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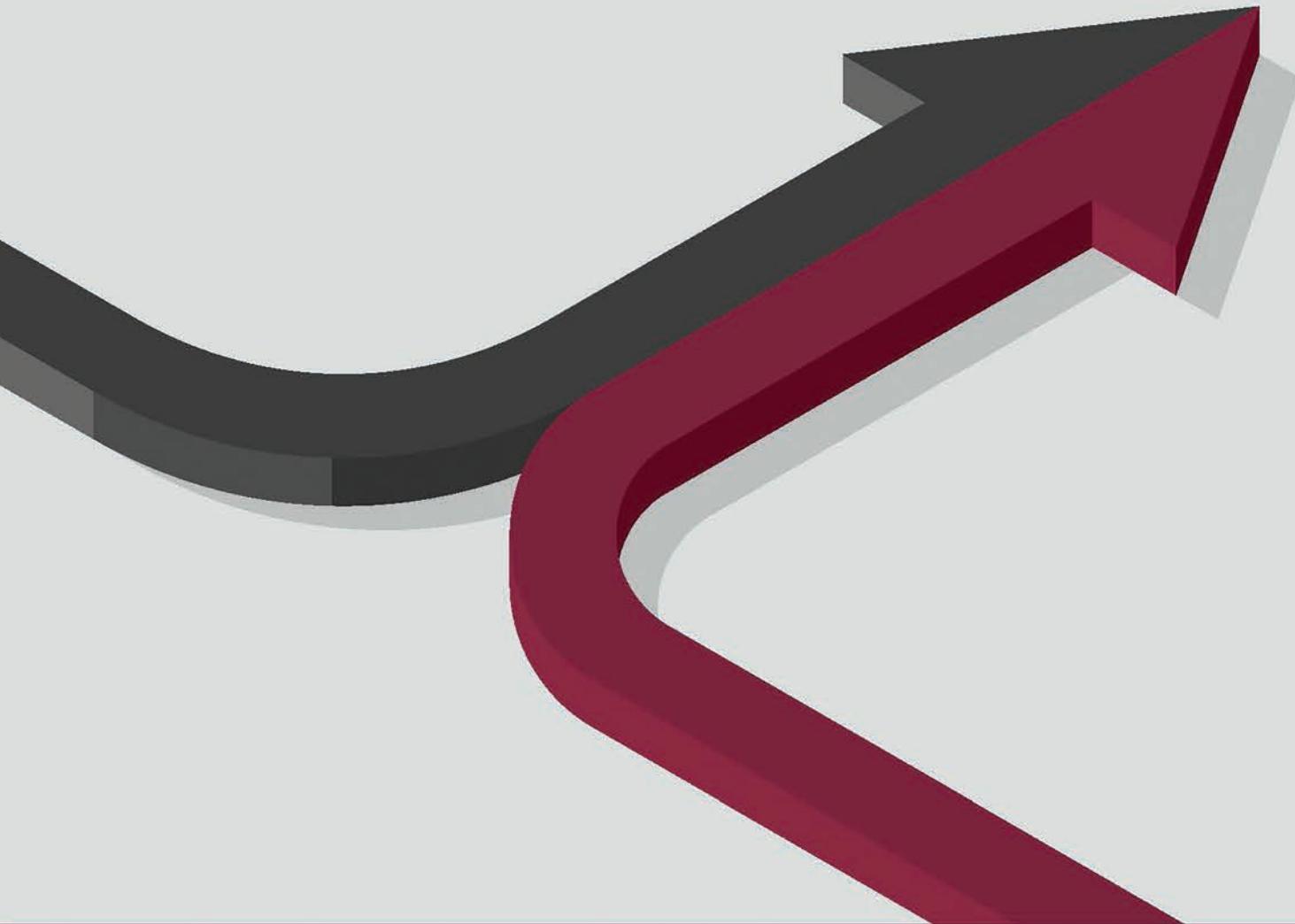
JANUARY 2026

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JANUARY 2026 | Volume 90, Number 1



Cover image: The Racine County Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center, which opened in May 2025. Photo courtesy of Treanor.

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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

Strengthening Our Civic Fabric: Local Leadership Matters

Our state's reputation for "Midwest nice" didn't happen by chance. It has been built by generations of Wisconsinites who live by the Golden Rule, show up when neighbors need a hand, and gather in kitchens and boardrooms to work through their differences.

But in recent years, the tone of public life both nationally and locally has taken a troubling turn. Rising negativity, divisiveness and a tendency to assume the worst in others are tearing at our civic fabric. While most of us agree that violence and threats have no place in our society, tragedies connected to political beliefs are becoming all too common as confrontation replaces empathy and understanding.

County leaders are in a unique position to help reverse this trend. From roads and elections to public safety and human services, county government directly impacts people's lives and knits our communities together. It's where democracy happens every day. With that role comes both the opportunity and the duty to promote constructive public discourse. But doing so requires deliberate leadership.

This fall, for example, the Vernon County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution condemning political violence and reaffirming our democratic principles, free speech, and the rule of law. Besides the significance of their words, what's equally important for residents to see is their county leaders taking intentional steps to support healthy civic life.

As we begin the new year, I encourage each county official to think about how you can lead intentionally through meaningful engagement, attentive listening, and

daily actions that foster connection.

Research and experience show that trust grows when people feel connected: through volunteering, attending events, joining local groups, and feeling welcome and heard. This helps build trust in each other, confidence in our institutions, and a shared belief that we all want our communities to thrive.

So, consider ways to create more opportunities for residents to engage and connect, whether through volunteer programs, open houses, partnerships with civic groups, or direct invitations to participate. Ask questions about whether residents are happy with their interactions across county services and how you can enhance them.

Seek out the voices you seldom hear from the public and staff. Engage with them and truly listen to their perspectives. Genuine listening involves understanding someone's experiences, concerns and values, not just waiting for your turn to speak. When we demonstrate this kind of authentic listening in public meetings and everyday interactions, we show what respectful engagement looks like and inspire others to do the same.

As county leaders, we can help rejuvenate the civic life that Wisconsinites take pride in by acting purposefully, choosing empathy over division, and setting an example for the public discourse we want our communities to follow.

Let's strengthen the civic fabric that past generations so carefully wove and show the nation what respectful, engaged local democracy at its best looks like. ■

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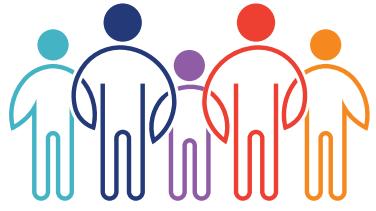
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The Racine County Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center, which opened in May 2025.

Correctional Facilities for Youth



A Call for Sustainable Funding

*John Tuohy, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Human Service Association; and
Chelsea Shanks, Government Affairs Associate, Wisconsin Counties Association*

The state of Wisconsin operates several facilities for youth in need of specialized care or supervision. The Department of Corrections runs two juvenile correctional facilities for youth adjudicated for crimes: Lincoln Hills for boys and Copper Lake for girls. In addition, the Department of Health Services operates the Winnebago Mental Health Institute and the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center, which provide specialized services for children.

When a youth is placed in one of these facilities, either by the county health and human services department or by a judge, the county must pay for that placement by spending its Youth Aids and other funds that would otherwise support the very community services designed to keep youth out of the correctional system in the first place.

Although the state directly covers some expenses and certain types of placements, most operating costs for the state facilities are ultimately billed back to counties. Daily placement rates are essentially determined by a two-factor equation: the institution's total operating costs divided by the number of occupants.

Over time, Wisconsin has pushed toward greater reliance on community-based services, successfully reducing the number of people placed in state facilities.

The state is transitioning to new, more regional and treatment-focused juvenile correctional facilities that are expected to have lower operating costs.

However, operating costs have continued to rise as wages and inflation have increased. Combined with declining occupancy, these factors have led to significant increases in the daily rates charged to counties.

The state is transitioning to new, more regional and treatment-focused juvenile correctional facilities that are expected to have lower operating costs. Under recent legislation that authorized counties to run their own facilities, Racine County opened the Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center last May and Milwaukee County plans to open its new facility later this year. Several other state-run facilities are in the design or planning stages for youth who need more intensive care and supervision.

While counties have access to the Racine County facility, the skyrocketing daily rates at the other facilities are becoming increasingly untenable.

► Current rates

In the last decade, the daily rate for youth corrections has more than quadrupled, from \$303 per day (\$110,595 annually) in 2014 to \$1,268 per day (\$462,820 annually) in 2024, an increase of more than 300% in just 10 years. With the ongoing occupancy declines, now amplified by

Continued on page 8



In the last decade, the daily rate for youth corrections has more than quadrupled, from \$303 per day (\$110,595 annually) in 2014 to \$1,268 per day (\$462,820 annually) in 2024, an increase of more than 300% in just 10 years.

Continued from page 7

the opening of the first regional facility, the daily rate was expected to nearly double to \$2,501 per day (\$912,865 annually) in 2026. At that level, placing even one youth for a year would cost more than the total state Youth Aids allocation for 58 of Wisconsin's 72 counties — a stark illustration of the system's growing financial strain.

One of Gov. Tony Evers' partial vetoes in the 2025-27 state budget reduced the fiscal year 2026 rate to \$501 per day, sparing counties millions of dollars in expenditures. However, that veto created a substantial shortfall in the Department of Corrections' operating budget that will need to be resolved in the next state budget.

