images, and video.

Two-thirds of respondents said they plan to invest in generative AI this year, and 58% plan to invest over the next three years. Franz noted, however, that the evolving nature of AI technology has created uncertainty for some company leaders, who cited challenges like a lack of in-house expertise in AI, the complexity of integration, and security risks.

Janssen’s company is already embracing AI-driven workflow automation, cybersecurity enhancement, and digital transformation. “We’re currently helping companies and organizations implement AI that interprets handwriting and OCR [optical character recognition],” he said. “That allows the client to streamline workflows and automate data capture with a higher degree of accuracy.”

According to the study, manufacturers expect connectivity technologies such as 5G wireless, Bluetooth, and mesh networks, which allow for multiple connections, to have the greatest impact on operations over the next few years. Tools for inventory management, like RFID tag readers and computer vision systems, are also gaining traction. Other notable technologies cited in the study include mobile-friendly interfaces, predictive modeling systems, and smart energy solutions.



FOR THE FULL STUDY...
Visit bit.ly/NEW-Industry4

► Investment in people

Project managers remain in high demand, and 59% of respondents

expect to hire more in the next three years. Process engineers, AI specialists, automation technicians, data analysts, application developers, and IT security experts round out the list of critical roles.

“Companies anticipate collaborating with technical colleges and universities to meet these workforce needs,” said Franz, “as well as leveraging third-party platforms and outsourcing.”

James Imaging Systems is growing alongside these demands. “We’ve added 15 people to our team this year,” Janssen said, bringing their total to 136 employees. “As the need for smart workflows increases, so does the need for people who understand how to implement and manage them.”

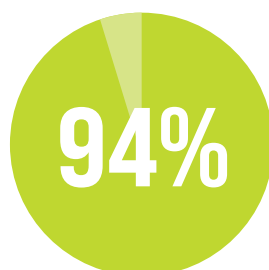
The Industry 4.0 landscape in northeast Wisconsin continues to evolve. While most manufacturers are moving toward greater digitization and automation, the study highlights a mix of optimism and uncertainty, especially around emerging tools like AI. Still, cybersecurity remains a top priority as organizations look to improve their workflows, and companies like James Imaging Systems are helping regional players make the leap.

“We’re not just preparing for the future,” said Franz. “We’re building it.” ■

Ann Franz is the executive director of Northeast Wisconsin (NEW) Manufacturing Alliance, a group of manufacturers that works with educators, workforce development, chambers of commerce, and state organizations to promote manufacturing in northeast Wisconsin.

A Closer Look at Northeast Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Investments in Technologies

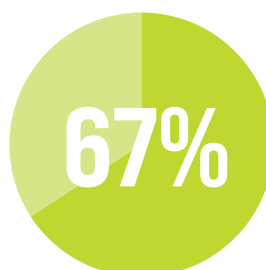
According to the Industry 4.0 Talent and Technology Survey 2024



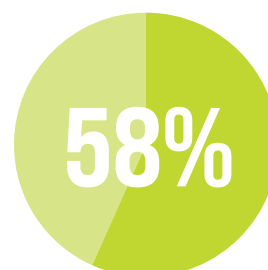
invested in
cybersecurity
in 2024



intend to increase
their investment in
cybersecurity over
the next three years



invested in
generative AI
in 2024



intend to invest in
generative AI over
the next three years



WASHINGTON COUNTY

Answering the Call: The Slinger Fire Department

Established in 1888, the history of the Slinger Fire Department runs deep. Here at the volunteer firehouse, it's not uncommon to find firefighters with family members across multiple generations who have served. It's a way of life for those in the department.

"For my family to have four generations on the Slinger Fire Department is pretty remarkable," said Slinger firefighter Ethan Wolf. "It's a part of my DNA."

With more than 760 fire stations in Wisconsin, it is estimated that over 600 are predominantly staffed by volunteers. Whether volunteers or professional firefighters, these individuals are committed to keeping their communities safe and being there for people at their time of greatest need.

"Here at the Slinger Fire Department, we are a 100% volunteer fire department, so everybody comes here because they want to," said Captain Tim Roskopf. "To me, being a firefighter is family. My great-grandpa was in the fire service. As a kid, my father would race to a call, and I'd



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

race behind on my bike. I am proud to be a fourth-generation firefighter."