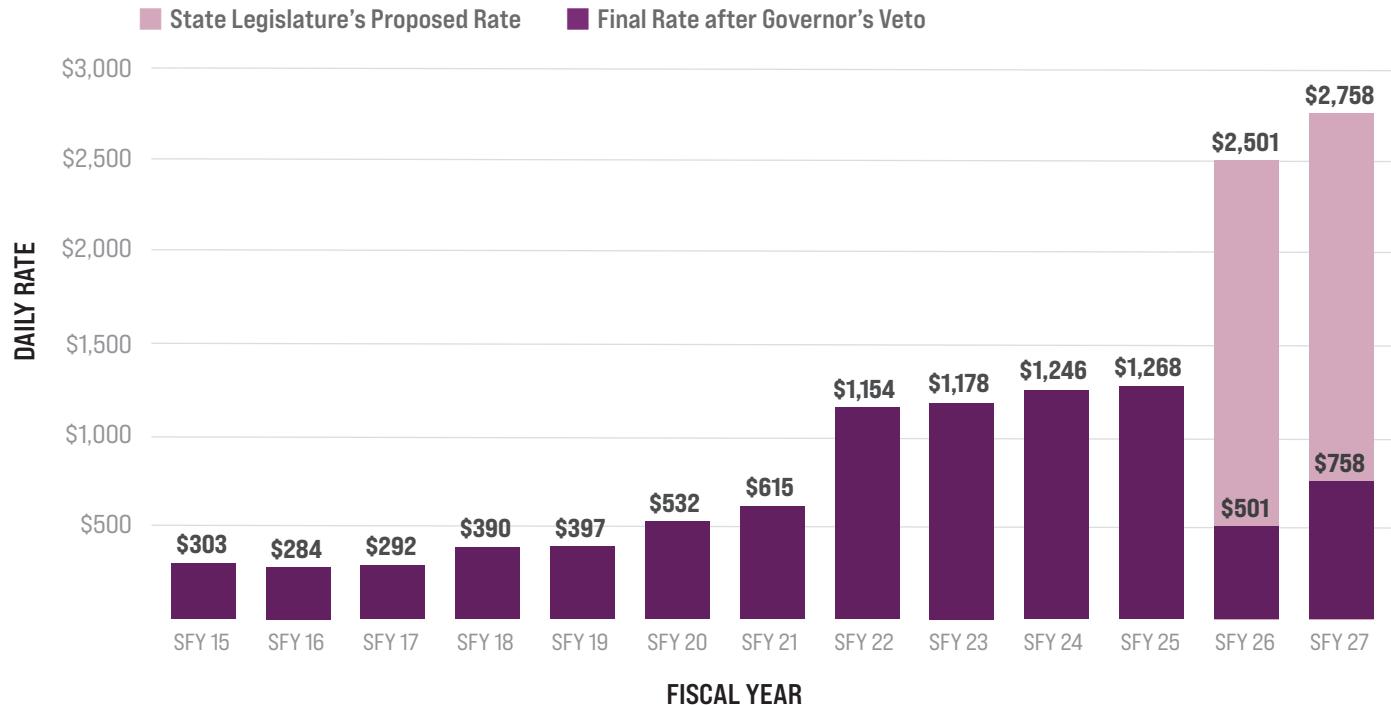
Similarly, with a current daily rate of \$1,756 and projections nearing \$2,500 for placements in the DHS mental health facilities, it is increasingly clear that relying on county-paid rates alone is not sustainable.

The continued decline in occupancy is a positive outcome of expanded community-based services if it results in children having their needs successfully met close to home. However, Wisconsin's rising operating costs combined with declining occupancy are driving additional double-digit rate increases for those youth who need a greater level of care and supervision.

Wisconsin's heavy reliance on program-revenue charges to counties for funding state-run facilities is creating a vicious cycle, pushing rates to higher and higher levels that no longer match the fiscal realities counties face. Counties remain committed to working with the state to establish a fair, predictable and realistic funding structure that maintains critical state facilities without overburdening local taxpayers. ■

John Tuohy is the executive director of the Wisconsin County Human Service Association and Chelsea Shanks is a government affairs associate for the Wisconsin Counties Association.

► Youth Corrections Rate Legislative Proposal vs Final Rate



► Progress in implementing Wisconsin's new model of youth justice

County-Run Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth

- Racine County Jonathon Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center SRCCCY

OPERATOR PROJECT STATUS

Racine County
Opened May 1, 2025

FUNDING STATUS

Start-up costs, lower-than-expected enrollment, and statutory ambiguities have created significant fiscal pressures. Racine County is requesting one-time stabilization funding, and an operational funding stream separate from Youth Aids.

- Milwaukee County Center for Youth SRCCCY (attached to Vel R. Phillips Juvenile Justice Facility)

Milwaukee County
Opening 2026

Milwaukee County is requesting ongoing operational funding support to ensure necessary staffing levels and strengthen rehabilitative programming.

State-Run Type 1 Facilities

- Dane County Type 1 Facility

OPERATOR PROJECT STATUS

DOC
In planning / design stage

FUNDING STATUS

Full \$130.7 million funding request approved by the state.

- Milwaukee Southeast Regional Care Center for Youth

DOC
Construction started 2024; completion 2026

2021 Act 252 appropriated \$41.8 million in funding for a new Type 1 in Milwaukee County.

- Northern Wisconsin Type 1 Facility

DOC
In planning stage

Planning funds requested but not approved by the state; additional funding is needed.

Other State Juvenile Corrections Expansions

- Grow Academy Expansion
Youth residential treatment/education facility in Dane County

OPERATOR PROJECT STATUS

DOC
In planning stage

FUNDING STATUS

\$1.5 million of \$31.1 million request approved by the state for planning only.

- Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center Expansion
Secure mental health treatment facility in Dane County (Expanding capacity to up to 93 youth, with 20 beds for female juveniles)

DHS

Expansion expected to be completed soon

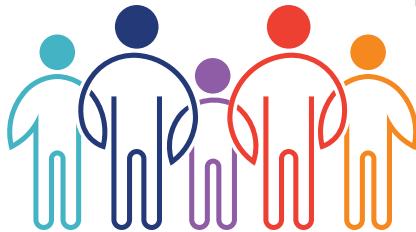
\$66 million approved for expansion.



Youth Corrections

Transformation

FROM VISION TO REALITY



By Lance Horozewski, Administrator, Wisconsin Department of Corrections' Division of Juvenile Corrections

In 2018, Wisconsin laid out a bold vision to reform its juvenile corrections system. Under a new law, the state began transitioning away from large, state-run, campus-style youth correctional facilities toward smaller, modern, state and county-operated facilities closer to the people they serve.

This new model of youth corrections created a multi-pronged approach. Counties were given the authority to construct and operate Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth (SRCCCY). The state will operate Type 1 secure facilities to serve youth committed as serious juvenile offenders and minors sentenced as adults.

The Type 1 facilities will also serve youth when a county SRCCCY is unable to meet a youth's needs. Both types of facilities are considered youth correctional facilities under state statute and serve the dual purpose of keeping the community safe and rehabilitating youth.

Wisconsin is finally turning that vision into reality. After the state Legislature and governor allocated millions of dollars in subsequent state budgets, secure facilities are now being designed and built in or near the communities where most of the youth sent to correctional facilities reside.

In May 2025, the first new secure facility opened in Caledonia in Racine County. This 48-bed facility

provides placement and services to youth in a state-of-the-art, secure building. The Jonathon Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center, operated by the Racine County Human Services Department, maximizes daylight with extensive windows and high ceilings.

Milwaukee County chose to accept state funding to expand and remodel the Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center in Wauwatosa to provide space for modern treatment and health care, and to add eight more beds for its youth.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections broke ground on its Type I youth facility in the city of Milwaukee's north side in the summer of 2024. With the largest population in the state, Milwaukee County sends the highest number of youth to the juvenile corrections system. The Southeast Regional Care Center for Youth, expected to open soon, is close to public transportation, local service providers and other community resources. The DOC's Division of Juvenile Corrections worked with an architectural firm to design the building with a focus on trauma-informed care, education and human-centered safety.



The complete transition to new facilities in Wisconsin is expected by the end of 2028.

Another DOC Type I facility is scheduled to break ground in Dane County in mid-2026. The design will incorporate facets of the Southeast Regional facility in Milwaukee, expand opportunities for outdoor agriculture, and include a large multipurpose industrial arts building.

Concurrently, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services is expanding its Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center in Madison, which serves boys and girls whose needs cannot be met in other youth correctional settings, including those with the most complex mental health needs and who exhibit violent behavior. The new facility further solidifies the program's commitment to serving youth in a treatment-focused, trauma-informed environment.

The complete transition to new facilities in Wisconsin is expected by the end of 2028. It's an ambitious goal, but one worth achieving for the safety of our communities, the rehabilitation of our youth, and the working conditions of the men and women employed in these facilities. ■

Lance Horozewski is the administrator for the Division of Juvenile Corrections in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

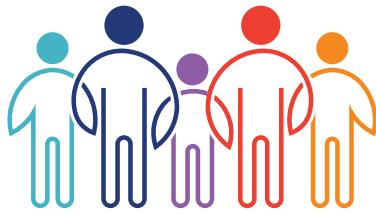
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Building a Model for Youth Justice

Racine County's Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center Sets a New Standard for Wisconsin

By Travis Richardson, Director of Data and Performance Analytics; Hope Otto, Human Services Director; and Amberlyn Yohn, Administrator of Youth Rehabilitative Services, Racine County

When Wisconsin lawmakers passed Act 185 in 2018, they envisioned a youth justice system rooted in rehabilitation rather than punishment, with the state's long-standing reliance on large, statewide institutions like Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake giving way to smaller, regional facilities that are secure, but community-based and treatment-focused. In 2025, Racine County became the first in Wisconsin to turn that vision into reality.

► A vision realized

Last May, Racine County opened the Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center, a 70,000-square-foot, 48-bed secure residential care center designed from the ground up to change how Wisconsin serves youth in crisis. It is the state's first operating Secure Residential Care Center for Children and Youth (SRCCCY). The new center stands as a tribute to the late County Executive Jonathan Delagrange, whose leadership and compassion were instrumental in moving the project forward.

Before the new center, the county's youth detention facility occupied a windowless wing of the fourth floor of its Human Services Department. It lacked outdoor space, natural light and the environment necessary for meaningful rehabilitation. "Our previous facility was a

traditional adult correctional design and not conducive to a cognitive behavioral approach to change," said Amberlyn Yohn, administrator of youth rehabilitative services in Racine County. "With this new center, we expect outcomes to go from good to fantastic."

► Designed for healing and growth

Built on a 29-acre site in Caledonia, the new youth center exemplifies trauma-informed and normative design — two concepts prioritizing dignity, safety and healing. Views of wetlands and sky replace bars and concrete. Courtyards and gardens encourage movement and physical activity. A community room with floor-to-ceiling glass hosts family visits, restorative programming and staff training.

"Racine County wanted a facility designed with care, intention and purpose," said Andy Pitts, justice design principal with Treanor, the project's national design firm. "It's about empowering youth and families through visitation, programming and opportunities that support transformation."

Inside, traditional classrooms sit beside vocational labs for culinary arts, barbering and music production. Flexible layouts allow staff to adjust the environment to the needs of the youth. Every design decision, from private bedrooms



Photo credit: Tricia Shay Photography



Built on a 29-acre site in Caledonia, the new youth center exemplifies trauma-informed and normative design – two concepts prioritizing dignity, safety and healing.

to a secure but inviting courtroom, reflects one goal: to normalize the experience of care and prepare young people for success in the community.

“It is essential that the beauty and innovation of this facility are matched by equal investment in the programming and rehabilitative services offered within. Racine County remains deeply committed to providing our region’s youth with the highest quality of care and the best opportunity for lasting success,” said Hope Otto, Racine County’s human services director.

► **Programs that build futures**

At the heart of the work are two evidence-based programs tailored by gender. For boys, RISE=UP (Respect, Integrity, Service, Excellence = Unlimited Potential) offers academic instruction through the Racine Unified School District, along with cognitive behavioral therapy, aggression replacement training, and life space crisis intervention. The curriculum emphasizes social-emotional wellness, vocational readiness and relationship development. For girls, ASPIRE (Advancing Skills and Promoting Independence, Resilience, and Empowerment) focuses

on emotional regulation, healthy relationships and financial literacy. Activities such as vision boarding, expressive arts and goal-setting nurture confidence and connection.

Together, these programs replace a punitive model with one of education, therapy and belonging. Youth engage in counseling and workforce development, learning to make choices that promote independence and resilience.

► **Community and economic impact**

The facility’s local operation also reduces costs for counties and taxpayers. Placement rates at state-run youth institutions are growing at an unsustainable rate while the youth center provides comprehensive, humane care closer to home at a lower expense. Keeping youth within their community strengthens family ties and improves re-entry outcomes.

Racine County also worked with a workforce and community engagement firm to provide county residents and businesses with access to the construction of the project. The results exceeded expectations. Nearly 30% of

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

all employees on site were Racine County residents and an additional 25% were minority, women and/or veterans.

► Challenges and the road ahead

As the state's first operating SRCCCY, Racine County has learned lessons that will inform the system statewide. While the facility's operational costs are lower than what the county had been paying to send youth to the statewide institutions, the start-up costs, lower-than-projected early enrollment, and statutory ambiguities have created fiscal challenges. To ensure that Wisconsin's first SRCCCY succeeds, Racine County is working to secure one-time stabilization funding and ongoing operational support from the state.

Currently, SRCCCY operations draw from the same Youth Aids allocation meant for community-based



TO LEARN MORE

For more information and a referral form, visit bit.ly/Racine_JDYDCC.

prevention programs, leaving both under-resourced. Racine County proposes a separate operational funding stream to preserve Youth Aids for diversion and early-intervention work while ensuring safe, secure care. Additional support is also needed to sustain female housing units and to modernize staff training standards consistent with Act 185's trauma-informed vision.

Any county seeking to place a youth at the Jonathan Delagrange Youth Development and Care Center must have an active contract in place before admission. Each year, contracts are issued to all Wisconsin counties. For the RISE=UP or ASPIRE programs specifically, counties are required to submit an online referral for any youth they wish to place. Staff members review these referrals twice a week to ensure timely communication and placement decisions. For more information and a referral form, visit bit.ly/Racine_JDYDCC.

► A statewide model for reform

Racine's new youth center represents a blueprint for the future of juvenile justice in Wisconsin. Its trauma-informed architecture, integrated programming and collaborative design have already drawn interest from policymakers and practitioners across the country.

Racine County and its partners are confident that, with continued state collaboration, Wisconsin can fully realize Act 185's promise: a youth justice system that promotes accountability, healing and hope. As County Executive Ralph Malicki said at the center's opening, "This facility is about giving young people the opportunity to heal, grow and succeed. It's about building a safer, stronger Wisconsin for everyone." ■

Travis Richardson is the director of data and performance analytics; Hope Otto, is the human services director; and Amberlyn Yohn is the administrator of youth rehabilitative services for Racine County.

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Groundbreaking for the new Milwaukee County Center for Youth, which is expected to open in 2026.

Milwaukee County Center for Youth



New Treatment-Focused Care Close to Home

By Shakita LaGrant-McClain, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services

Serving youth closer to home has been the goal of Milwaukee County's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for years. With the state's passage of Act 185 in 2018, Milwaukee County took advantage of this new Wisconsin model of youth justice by applying to operate a Secure Residential Care Center for Children and Youth (SRCCCY) and ensure children are cared for closer to their families and community support networks.

The new facility, called the Milwaukee County Center for Youth, will accommodate up to 32 Milwaukee County youth at a time and is set to open in early 2026. Located

within the Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center in Wauwatosa, the total capital budget is nearly \$37 million, including over \$28 million in state grant funding. It is a secure, treatment-focused residential facility designed to offer a safe, positive, sustainable, and developmentally appropriate environment, enhance the juvenile justice system, and help build a safer community.



Shakita LaGrant-McClain

The Milwaukee County Center for Youth will be a secure, treatment-focused residential facility designed to offer a safe, positive, sustainable, and developmentally appropriate environment, enhance the juvenile justice system, and help build a safer community.

► Core programs, strategies and activities

The ongoing effort to develop a well-integrated program model in Milwaukee County is guided by multiple approaches and bodies of best-practice research that have emerged over the past 15+ years. Along with research on adolescent brain development and the impact of trauma, there is a substantial body of knowledge that identifies best practices for working with youth in a confinement setting.

The project involves renovating the two existing Milwaukee County Accountability Program housing units at Vel R. Phillips and developing classrooms and other educational spaces for teacher support, a computer/learning lab, vocational programs, testing and consultation, a culinary arts program, and multimedia activities.

Psychiatric, psychological, medical, dental and nursing services will be provided to meet all the youth's health needs during placement, as well as indoor and outdoor recreation areas and outdoor green spaces. Additionally, a welcoming vestibule will allow public access and include space for private meetings, family visits, and dining and culinary arts programs.

With the facility staffed at an 8:1 youth-to-staff ratio, each personalized care and treatment plan will determine participation in specific programs.

All participants, whether in secure care or in the community, will receive dialectical behavior therapy, which is a specific type of cognitive-behavioral therapy based on five key components: skill-building, commitment to healing and equity, positive youth development,



community restoration, and family engagement and inclusion. Dialectical behavior therapy involves skills groups, individual therapy, and family therapy sessions, with each youth working with trained staff. Parents and guardians are involved to help maintain strong relationships with family members.

Full-time, personalized education programs and vocational training will be provided to support specific needs. This will include comprehensive assessments; special education services; core academic classwork; science, technology, engineering, and math coursework; credit attainment/recovery; physical education; expressive arts; and a variety of vocational trainings, certifications, and skills.

Additionally, the program will offer personalized services and supports, including mentoring and independent living, recreational and leisure activities, and cultural skill-building, with specific skill development related to personal care, money management, employment, goal setting, transportation, problem-solving, peer refusal skills, and parenting. Youth will be connected with adults

Continued on page 18



The new facility will accommodate up to 32 Milwaukee County youth at a time and is set to open in early 2026.

Continued from page 17

in the community and with credible messengers who can maintain relationships with them when they return home.

► Looking ahead

Over the past several years, efforts in Milwaukee County have focused on developing prevention and intervention strategies and expanding the continuum of care to decrease the number of children in secure detention. The county's DHHS Children, Youth, and Family Services has increased community violence intervention and interruption initiatives, as well as gender-specific services for justice-involved girls. The aim is to serve children in ways that

support them, their families and the community. The opening of the Milwaukee County Center for Youth will advance this objective by providing a more effective and restorative approach.

We hope that through these efforts, our young people will lead fulfilling lives outside the justice system, contribute positively to their communities, and lessen the economic burden of youth incarceration on society. I am proud that Milwaukee County is taking meaningful action to help our young people reach their full potential. ■

Shakita LaGrant-McClain is the executive director of the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services.

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THE MENDOTA JUVENILE TREATMENT CENTER

Expanding to Serve Our Youth

By Dr. Greg Van Rybroek, Facility Director, Mendota Mental Health Institute/Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center; and Gynger Steele, Administrator, Division of Care and Treatment Facilities, Wisconsin Department of Health Services

Act 185, enacted in 2018, directed the Department of Health Services to expand the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center. MJTC provides psychological and psychiatric evaluations and treatment for juveniles whose behavior presents a serious problem to themselves or others in juvenile correctional facilities and whose mental health needs can be met by MJTC. It is part of the Mendota Mental Health Institute and operates in a standalone facility on the grounds. Since 1995, MJTC has assessed and treated male youth transferred from the Department of Corrections' Division of Juvenile Corrections.

The expansion of MJTC is nearing completion. When staffing is fully funded, it will expand treatment to up to 93 juvenile youth, with 20 beds for female juveniles.

► **Background**

Part of MJTC's original mandate was to conduct studies to determine whether its treatment program was effective in reducing recidivism. The studies completed over the years have demonstrated an unprecedented reduction in recidivism following intensive treatment at MJTC, and that the treatment of violent or otherwise behaviorally or mentally troubled youth is cost-effective. As a result, the MJTC treatment program has gained international attention, public support and professional acceptance for its effectiveness in treating youth, reducing recidivism and massively lowering overall system costs.