With ongoing training to be ready to pivot for any emergency, the Slinger Fire Department continually

strives to be there for people on their "worst day" and invests in safety techniques that save lives, while building community.

The department serves the village of Slinger and parts of the towns of Polk and West Bend in Washington County, as well as provides assistance to surrounding communities through mutual aid agreements. In addition to responding to calls, the department provides fire inspections and hosts basic rapid intervention team trainings.

The pride in service is felt throughout the Slinger Fire Department. "We are helping people when they need help the most," said firefighter Craig Wolf. "To give back to our community we live in and work here, this is our foundation." □

► **WATCH NOW:** [youtube.com/DiscoverWI](https://www.youtube.com/DiscoverWI)

To see season four stories as they are released, as well as previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at [youtube.com/DiscoverWI](https://www.youtube.com/DiscoverWI) and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast on your favorite podcast player, which features counties in the program.



MARATHON COUNTY

Rooted in Tradition: Hsu Ginseng Farms

In the late 70s, Paul Hsu was working for the state of Wisconsin as a social worker. One of his colleagues mentioned that ginseng was grown in Marathon County. Intrigued, he thought of his mother in Taiwan, who had numerous health concerns. So, one day, he drove up to the county, knocked on a few farmers' doors, and ultimately, bought several pounds of ginseng to send to his mother. That trip proved to be fruitful in more ways than one, firmly planting Hsu's interest in the crop.

Hsu Ginseng Farms opened in 1976. Today, it is one of the top producers in the state. "My father was a believer first in ginseng," said Will Hsu, the current owner/operator. "He built a company that is recognized worldwide."

Ginseng has been cultivated in Wisconsin for more than 100 years, with the earliest farm established in 1904 in the town of Hamburg in Marathon County, which pioneered ginseng farming in the state. Prior to that, farmers in northern Wisconsin harvested and sold wild ginseng, which once thrived in our shady, deciduous forests.

"Marathon County has been the hub of ginseng production in the United States," said Will. "It's generational because it takes so long to get a crop, but also to learn how to grow it. It's a unique item. Today, less than 100 farms are actively growing

ginseng in the state."

A time-consuming and tedious farming process, ginseng is grown on land that will never be used for more than one crop. "You can grow other crops on that land after, but once we plant ginseng, we will never go back," said Will. "We don't use chemicals for weeds, as it would kill the plant, and all planting of the seeds and processing are done by hand."

According to the Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau, which issued a report in 2017 when ginseng was designated the state's official herb, "American ginseng, or *Panax quinquefolius*, is a slow-growing perennial herb that is a member of the ivy family. Above ground, the ginseng plant has leaves that look similar to a strawberry plant and grows small red berries in the fall. The beige root of the plant, which resembles a parsnip, is used as herbal medicine, particularly in eastern Asia. Some claim that ginseng root raises energy levels, lowers cholesterol, enhances strength, and reduces stress."

With a healthy demand for the product in major markets in Asia, Hsu Ginseng Farms is proud to promote the traditions of our state on a worldwide stage. □

► **WATCH NOW:** [youtube.com/DiscoverWI](https://www.youtube.com/DiscoverWI)

To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell at 866-404-2700 or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866.404.2700.

Wisconsin Counties Association

2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE *GAME DAY*

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

Welcome to Game Day in Sauk County!

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.

Are you ready to hit the field? If not, it's time to head to the locker room and gear up because the WCA 2025 Annual Conference is here, and it's game on in beautiful Sauk County!

This year's theme, "Game Day," also reflects the vibrant growth of our Wisconsin Dells and the Lake Delton communities. From youth to adult sports, these activities are bringing people together, fostering teamwork and creating champions. Across Sauk County, communities are stepping up and playing hard, sprinting forward with exciting new additions to our fields of play.

So, let's suit up and prepare to engage, challenge, invigorate and take action as part of WCA's Team WisCo. We're all on the same team, working together to lead Wisconsin counties toward success.

Coaching us on to victory is this year's lineup of top-tier speakers, workshop sessions and networking opportunities

designed to help you address the important issues facing county officials today. Whether you're a seasoned veteran or just starting out, there's a spot for everyone on this team.

As a high school sports announcer (yes, in my spare time), I've had the privilege of witnessing countless memorable moments on the field. But beyond the game, I see a greater opportunity to unite our communities, our counties and the great state of Wisconsin. It's a true "triple threat" play that highlights the amazing teamwork driving both sports and government forward.