The MJTC mission is to treat serious juvenile offenders by combining the security consciousness of a traditional correctional institution with a mental health orientation. The unique approach addresses the deeper detachment, antagonistic defiance and anger often experienced

by traumatized youth. The treatment model involves daily care with a clinical-correctional foundation that acknowledges personal suffering and estrangement from cultural norms. The results have demonstrated that significant psychiatric intervention is effective in the lives of our most seriously disordered and violent youth while also saving the lives of Wisconsin's citizens.

► **The future**

Currently, MJTC accepts admissions from DOC's Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake schools. Current practice and law allow DHS and the Division of Juvenile Corrections to identify the juveniles who would benefit from MJTC treatment or who would be better served in a DOC institution. DOC staff have years of established policy and precedent to rely on when making placement recommendations, and maintain a close working relationship with their DHS counterparts to ensure that appropriate individuals receive treatment when needed.

Under a new law, counties will also be able to refer juveniles to MJTC. The county referral process will be established through the new Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth that counties are developing. Under the law, admissions and discharges may occur only with DHS's approval.

DHS will partner with state and county partners and continue moving forward to work with Wisconsin's youth who have significant mental health needs and behavioral symptoms. ■

Dr. Greg Van Rybroek is the facility director for the Mendota Mental Health Institute/Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center. Gynger Steele is the administrator for the Division of Care and Treatment Facilities at the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

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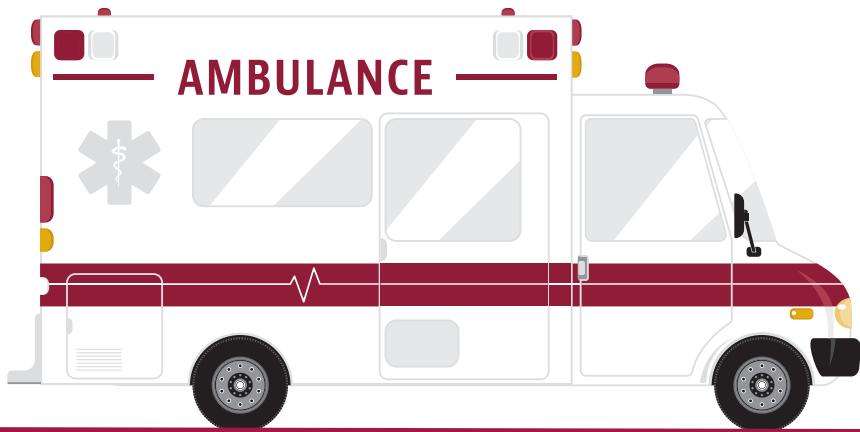
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A System on the Brink

Why county leadership needed for emergency medical services

By James Small, Rural EMS Outreach Program Manager, Wisconsin Office of Rural Health

Emergency medical services are the backbone of Wisconsin's public health and safety infrastructure. They are often the first line of care in medical emergencies, trauma incidents and disasters. Yet, according to the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health's 2023 EMS Reliability Report, EMS systems in the state are under severe strain.

The report, based on responses from 60% of EMS directors statewide, reveals a sobering reality:

- 41% of EMS agencies had days in the prior year when they couldn't staff an ambulance
- 78% provided mutual aid to neighboring communities due to staffing shortages
- 69% feared they wouldn't be able to staff their primary ambulance in the following year

Over half of Wisconsin's EMS agencies rely on volunteers — a model increasingly unsustainable in today's economic and demographic landscape. Volunteer-based EMS agencies are four times more likely to report staffing gaps than paid-staff agencies. The gap between past ambulance unavailability (41%) and future staffing concerns (69%) signals a worsening trend.

EMS agencies face complex funding challenges with insufficient reimbursement from Medicare and Medicaid, levy limits on municipal funding, a lack of sustainable funding (e.g., one-time grants and fundraisers), and rising costs due to inflation and increased call volume. Nearly 30% of EMS agencies reported that their current financial resources were not sufficient to cover the following year's projected costs.

The EMS Reliability Report includes dozens of quotes from service directors across Wisconsin. Their voices paint a picture of dedication stretched to the breaking point:

“We are in crisis mode, trying to protect the people of our town. My crew members work [other jobs] during the day.”

“One agency in our county has the same person running every single ambulance call. The minute she quits, that agency will fold.”

“We will go out of service if things don’t change.”

These aren’t isolated anecdotes. They reflect a statewide pattern of burnout, aging provider pools and unsustainable volunteerism.

Rural and volunteer agencies are disproportionately dependent on a handful of individuals. This fragility puts entire communities at risk.

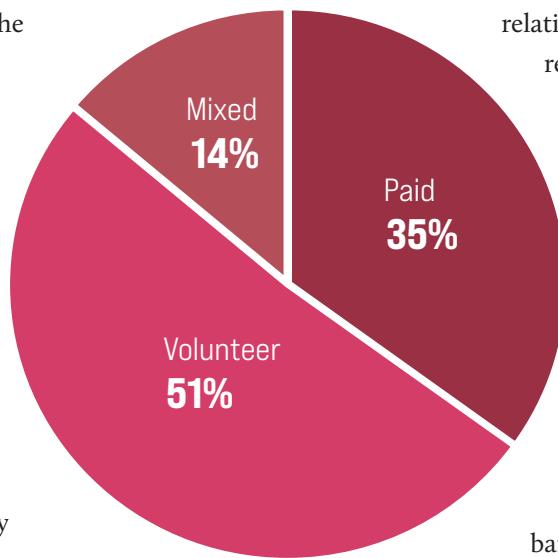
► Why county leadership matters

Counties are the connective tissue between municipalities. They oversee public health, emergency management and human services, all of which intersect with EMS. One solution is for counties to consider taking on a greater role in overseeing EMS systems.

Rural and volunteer agencies are disproportionately dependent on a handful of individuals.

This fragility puts entire communities at risk.

Statewide Distribution of EMS Staffing Models



Source: Wisconsin Office of Rural Health's 2023 EMS Reliability Report

In rural Wisconsin in particular, county governments typically possess greater administrative capacity, financial sophistication, and strategic planning infrastructure

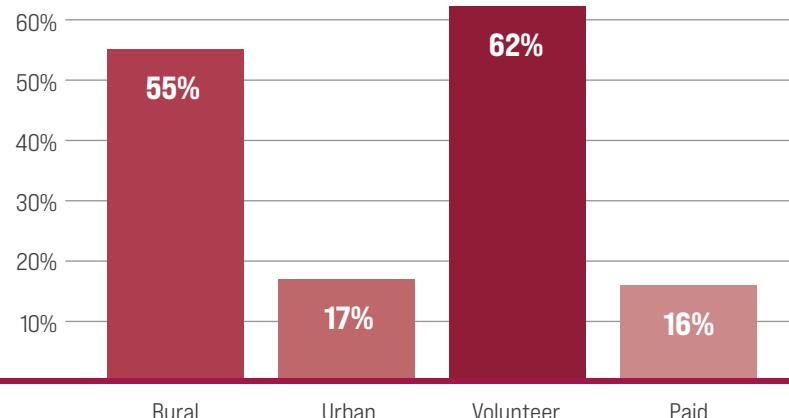
than their municipal counterparts. Counties often have dedicated finance staff; professionalized emergency management offices; established relationships with state agencies and regional coalitions; and experience managing multi-jurisdictional services such as public health, human services, and transportation.

In contrast, many rural towns and villages operate with part-time clerks, volunteer boards and limited fiscal tools. While these municipalities are deeply committed to their communities, they often lack the bandwidth to navigate complex EMS funding, staffing and regulatory challenges.

County governments can bridge this gap — not by replacing local control, but by coordinating and supporting EMS systems that span multiple jurisdictions. Their ability to convene stakeholders, manage shared services and pursue sustainable funding makes them the natural leaders in a transformation of the EMS system.

Continued on page 24

► Agencies Relying on ≤ 6 Staff for 80%+ of Calls



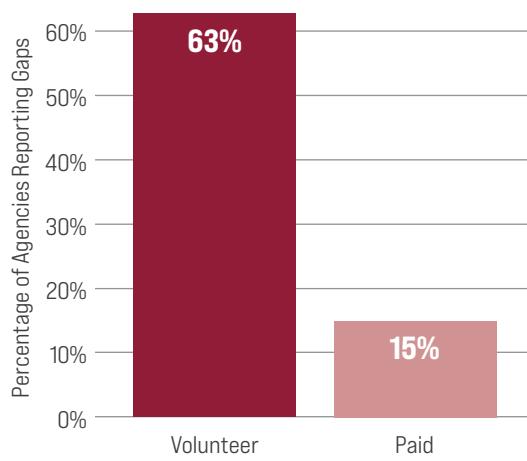
Source: Wisconsin Office of Rural Health's 2023 EMS Reliability Report

Volunteer-based EMS agencies are four times more likely to report staffing gaps than paid-staff agencies.

Continued from page 23

The EMS Reliability Report offers clear recommendations for counties to fund and coordinate services across municipal boundaries. In addition to providing direct funding for staff, equipment and training, counties have the ability to coordinate regional systems that reduce duplication and improve coverage; leverage intergovernmental agreements to pool resources; share staffing and ensure that all municipalities are equally responsible for reliable services; provide stable funding via an EMS tax levy (currently used by 14 counties); and

► Staffing Gaps by EMS Staffing Model



Source: Wisconsin Office of Rural Health's 2023 EMS Reliability Report

support workforce development by investing in training centers, employer-funded certification programs, and paid staffing models.

► EMS as a strategic partner

Emergency medical services are not just a public safety function. They are deeply interwoven with nearly every major county mission, advancing goals in public health, human services, emergency management, workforce development and equity. By taking a lead in transforming services, counties have the opportunity to strengthen the role of EMS in improving their communities and providing services more comprehensively and efficiently.

► Voices from the Field County EMS Services

WAUSHARA COUNTY EMS Chief Keith Melvin

“Since Waushara County’s EMS service started in 1975 with a single ambulance, its level of service has continually improved. Today, the county boasts licensure levels from EMT to critical care paramedic. In addition to responding to calls, community paramedics work with agency partners to reduce falls among seniors and address overdoses.

“The county’s four stations each cost about a million dollars to operate. EMS services generate roughly \$1.5 million in total annual revenue. The remaining funds come primarily from local property taxpayers, with the EMS service outside the county levy.

“Countywide or regional emergency service districts should be seriously considered, as volunteer systems are collapsing and private companies often prioritize hospital transports over 911 response or community programs.”

ONEIDA COUNTY Sheriff Grady Hartman

“Our EMS system was established in the 1970s. It’s funded by the county tax dollars outside the levy, with the towns contributing as well, and that structure has kept it sustainable for us.”

DOOR COUNTY County Administrator Ken Pabich

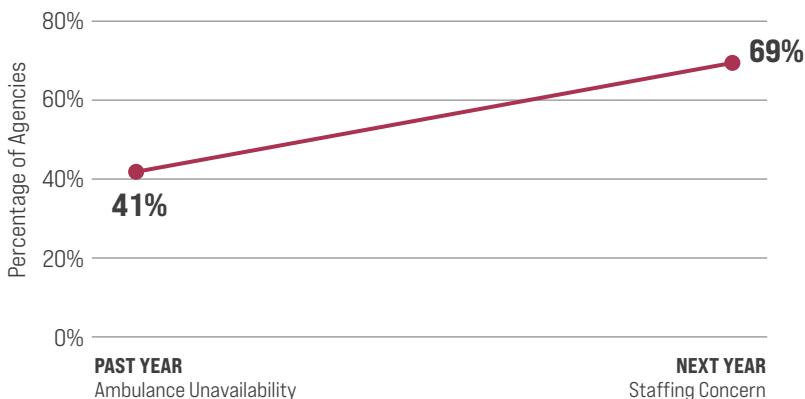
“Door County has always operated a countywide service. It’s outside the levy, with \$5.2 million budgeted for 2026. We’re expanding fall-prevention efforts and providing transports for Door County Medical Center in Sturgeon Bay. It’s a costly model, but in my view, it’s the most effective way to deliver high-quality EMS.”

► EMS Reliability Concerns Past vs. Future

EMS providers are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing acute medical and behavioral health crises, from substance abuse and homelessness to elder neglect and domestic violence.

Counties can collaborate with EMS to share data on overdose trends, chronic disease, and vulnerable populations; coordinate care transitions between EMS and county health departments; and deploy mobile integrated health teams to reduce hospital readmissions and improve community health outcomes. Counties can train EMS staff in trauma-informed response and referral pathways, embed social workers or crisis counselors into EMS teams, and use EMS data to inform service gaps and allocate resources.

As a critical partner in emergency management and



Source: Wisconsin Office of Rural Health's 2023 EMS Reliability Report

disaster response, counties can take advantage of the experience of EMS providers in mass casualty and disaster planning; coordinated responses to pandemics, floods and wildfires; and regional exercises and incident command system integration.

Continued on page 26

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Counties can also use EMS as a pipeline into nursing, firefighting, and related roles by supporting local training centers and certification programs and offering tuition assistance or apprenticeships.

Continued from page 25

Counties can also use EMS as a pipeline into nursing, firefighting, and related roles by supporting local training centers and certification programs and offering tuition assistance or apprenticeships.

► At a crossroads

Wisconsin's EMS system is at a crossroads. By using its legal and taxing authority to invest in EMS, counties can help ensure that every 911 call receives a timely, lifesaving response. They can build resilient systems that honor the dedication of providers and protect the health of every resident. The alternative — silence, delay or fragmentation — risks lives.



LOOKING FOR ASSISTANCE?

Contact the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health:
email small5@wisc.edu or visit worh.org/ems.

The Wisconsin Office of Rural Health is currently assisting communities across Wisconsin to address their EMS reliability and sustainability challenges. We provide no-cost technical assistance to help agencies and their local governments navigate improving EMS response. ■

James Small is the Rural EMS Outreach Program manager in the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health at UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health. Small is a nationally recognized public safety leader with over 30 years of experience across law enforcement, EMS and fire services. He has led transformational initiatives in workforce diversity, organizational development and rural EMS reliability, earning multiple innovation awards. A published author and educator, Small also holds key state appointments influencing policy and public health systems.

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After a Century Investing in Innovation

WARF Looks to the Future

By Brittney Kenaston, Staff Journalist, In Business Madison

When biochemistry professor Harry Steenbock filed to patent a groundbreaking vitamin D-fortification process in 1924, he also sparked the creation of an organization primed to bolster innovation for the next century.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison professor's achievement increased the accessibility of vitamin D and its health benefits to the general population. At the same time, it created a new approach to bringing life-changing research to market, supporting the university's work in the process.

Such is the origin story of the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), a technology transfer office which, in the past 100 years, has quietly funded, supported

and invested in the pioneering work coming out of the UW to benefit the public.

"There's a story you can tell, that (Steenbock) is this singular hero, a kind of genius, Thomas Edison type," said Kevin Walters, WARF's public affairs associate and resident historian. "But I think the more interesting story is that he needed a lot of help, and it brought together different strands of UW-Madison, and Wisconsin and the people around it."

To capitalize on his discovery, Steenbock needed business expertise. He teamed up with Graduate Dean Charles Schlicter to recruit alumni to negotiate contracts with companies interested in applying the vitamin D-fortification process to their products — among them



Quaker Oats, which is still well-known today.

"Steenbock had the science and the original motivation" to protect the dairy industry, which had long drawn state support to UW-Madison, said Walters, "but he needed administrators to figure out how to make that work in an organizational way, and then he needed alumni and business acumen to figure out how to turn that into a successful business."

For a century, WARF has retained that successful formula to keep UW-Madison research and innovation on the bleeding edge, and the organization's ability to adapt and sustain itself amid uncertainty — economic and otherwise — may be more important now than ever before.

► The early days of WARF

As Steenbock's innovation met success, it was followed by thousands of others who sought to find solutions to complex problems close to home. WARF funding helped lead to a patented process for making iodine stable in table salt, and the discovery of a coumarin derivative called Warfarin — which credits WARF in its name — remains the world's most commonly prescribed blood thinner.

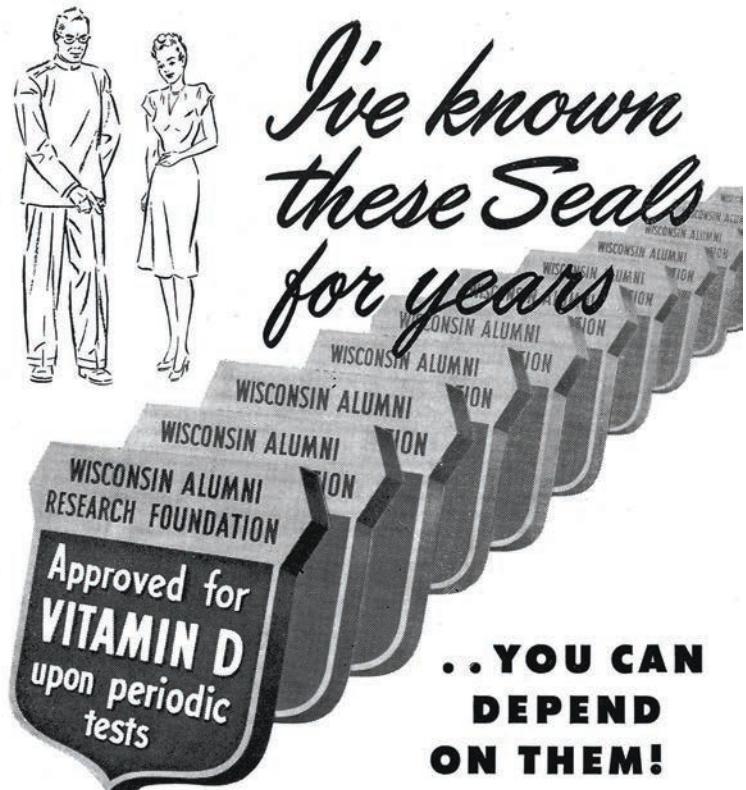
Hector DeLuca, one of Steenbock's last students, developed several major pharmaceuticals to treat bone diseases and chronic kidney failure with WARF support, and the organization's investments have also funded significant advances in semiconductors, stem cell research, cancer diagnostics, fusion and more through the decades.

Yet on the path to its current operation, WARF faced multiple challenges.

In the wake of World War II, a massive increase in federal funding for research sparked a key argument concerning patent policy, Walters said.

"The default had been basically, if the federal government was funding it, then the federal government should own the inventions," he said.

"That was never really true. ... You need a company to



come in and invest in the basic research to turn it into a commercial product, and understand the market, and then have the incentive to go out and make a profit."

In the 1960s, WARF's patent counsel Howard Bremer took on the sticky policy issue with help from Norman Latker of the National Institutes of Health. They helped establish a first-of-its-kind contract between the university and the government that would allow the latter to waive its patent rights to discoveries yielded by federally funded research.

As it turned out, this was a precursor to the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980, which, according to Walters, "basically said, we're going to allow universities all across the country to patent their own research on federal funding as long as they meet certain conditions.