So, bring your game face because this year's WCA conference promises to be a winning experience! □



— Timothy McCumber, Sauk County Board Chair

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit 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.



Jefferson County Proud to Co-Host

Welcome to the WCA Annual Conference — and to Jefferson County’s story. For the first time, two counties are co-hosting the WCA Annual Conference, and Jefferson County is proud to join Sauk County in that role.

Like all counties, we face challenges, but our foundation is strong, and our partnerships are stronger. Across all areas of our work, we strive to live up to our county’s tagline: Explore. Thrive. Belong.

We hope you get to know Jefferson County during this year’s conference and we warmly invite you to visit us soon. Whether it’s for business, a personal venture, or simply to enjoy our natural beauty and vibrant downtowns, we’d love to welcome you. □

— Steve Nass, Jefferson County Board Chair



ADDITIONAL INFO

► REGISTRATION OPEN

► Agenda highlights include:

- 30 informative and engaging workshops on timely issues
- General session speakers who will inform and entertain you
- A robust exhibit hall with vendors that provide a wide array of services
- Networking opportunities at meals, receptions and more!



Use the QR code to visit the conference website at wcaconference.com for the agenda and an interactive exhibit hall.



► Conference registration desk

When you arrive at the Kalahari, make the registration desk your first stop to pick up your badge and conference materials. The WCA will staff the registration desk on Sunday, Sept. 21, 1-5:30 p.m.; on Monday, Sept. 22, 7 a.m.-5 p.m.; and on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 7-10:30 a.m.

► WCA Annual Business Meeting

If you are attending the WCA Annual Business Meeting on Sunday, Sept. 21, pick up your credentials beginning at 3 p.m. in Africa 10-30. The meeting starts at 3:30 p.m.

► Complimentary shuttle service

Staying at other hotels? Use the complimentary shuttle service on Monday and Tuesday. It runs between participating hotels and the Kalahari. Stop by the WCA registration desk for a schedule.



Save the dates
for upcoming webinars:

- October 22
- November 19
- December 17

“In the Board Room” Webinar Recordings Available

The final WCA “In the Board Room” monthly webinars with Andy Phillips and Attolles Law for 2025 will be held on Oct. 22, Nov. 19 and Dec. 17. Watch for the 2026 schedule to be released in the coming months.

The October webinar will focus on intergovernmental agreements. The November webinar will provide a briefing

on recent court decisions (originally scheduled for the August webinar). The December topic is yet to be determined.

Recordings of all webinars are available on the WCA website at wicounties.org. To attend the live webinars, pre-registration at bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom25 is required to receive the webinar link. There is no cost to register. □

Wisconsin Counties Receive NACo 2025 Achievement Awards

Since 1970, the National Association of Counties Achievement Awards have recognized outstanding county government programs and services. Through a non-competitive application process, noteworthy programs receive awards in 18 categories that cover a vast range of county responsibilities.

The 2025 winners include Sawyer, Ozaukee and Milwaukee counties. Sawyer County was recognized for its criminal justice program. Ozaukee County was recognized for development at its Hawthorne Hills County Park. Milwaukee County was recognized for numerous programs, including its overdose data analytics, opioid prevention efforts, affordable housing initiatives, child support services, and increased accessibility at a nature center.

For more information about the NACo Achievement Awards, visit bit.ly/NACo_Awards. For the full list of award winners, visit bit.ly/NACo_AwardWinners. □

2025 ALERT Law Enforcement Grant Program Applications Due Oct. 31

To support its member law enforcement agencies’ efforts in risk management, the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation is offering \$30,000 in grants for training, equipment, community awareness campaigns and other programs through the ALERT Law Enforcement Grants program.

Grantees must hold an active County Mutual general liability insurance policy at the time of entry and meet the definition of a “law enforcement agency” as outlined in state statutes. For details and to apply, visit wisconsincountymutual.org. Applications are due Friday, Oct. 31, at 4:30 p.m. □

2025 Corporation Counsel/Defense Counsel Forum Sept. 5

The Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation, along with sponsor firms Stadler Sacks, LLC and Crivello, Nichols & Hall, S.C., will hold the 32nd Annual Corporation Counsel/Defense Counsel Forum on Friday, Sept. 5 at the Holiday Inn Stevens Point Convention Center. Visit bit.ly/2025-CountyMutual-CounselForum for details. □

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Prime Exclusive Offer
for WCA Members

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.