"They have to make it available for licensing, they have

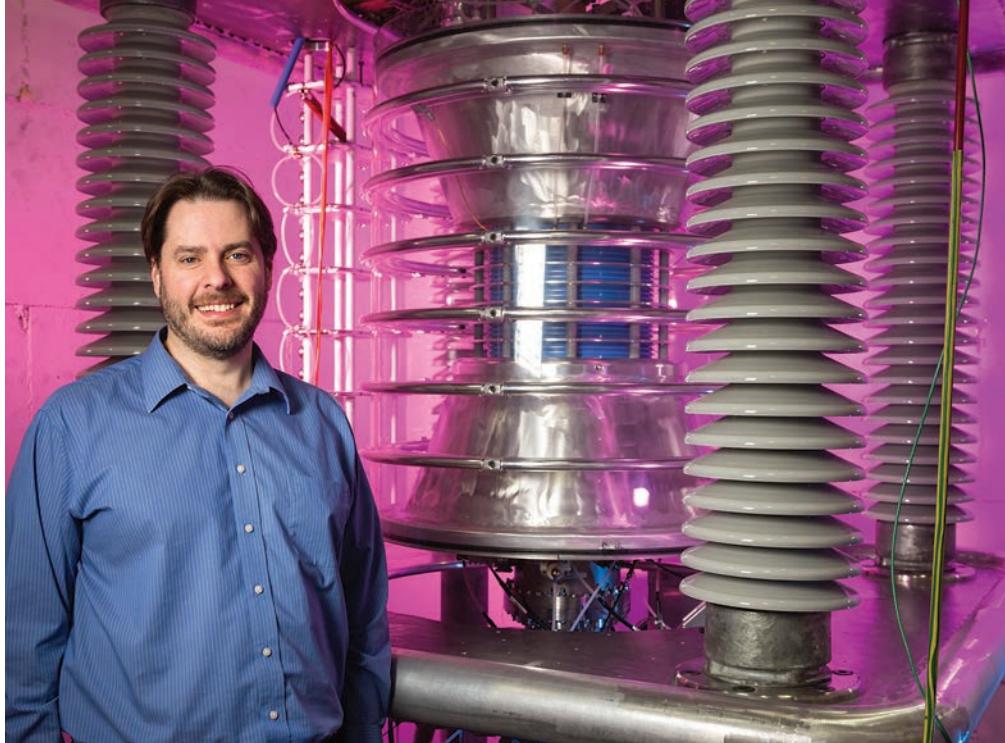
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The Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), a technology transfer office, has quietly funded, supported and invested in the pioneering work coming out of the UW to benefit the public.



Annual grants to UW-Madison from WARF — which over the last century have totaled \$4.5 billion — fund critical research in areas that might yield discoveries with startup potential.



Continued from page 29

to allow companies to license it on reasonable terms, they can't sit on it, they can't try to extort companies ... and if the government needs it, the government can use it."

In the late 20th century, WARF adapted again in response to the biotechnology boom, which led to an evolution that still influences its activities today.

"What used to happen," [Erik] Iverson [WARF's CEO,] said, "is a very nascent technology ... would come to us. Companies don't want to license super, duper early stuff, so it really wouldn't go anywhere."

Through its investment and support, WARF assisted those fledgling startups.

"Existing companies don't often want to take risks on basic research patents, what we call 'deep tech,'" added Walters. "They don't want to reinvent the iPhone. They want to issue the iPhone 13, or 14, or 15. ... To take the massive risks, you've got to create a new company."

That's exactly what happened in the early 1990s, when UW-Madison professors Jim Dahlberg and Lloyd Smith pitched WARF the idea of forming a company — Third Wave — around Dahlberg's discovery of the cancer detection enzyme cleavase.

Lacking the funds to cover licensing fees, they offered WARF equity in the company.

Over roughly a decade, Third Wave worked to

commercialize diagnostic tests, went public and was purchased by Boston-based Hologic. WARF made around a million dollars from Third Wave, Walters said, and the company later sold for upwards of \$500 million.

He also emphasized that while WARF has historically issued over 4,000 patents, the organization has had to accept the risk of commercializing innovations that don't go anywhere in pursuit of "the diamond in the rough."

Yet WARF's operations are self-sustaining, as it invests the royalties from these inventions to fund its work.

► "The envy of all the universities"

Iverson joined WARF in 2016 and set out to reorganize and revamp the organization with three strategic initiatives — WARF Therapeutics, WARF Accelerator and WARF Ventures — to encourage new companies and propel growth.

Annual grants to UW-Madison from WARF — which over the last century have totaled \$4.5 billion — fueled these initiatives by funding critical research in areas that might yield discoveries with startup potential.

"WARF as an institution is the envy of all the universities in the United States," said Dorota Grejner-Brzezinska, UW-Madison's vice chancellor for research. "It adds significant funding to the research enterprise. ... And we can then invest in a number of research areas — biotech, engineering, all sorts of health sciences, agricultural

Continued on page 32



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In the last six years, WARF Ventures has invested in over 30 companies, placing it among Wisconsin's most active investors.

Continued from page 30

sciences, many areas that UW excels in.”

Many campus innovations are supported by federal grants before they reach WARF, she said, or vice versa. Sometimes, it's a cycle, with WARF seeding an idea that then receives funding from the federal government, propelling the technology to a new level, where it's ready for additional WARF investment or to be spun out into a startup.

That's where WARF Accelerator and WARF Therapeutics come in.

“The point of an accelerator is to take a certain number of nascent technologies ... put a bit of resources behind them ... (and) mature the technology sufficiently that somebody would be interested in it,” said Iverson.

Greg Keenan, the senior director of WARF Ventures and WARF Accelerator, added, “We're really focusing our dollars

to translate that lab discovery into something a business can understand, or figure out how to start a company that solves a particular problem.”

WARF Accelerator initially encompassed drug-related innovations, but Iverson felt the high cost to develop them justified a sister initiative. WARF Therapeutics establishes a path from drug research to commercialization, helping translate UW-Madison discoveries into market-ready therapies.

WARF Therapeutics' portfolio is made up of programs in therapeutic areas that have a high degree of preclinical validation and address needs in the medical world. Most are in the early-stage research phase, but a few occupy what WARF calls the “monetization zone.”

In fact, Iverson said, WARF is “likely going to license our first drug to a big pharmaceutical company in the very near future.”

► **Graduating to WARF Ventures**

Discoveries from all sections of scientific research may proceed to WARF Accelerator and usually number between 10-15 per year. These projects often become startups and ripen for investment by WARF Ventures.

“We had our investment team when I came in,” said Iverson. “They were managing the billions of dollars of money that we've got ... and making some venture investments into spin-out companies from campus, but it wasn't really robust, cohesive or well-coordinated.”

Iverson wanted to formalize a venture fund and team to support university spin-out companies — in particular, companies that receive a license to technologies patented by WARF. That team would also help to syndicate investments with investors to distribute risk.

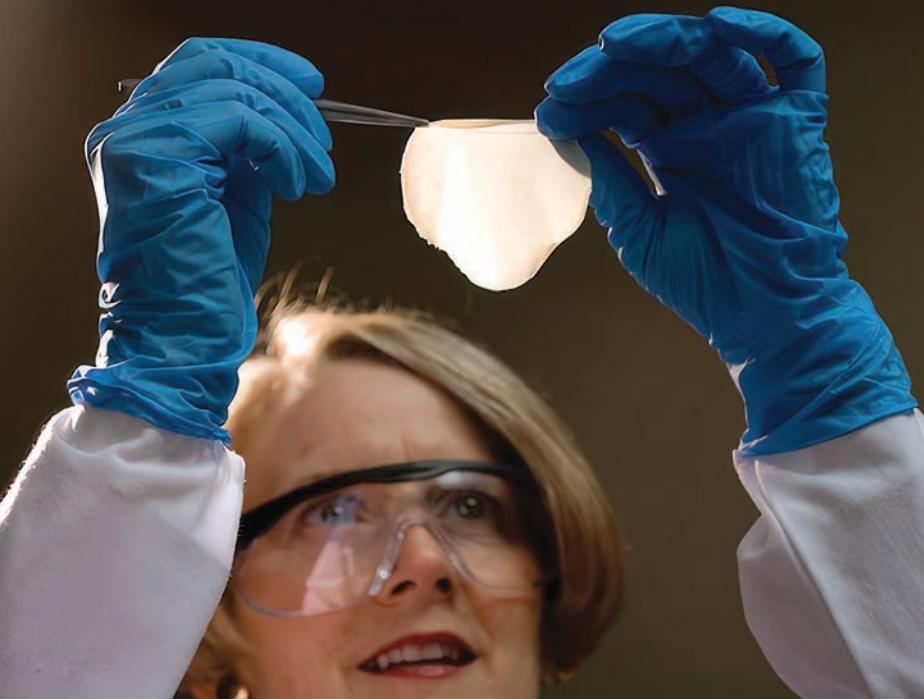
The rollout of WARF's strategic initiatives created a pipeline, with WARF's annual grant funding potentially patentable research, and intellectual property licensing feeding WARF Therapeutics or WARF Accelerator and WARF Ventures, which could develop startups and set them on the way to commercialization.

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In the last six years, WARF Ventures has invested in over 30 companies, placing it among Wisconsin's most active investors.

Iverson said since he joined WARF, he has come to "appreciate very quickly that this is a very complex and multifaceted institution."

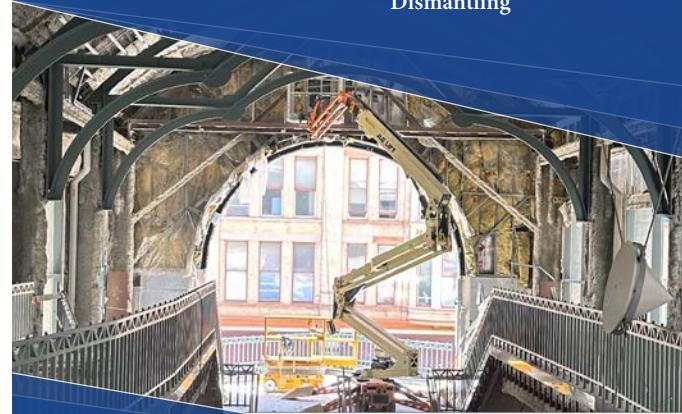
"I knew of WARF, I respected WARF," he said, "but I entirely underappreciated the magnitude of its importance to the campus, and how seriously WARF takes the well-being of UW, of Madison and of the state of Wisconsin."