Forward Analytics: Shared Revenue Estimates Revised Downward



Each July and October, shared revenue payments are dispersed to municipalities and counties. Policies implemented in the 2025-27 state budget changed total sales tax collection estimates, which, in turn, caused shared revenue payments to be revised downwards.

In addition to the revisions of shared revenue payments, county sales tax revenue will also decline due to the same policy changes. Forward Analytics' July Spotlight, "Unintended Consequences," delves into this issue and provides a list of shared revenue payment discrepancies.

Visit forward-analytics.net for sales tax payment information for the current year and the next biennium as well as Forward Analytics' July Spotlight. □

Attend a Small Community Forum in Sept. or Oct.

Concerned about the future of Wisconsin's small (and mighty) communities? Attend a Small Community Forum with other community leaders, elected officials, business leaders, and civic-minded individuals to share best practices and discuss strategies for addressing the unique opportunities and challenges facing small communities. The forums are hosted by the WCA, Wisconsin Rural Partners, Create Wisconsin and others.

2025 SMALL COMMUNITY FORUMS

- **Oconto County:** Sept. 9, CESA 8, Gillett, 8:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m.
- **Richland County:** Sept. 11, Cazenovia Firehouse, 7:30 a.m.–1 p.m.
- **Rusk County:** Oct. 1, Weyerhaeuser VFW Post 5780, 8:30 a.m.–1:30 p.m.
- **Dodge County:** Oct. 7, Hustisford Community Hall, 7:30 a.m.–1 p.m.

All forums start with registration and breakfast at the time listed above. The program begins 30 minutes later. Lunch is provided at 12 noon. The registration fee is \$25. For more information, and to register, visit wiruralpartners.org/Small-Community-Forums. □

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.

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Supporting Future Leaders

By Robyn Voss, Government Affairs & Project Manager, Wisconsin Counties Association

There's no doubt that college can be expensive. Many students juggle multiple jobs while pursuing their educational goals. To help ease that financial burden, the Wisconsin County Mutual

Insurance Corporation has again awarded five \$2,500 scholarships to eligible students,



and the WCA Group Health Trust has awarded five \$2,000 scholarships to students pursuing careers in health care.

These scholarship programs, established 18 and 17 years ago respectively, were created to give back to members who work tirelessly to keep Wisconsin's counties, municipalities and

WISCONSIN COUNTY MUTUAL INSURANCE CORPORATION SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

County Mutual, which insures over 50 counties in Wisconsin, has awarded more than \$100,000 in scholarships since launching the program in 2007. This year, nearly 150 students applied, with five recipients selected:



ZURI DENNIS, daughter of Iowa County Deputy Clerk of Court Tara Weigel, is studying finance at UW-Madison. "From a young age, I have been fascinated by how money works and the significant impact it has on individuals and businesses."

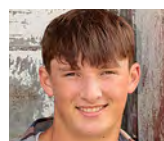


ALEXANDER FISCHER, son of Dunn County ADRC Manager Tracy Fischer, is attending UW-La Crosse and majoring in chemistry with a business concentration (pre-pharmacy). Inspired by his mother's chronic illness, he said, "I am motivated to give back by improving the lives of others through advancements in medicine."

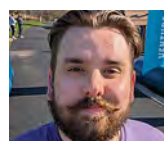


MCKENNA COY, daughter of Bayfield County health officer Anne-Marie Coy, is pursuing a degree in audio production at UW-Green Bay. "My dream career is

to own or work in a music studio, where I can collaborate with different artists from around the world and help them produce music for everyone to enjoy."



CAYDAN JOHNSTON, whose mother Erika Johnston is deputy clerk of court in Trempealeau County, is studying construction management and architecture at UW-Stout. "My ambition is to join an architectural firm after graduation to gain hands-on experience, develop my skills further, and work my way up through the ranks."



NATHANAEL FRANKS, son of Jackson County Register of Deeds Rebecca Franks, is studying engineering at Viterbo University. "I see myself contributing meaningfully to engineering and design, focusing on innovation, community, and sustainability." □

2025 Scholarship Recipients

school districts running smoothly.

To qualify, applicants must be enrolled full-time in an undergraduate program at an accredited two- or four-year college in Wisconsin by fall 2025. Additionally, the applicant or their spouse, parent, grandparent, or guardian must be employed by a County Mutual or GHT



member to apply for the respective scholarship.

An independent panel of educators select the recipients based on scores of their future goals and career plans, grade point average, community involvement, the quality of a written essay, and a letter of recommendation. □

WCA GROUP HEALTH TRUST SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

The WCA Group Health Trust focuses its scholarships on students pursuing careers in the health care field, ranging from nursing and physical therapy to radiography and medical research. This year, the GHT received more than 40 applications and proudly awarded five scholarships:



ABIGAIL CROPSEY, daughter of Freedom Area School District special education teacher Wendy Cropsey, is majoring in nursing at Wisconsin Lutheran College. She plans to

become a pediatric nurse and said, “I am very excited about my future in the health care field. I can’t wait to help others!”



MACEY MIELKE, daughter of Mosinee School District physical education teacher Gregory Mielke, is a biochemistry major at UW-Madison. She plans to become a

neonatologist, saying, “I have decided to devote my life to healing premature babies and their families in the neonatal intensive care unit.”



CALEB RADART, son of Luxemburg School District teacher Lisa Radart, is studying biology at UW-La Crosse. He plans to pursue a doctorate in naturopathic

medicine and said, “I hope to work with patients to find

the root cause of their health issues. Instead of masking symptoms, I will provide people with alternative options that solve their problems and educate them on preventing future problems.”



AUBREY VAUGHN, daughter of Sheboygan County machine operator Sonny Vaughn, is attending Lakeshore College and studying radiography. “The ability to

contribute to someone’s health and well-being by capturing images that aid in diagnosis is both fulfilling and impactful.”



MADISON DEPREY, daughter of Luxemburg School District speech-language pathologist Ann Deprey, is majoring in radiation therapy at UW-La Crosse.

“The radiation therapy field will allow me to build and maintain connections with patients in a similar way as being a certified nursing assistant so that I can assist them while they are undergoing treatments.” □

President's 2026 Budget Proposal Affects Wide Range of County Services

With the Budget Reconciliation Act of 2025 (the “One Big Beautiful Bill”) signed into law, Congress now turns its attention to the fiscal year 2026 budget, a broader proposal outlining the government’s spending and revenue plans for the upcoming fiscal year, which starts on Oct. 1.

In May, the White House released detailed information on President Donald Trump’s FY 2026 discretionary budget request. Overall, the proposal would reduce annual non-defense spending by 22.6%, or about \$163 billion, while increasing defense spending by 13% or about \$119.3 billion. The proposed budget would also replace a number of current programs with block grants to decrease federal oversight and increase the states’ share of program funding.

As the FY2026 budget process proceeds, Congress may also continue considering budget rescission bills that cut previously approved funding, as it did recently for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

County officials are encouraged to contact the WCA Government Affairs team with information about how the proposed FY 2026 budget would impact their counties. Specific data and anecdotes are invaluable in their advocacy efforts.

Per information from the National Association of Counties, highlights of the president’s budget include (edited for space constraints):

Agriculture and Rural Affairs

- Cuts \$1.18 billion for the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, which provide farm loans, conservation programs, and disaster assistance
- Decreases U.S. Forest Service funding from \$16.8 billion to \$4 billion, affecting programs related to wildfire mitigation, forest health, recreation access, and watershed protection
- Reduces USDA Rural Development funding by \$3.14 billion and eliminates programs that support housing, broadband, water systems, and community facilities
- Eliminates the Rural Disaster Assistance Fund, which helps counties recover from natural disasters

Community, Economic and Workforce Development

- Eliminates the Economic Development Administration, which helps counties invest in infrastructure, workforce development and small businesses
- Makes significant cuts to housing programs such as the Community Development Block Grant and the HOME Investment Partnerships Program
- Ends \$291 million in discretionary awards for the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, limiting rural communities’ ability to support small businesses
- Consolidates rental assistance programs into a state block grant, reduces their funding by \$26.7 billion, and implements a two-year cap on assistance for able-bodied adults
- Consolidates homeless assistance programs into one grant that provides two-year housing assistance
- Reduces funds for self-sufficiency programs by \$196 million, but does include \$25 million in housing grants for youth aging out of foster care
- Consolidates workforce development grants into a “Make America Skilled Again” state block grant, reduces funding by \$1.64 billion, and requires 10% of allocated funds to be spent on apprenticeship programs

Veterans Affairs

- Increases funding for Veteran Affairs medical care by \$3.3 billion, with an emphasis on tailored services, improved access to community care, case management, and support services for at-risk veterans

Environment, Energy and Land Use

- Reduces the Clean and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, which would impact counties’ ability to maintain and improve water infrastructure
- Rescinds funds for the Weatherization Assistance Program, which helps low-income households reduce energy costs and increase their energy efficiency

County officials are encouraged to contact the WCA Government Affairs team with information about how the proposed FY 2026 budget would impact their counties. Specific data and anecdotes are invaluable in their advocacy efforts.