"It's our responsibility to make sure that this place is stronger when we leave it so it can go on for another 100 years-plus." ■

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The cooperation of all these parts meant that the research coming out of UW-Madison at the front of the pipeline could be better directed to meet industry demand, and WARF could pinpoint the research areas most worthy of investment through grants.

"If we kept (nascent technologies) on campus, provided some grant funding, directed some level of the research toward industry input, and it stayed on campus another six months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months, not only were they maturing the technology, but they were getting additional grants from funding institutions nationally and otherwise," said Iverson.

"Suddenly the technology was more attractive. Then, when it's time to license, we've got a broader, syndicated set of people interested in looking at the technology. The researchers had more data to publish ... and we had better technologies to license."

The establishment of WARF Ventures in 2019 created a positive cycle that continues to bolster university research, cultivate a better market and create better products for that market over time.

"Since we stood (WARF Ventures) up, they have invested somewhere in the range of \$50 million," said Iverson, noting that co-investors have added another \$900 million — "a huge amount of money, and a representation of the amazing technologies coming off this marvelous campus."

"There's some really awesome opportunities we have that are playing out," said Keenan, pointing to fusion, quantum



Photos by John Russell Seal

2026 DISCOVER WISCONSIN WINNING PHOTO

Meet the Photographer

By Discover Wisconsin Staff

Each year, Discover Wisconsin, the nation's longest-running tourism TV show and the state's leading media brand, partners up with the Wisconsin Counties Association to conduct a photo contest through social media. Thousands of people enter their best Wisconsin photos, and the Discover Wisconsin crew chooses 12 winners to be featured in their annual calendar — one of which will be featured on the cover.

The winning photo for the 2026 calendar's cover spot features Rib Mountain. The photo was taken by John Russell Seal and was chosen from more than

1,500 entries. We got to know him a little bit, learning about his life in Wisconsin and how he captured this winning photo.

- **Discover Wisconsin:**
Can you give us the backstory of how you captured the photograph?

My wife and I were running some errands. I looked up at Rib Mountain and was in awe. So, I told her that I wish I had my drone on me. She turned the car around immediately and drove home to grab it. Then, we

parked at a golf range and flew the drone up, snapping the photo right before the sun set.



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● DW: How did you get involved in photography?

It is sort of a hobby. Four years ago, my wife bought me a drone. I now have a freelance business using handheld cinematography and drones.

● DW: What's your connection to Wisconsin?

I am originally from Idaho, but my wife and I moved to the Wausau area in 2021 because housing became so expensive in Idaho. We miss the mountains but have started a whole new life here. Besides the long winters, it is a beautiful place. It is so green in the summer!

● DW: What makes Wisconsin such a wonderful photography location/subject?

Wisconsin has everything from beaches to rainforest-like areas to meadows. It truly has four seasons, and I can see that when looking back at my footage from each season. I have so many places to shoot video, and I love it.

● DW: Do you have a favorite place in Wisconsin you still want to capture on camera?

I haven't shot any video in cities just for fun. I have had paid projects to shoot video in Milwaukee and Madison, but I want just a few days to shoot passion projects there.

● DW: How do you choose the perfect moment to capture a scene like the one at Rib Mountain?

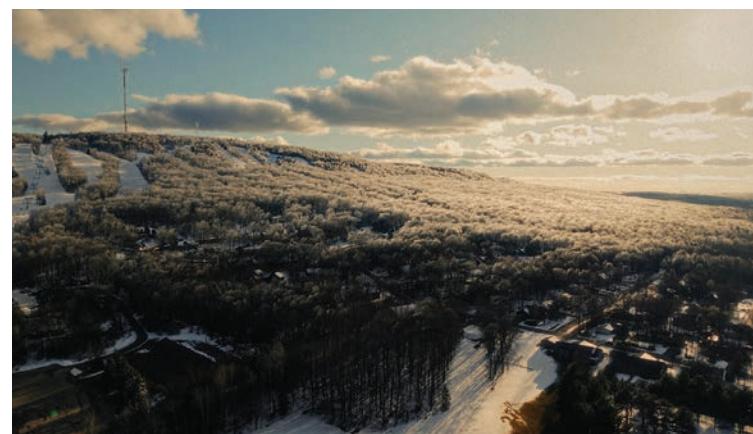
Spontaneous. Those are always the best times. One of my favorite drone shots yet is of a dirt bike on ice. A group of young adults was just drifting motorcycles and cars on frozen ice, and I made a short social media drone video. It was pretty epic.

● DW: Can you describe the moment you knew you captured something special with the Rib Mountain photo?

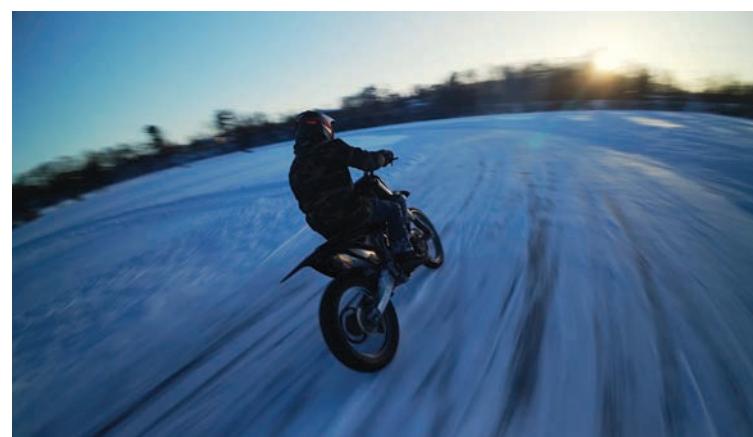
You know you have gotten something good when you just can't stop smiling and run home to edit it right away. I don't think we ever finished running errands that evening because I knew I needed to get this into the lightroom right away and check it out. I have tried to recreate it since, but it has been hard to get that timing and look again. It definitely was a unique phenomenon.

● DW: Do you have any favorite Wisconsin memories?

Shooting video in the fall. It is just so beautiful. I had experienced nothing like it before moving here. The colors are so vivid and awesome. ■



View more of Seal's work on Instagram:  JOHNRUSSELLSEAL



▲ A short video, "A Portrait of Monica Kuhn," is available at bit.ly/Seal_Kuhn.



BROWN COUNTY

Brown County's Legacy Honoring Wisconsin Veterans and the Spirit of Service

Across from the bright lights of Lambeau Field stands the Brown County Veterans Memorial, a quiet tribute to those who defended our nation. Its stark concrete design rises simply yet powerfully, symbolizing ordinary people from Brown County who accomplished extraordinary things in service to their country.

Among those whose legacy looms large is Denis John Francis Murphy, a name that may not be familiar to many outside local history circles, but whose heroism resonates profoundly in Green Bay and beyond. Murphy holds the distinction of being the only Green Bay-area resident ever awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

An immigrant farmer with a young family, he was living a quiet life in the town of Glenmore when the nation called in 1861. The Civil War had erupted, and Murphy answered without hesitation, enlisting in the 14th Wisconsin Regiment, a unit primarily made up of young men from northeast Wisconsin.

Murphy's courage was soon tested on some of the Civil War's fiercest battlefields. At the Battle of Shiloh, one of the war's bloodiest encounters, he displayed leadership and bravery under fire that would become legendary among his peers. Later, at the Battle of Corinth, his actions helped turn the tide in critical moments, cementing his place in history.



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications

His Medal of Honor citation would later recognize his extraordinary valor, but for Murphy, service was not about accolades; it was about answering the call to protect and serve.

Brown County itself has long been a community intertwined with military service. Generations of residents have walked the path from hometown farms and neighborhoods to the frontlines abroad, carrying with them the values instilled by their families and their communities. The Veterans Memorial stands as a reminder of those stories, both celebrated and unsung, that collectively shape the county's identity.

Today, Brown County continues to contribute to the nation's military. Veterans' organizations provide support networks, mentoring, and outreach programs for service members and their families. Annual ceremonies at the memorial, especially on Veterans Day and Memorial Day, draw crowds who come to honor both history and living heroes.

In Brown County, where bravery is remembered and revered, the past and present converge. From the heroics of Denis John Francis Murphy to the countless others who have served, the memorial encapsulates a simple yet profound truth: the spirit of service is woven deeply into the fabric of our state. □

► WATCH NOW: bit.ly/BrownCounty_Veterans



WASHINGTON COUNTY

Washington County's Art Scene Creativity and Community in Harmony

In West Bend, art isn't tucked away in galleries. Rather, it spills into streets, theaters and public spaces, shaping a city where creativity and community collide. From outdoor sculptures running alongside the Milwaukee River to the Museum of Wisconsin Art, every corner tells a story of passion, collaboration and local pride.

"West Bend stands out not only for its thriving art scene but for the incredible people who make it happen," said Mark C. Rose, president & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, Inc. "Their story is one of passion, collaboration and creativity, the kind that makes Wisconsin feel like home."

From public art installations to local festivals, West Bend's commitment to the arts strengthens the city's identity and fosters connections among residents. Artists, organizers and volunteers all play a role in shaping a cultural landscape that is as welcoming as it is inspiring.

The riverwalk in West Bend stretches roughly three miles along the banks of the Milwaukee River, forming part of the larger West Bend Milwaukee Riverfront Parkway. Completed

in stages and finalized in 2019, the improvements included new ADA-accessible walking paths, restored riverbanks, pedestrian bridges and stairs to the water, transforming what had once been an underutilized riverfront into a vibrant, welcoming space for residents and visitors.

The riverwalk is also a curated outdoor art experience. The West Bend Sculpture Walk features more than 40 outdoor sculptures made from a variety of materials, including metal, stone and recycled objects. The pieces come from a diverse mix of local, regional, national, and even international artists.

The nearby Museum of Wisconsin Art ties the area together nicely, bridging "institutional" art spaces and public art space. Visitors can see a world-class art museum and then step outside to walk among sculptures while enjoying river views.