- Cuts the Environmental Protection Agency's Brownfields program, which helps counties clean up and redevelop contaminated parcels of land
- Reduces funding for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by 20%, which would limit the assistance provided to protect and develop water infrastructure

Finance, Pensions and Intergovernmental Affairs

- Reduces the U.S. Election Assistance Commission budget from \$28 million to \$17 million, reducing staff and available technical assistance
- Zeroes out election security grants that counties can access to upgrade election equipment

Health

- Reduces the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' budget from \$127 billion in FY 2025 to \$95 billion
- Consolidates DHHS' 28 operating divisions into 15, and creates the "Administration for a Healthy America"
- Merges the Substance Use Prevention and Treatment Block Grant and the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant into a single Behavioral Health Innovation block grant
- Reduces funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from \$8 billion in FY 2025 to \$4.1 billion in FY 2026, and restructures the agency



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Human Services and Education

- Eliminates the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program and eliminates the Community Services Block Grant, which supports local agencies in designing and implementing anti-poverty programs
- Reduces the U.S. Department of Education's budget by \$12 billion but preserves funding for low-income schools and special education
- Maintains level funding for child welfare services, the Social Services Block Grant, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and Head Start

- Cuts funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children, primarily by limiting the purchase of fruits and vegetables to pre-pandemic levels

Justice and Public Safety

- Increases the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Relief Fund by \$4 billion, but cuts non-disaster grant programs, representing an almost 20% decrease in the total FEMA grant portfolio
- Cuts FEMA training and education programs by over \$100 million

Public Lands

- Provides \$175 million for a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service by consolidating wildfire responsibilities, which could impact how counties engage with federal partners and access resources for local fire management
- Maintains Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT) funding at \$635 million

Telecommunications and Technology

- Cuts \$491 million from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or about 17% of operational funds, which will impact technical services provided through the Multi-State/Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (MS/EI-ISAC)

Transportation

- Increases funding for critical infrastructure programs, including \$770 million for the Infrastructure for Rebuilding America grant program and \$400 million for rail safety
- Provides \$824 million for upgrades at airports, including county-owned airports
- Boosts overall formula funding for highways and transit programs, thanks in part to advance appropriations from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law
- Restricts eligibility for the Essential Air Service program, likely resulting in some counties losing federally subsidized commercial air service ■



LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

The Innovation Fund Program

AN UPDATE ON THE NEW LAW

By Andy Phillips and Kirstin Mathers, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

Created under 2023 Wisconsin Act 12, the Innovation Fund Program is designed to provide funds to local governments that transfer a service or duty to another entity (whether it be another county, a municipality, a nonprofit organization or other private entity).¹ The goal is to incentivize local governments to reduce spending by transferring and consolidating allowable services or duties.

In administering the program, the Wisconsin Department of Revenue must prioritize “innovation” plans that realize savings for public safety, fire protection, and emergency services. However, a wide range of services and duties qualify under the program, such as information technology, administration, public works, economic development, housing, parks, and more.²

Currently, the DOR is determining the schedule for awarding and distributing the Innovation Fund grants and will share more information as it becomes available.

► Act 15 updates to the Innovation Fund Program

2025 Wisconsin Act 15 (the 2025-27 state biennial budget) made some important changes to the program.

Act 15 clarified that the term of a contract subject to Innovation Fund support must be for at least three years. Additionally, Act 15 clarified that the annual grant award amount is equal to 25% of the total costs of performing the transferred service or duty in the year immediately preceding the transfer for nonprofit and private entities,

as well as local governments, except as otherwise provided in the program requirements (e.g., as noted later in this article, local governments are still subject to a yearly cap of \$10 million in total payment distributions received).

The penalty provisions for a proposed project’s failure to meet targeted savings were significantly revised as well. The law no longer mandates that the DOR only grant awards to innovation plans expected to save at least 10% of the total cost of providing the service or duty; that applicants certify the local government will achieve half of the projected savings within 24-36 months of receiving the initial grant funds; or that the DOR notify the Department of Administration if any county or municipality fails to realize the projected savings, leading to a withholding of the next payment equal to the shortfall between the required savings and the actual savings achieved.

Instead, Act 15 requires reviewing the total amount spent on the service before and after consolidation. It eliminates grant funding only if the post-consolidation costs exceed pre-consolidation costs by at least 15% and allows the DOA to withhold payments for that grant in the following year.

The Innovation Fund Program was also extended by two fiscal years, lasting through “the end of the sixth fiscal year after Nov. 13, 2024,” which is June 30, 2031. This gives additional time for counties to plan and for the DOR to issue grants. Grants may now be distributed in payments made each year starting with the 2025 fiscal year (July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026), and the four following fiscal years. If awarded, local

The Innovation Fund Program was also extended by two fiscal years, lasting through... June 30, 2031. This gives additional time for counties to plan and for the DOR to issue grants.

governments will receive the grant payments in up to five installments, one in each fiscal year.

► What remains unchanged?

Despite the many important changes made by Act 15, much of the program remains unchanged.

To participate, the local government must have provided the specific services or duties in the year immediately preceding the transfer.

The local government must provide a copy of the transfer agreement to the DOR that adheres to certain requirements, such as specifying the service or duty, the total cost of providing the service or duty in the prior year, the amount the entity transferring the service or duty will pay to the entity receiving it, and details on how the grant funds will be allocated to the parties.³

Priority is still given to public safety, fire protection, and emergency services plans. The method for determining the fair market compensation for services provided by volunteer firefighters or emergency medical services is determined by the rules promulgated by the DOR. The DOR has released a fact sheet with information on how to calculate this.⁴

After the DOR awards grants to the priority applicants, it may award other local governments a prorated share of the remaining amount allocated. The DOR may distribute a total of up to \$300 million in payments statewide, with no local government receiving more than \$10 million per year in payments.

The certification, audit and reporting requirements remain unchanged. The DOR must certify the amounts of grants awarded to the DOA, which shall pay the amount of the grants awarded. Each year, the DOR must audit at least 10% of awarded grants for which at least 24 months have

passed since the first distribution under the grant. The DOR also must submit a report to the state Legislature's Joint Committee on Finance concerning all grants awarded no later than Dec. 31 of each year grants are awarded.

► Finalized administrative rules for the Innovation Fund Program

It should be noted that the DOR's administrative rules for the Innovation Fund Program were recently finalized and submitted for publication in the Wisconsin Administrative Register.⁵ The rules do not take effect until the first day of the month following the publication date. The register currently shows a scheduled publication date of July 28, 2025, and a scheduled effective date of Aug. 1, 2025. While it remains uncertain as to the status of the rules given the DOR's intent to update the program guidelines following Act 15, there are two key points to highlight regarding record retention and DOR audits that the rules address.

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LEGAL ISSUES

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First, the rules require each local government participating in an approved innovation project to maintain detailed records for at least four years after receiving the first grant payment distribution.⁶ Second, the rules authorize the DOR to take certain actions in relation to audits, which may require additional documentation to be submitted.⁷

The WCA and Attolles Law will keep counties apprised as the DOR works through the updated requirements related to the program, as well as the release of additional resources to assist counties. If you have any questions regarding the program or this article, please do not hesitate to contact the WCA or the authors. ■

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. § 79.038.
2. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1)(b)1. The following services or duties are eligible for grants: public safety, including law enforcement, but not including jail; fire protection; emergency services; courts; jails; training; communications; information technology; administration, including staffing, payroll, and human resources; public works; economic development and tourism; public health; housing, planning, and zoning; parks and recreation.
3. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1)(a)1.
4. Wisconsin Department of Revenue fact sheet for determining fair market compensation for volunteer firefighters and emergency medical services practitioners, bit.ly/DOR_FMC_Factsheet.
5. Wisconsin Department of Revenue, CR 24-090 Final Rule Order (June 4, 2024), relating to innovation grant programs pursuant to 2023 Wisconsin Act 12, bit.ly/DOR_CR24-090.
6. Wis. Admin. Code § Tax 21.05(3)(a).
7. Wis. Admin. Code § Tax 21.05(3)(b)-(e).

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