"Art here isn't just about exhibitions, it's about community," Rose added. "Washington County has embraced this ethos, enriching lives, sparking imagination and leaving a lasting mark on the region for generations." □

► **WATCH NOW:** bit.ly/WashingtonCounty_Arts

Current counties sharing their *Uniquely Wisconsin* stories in season four include Brown, Marathon, Outagamie, Pierce and Washington. Counties highlighted in the first three seasons of *Uniquely Wisconsin* include Adams, Ashland, Calumet, Green Lake, Jefferson, Kenosha, Lincoln, Marathon, Monroe, Oconto, Portage, Price, Racine, Rock, Sauk, Sheboygan, Washington and Wood.

To see season four stories as they are released, as well as previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at youtube.com/DiscoverWI and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast on your favorite podcast player, where counties in the program are featured. To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning *Uniquely Wisconsin* brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.

NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

- February 25
- March 25
- April 22
- May 27
- June 24
- July 22
- August 26
- October 28
- November 18
- December 16

January “In the Board Room” Webinar to Focus on Board Rules

The next WCA “In the Board Room” monthly webinar with Andy Phillips and Attolles Law will be held at noon on Wednesday, Jan. 28.

In the first 2026 edition of “In the Board Room,” join Andy Phillips and Attolles Law for a discussion of board rules. While this topic has been addressed in past sessions, many counties are working through revisions and updates to their board rules in anticipation of the elections in April.

Now is the perfect time to ensure your rules are organized appropriately and dust off all of the “what if” and “purely hypothetical” questions about procedure.

Visit bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26 to register for the 2026 webinars. There is no cost to register.

Recordings of all the webinars to date are available for members on the WCA website at wicounties.org. ■

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.



amazon business

Prime Exclusive Offer for WCA Members

The WCA has partnered with Amazon Business for a new, exclusive program. 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.

2026 WCA LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE

Where Wisconsin County Voices Shape Policy

Join county leaders from across Wisconsin for two days of insight, connection and forward-looking conversations at the 2026 WCA Legislative Conference, Feb. 10-11 in Madison. Designed specifically for county officials, this event offers direct access to state decision-makers, expert analysis of emerging issues, and practical discussions that will enhance your leadership at home.

The program will include extensive updates on state and federal priorities from a state legislative leadership panel, the National Association of Counties, and the WCA Government Affairs Team.

Andy Phillips of Attolles Law will provide a legal update on the most pressing issues facing Wisconsin counties, and the Forward Analytics team will share data-driven insights on the trends shaping our state. The first day will conclude with an evening reception honoring county government — an excellent opportunity to foster



Top leaders from both parties in the state Senate and Assembly participated in a panel at the 2025 WCA Legislative Conference.

relationships and connect with colleagues.

Don't miss this valuable opportunity to stay informed, amplify your voice in state and federal policy, and network with leaders who share your dedication to Wisconsin. Visit wicounties.org for more information and to register. ■

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Federal Update

*Editor's note: The following articles are adapted from NACo County News articles and have been edited for clarity and brevity.
The original articles can be found at naco.org.*

Stretching Small Opioid Settlement Allocations Helps Funding Do More

By Meredith Moran, County News Staff Writer, National Association of Counties

At NACo's Opioid Solutions Leadership Network peer exchange in November, experts in substance use prevention, harm reduction, and recovery advised counties on best practices for leveraging small opioid settlement allocations.

"The innovation that I think is promising is the shift toward prevention programs that are addressing youth resilience, coping skills, mental health and all those things that start earlier in the lifespan and really address the broad array of factors that can underlie substance use," said Robyn Oster, associate director of health law and policy for Partnership to End Addiction.

► Allotments under \$50,000

For counties receiving opioid settlement allotments under \$50,000, the most effective ways to invest in prevention work are to scale up existing programming, which could be adding another component, making it universal, or training the existing workforce (such as people in the community working with or mentoring youth), according to



Oster. Counties could also hire a prevention specialist in the school system, she noted.

Studies show that people who utilize harm reduction programming are five times more likely to enter treatment and three times more likely to stop using drugs than people who don't, said Roxanne Saucier, an Open Society Foundations consultant. And syringe service programs, which provide substance users with sterile injecting equipment and collect used syringes to safely dispose of them, have resulted in 50% reductions in incidence of HIV and Hepatitis C, she added.

"Harm reduction is really an on-ramp to care," Saucier said. "Harm reduction programs are a place where people can come as they are, be accepted and welcomed, and have their humanity and dignity affirmed. Once people are there, we're giving them tools to use to protect themselves, protect their health."

► Allotments under \$5,000

For counties receiving opioid settlement allotments under \$5,000, the most effective way to invest in harm reduction

Abrupt Change to Federal Homelessness Funding to Affect Hundreds of Wisconsin Households

In November, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development released a new, fiscal year 2025 Notice of Funding Opportunity that will upend community efforts to address homelessness by dramatically changing funding criteria for the federal Continuum of Care Program.

"The CoC provides critical resources and was supposed to have been renewed last year," said Carrie Poser, executive director of the Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care, which provides support to 69 counties in the state. "The new



funding guidelines drastically change the priorities and how funds will be awarded, with virtually no time to plan or adapt."

According to Poser, the Wisconsin Balance of State CoC has \$21.6 million invested in 37 permanent housing projects across the state. Under the new funding guidelines, it can allocate only \$7.6 million of CoC funding for permanent housing. The rest must be spent on temporary housing or services. As a result, at least 606 households in Wisconsin will be affected, with their permanent housing support withdrawn by the end of the federal 2025 fiscal year in September.

is to buy and widely distribute naloxone, the medication that rapidly reverses opioid overdoses, according to Saucier.

Buying the generic intramuscular product instead of the nasal product (which is at least 10 times more expensive) can also reduce costs and allow counties to distribute it more widely, Saucier said. Investing in test strips and wound care, particularly in areas with high rates of xylazine (an animal tranquilizer) use, also provides large benefits at relatively small costs, she added.

Funding a local syringe service program is a beneficial way to use settlement dollars, especially amid changing federal guidelines around harm reduction, according to Saucier. Martinsville, Va., used funding to distribute safety supplies in isolated rural areas through mail-based and delivery services, she noted.

Drug checking using fourier-transform infrared spectrometers is a way to invest in harm reduction beyond test trips. It promotes safer drug use and helps public health communities understand drug supply trends, Saucier noted.

It's important to bring services to substance users instead of expecting them to seek them out, and mobile treatment and syringe exchange services are a great way to offer that, according to Saucier. The "health hub" model, in which multiple services are provided at one site, such as syringe services and legal aid, has also been effective, she noted.

Recovery programming, including peer support, saves lives, said Marianna Reid, Faces and Voices of Recovery's director of programs, who recently celebrated 13 years of sobriety. Funding transportation services and peer support are effective ways

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for more information and resources from the WCA about opioid settlement funds.

counties can invest in recovery work at any scale, she said.

"If you want to know what those community-based services can do for your communities, I'm a product of that," Reid said. Local recovery organizations "work across systems to provide for medical needs, employment needs, safe housing, things like that. And they also support establishing a sense of purpose and belonging in the community."

Stigma reduction is crucial — especially in rural communities — in helping local residents understand addiction and removing barriers to accessing treatment, Reid said. Many counties have already integrated peer recovery support into their emergency rooms, but peer recovery support has also been shown to be beneficial in the child welfare and legal systems, she noted.

The most effective way to invest in recovery work is to fund peer and professional development and create listening sessions and community assessments, Reid said. She noted that partnering with social work students from nearby state or community colleges offers a strategic, low-cost way to conduct a community assessment.

For counties receiving small settlement allocations, it's important to collaborate with community organizations, leveraging their expertise and investing in scaling up work that has already shown success, according to Dr. Abby Winiker, director of Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Bloomberg Overdose Prevention Initiative.

"So, work together and build upon efforts that are already in place — that cuts a ton of infrastructure cost and saves when you're looking at these small dollar investments." □

"These are people who were chronically homeless, living outside or in their car, staying in emergency shelters, or fleeing violence, prior to entering a permanent home with supports," said Poser. "This includes families, veterans, youth, and people with serious mental health conditions."

In addition, the new guidelines specifically exclude the Domestic Violence Rapid Re-Housing Program from receiving funding after September. In Wisconsin, 229 households participate in this program, which provides short-term rental assistance and services for those fleeing domestic violence.

"This abrupt, last-minute Notice of Funding Opportunity

changes the entire CoC Program structure with no advance notice, removes renewals as a long-standing priority, and destroys the lives of hundreds of people who already experienced the trauma of homelessness," said Poser. "This change to the homeless crisis response system will have a ripple effect across communities, impacting landlords, law enforcement, human services, and the health care system."

The Wisconsin Balance of State CoC urges county officials to contact their members of Congress to protect the CoC Program, direct HUD to renew the current grants to allow ongoing programs to continue, and alleviate the risk of upheaval across Wisconsin. □

EPA Releases New Definition of the “Waters of the United States”

By Charlotte Mitchell Duyshart, Associate Legislative Director; and Andrew Nober, Legislative Assistant, National Association of Counties

In November, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released a proposed rule defining what

constitutes the “waters of the United States” subject to federal regulation under the Clean Water Act. The new definition is narrower than previous rules and codifies the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the 2023 case Sackett v. EPA.

► Background

The Clean Water Act sets pollution control standards, including the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, for many waterways in the United States. It prohibits the discharge of pollutants into “navigable waters,” described as the “waters of the United States, including the territorial seas.” The law does not define that term in any greater detail. As a result, the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers, which both implement aspects of the law, have clarified jurisdictional “waters of the United States” through rulemaking and in response to court decisions.

In January 2023, the agencies finalized rulemaking that expanded protections for waterways through the “relatively permanent” and “significant nexus” tests. In May 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a decision in Sackett v. EPA invalidating the



2023 January Rule definition as being too broad.

In its decision, the court found that the Clean Water Act’s provisions applied to “only those relatively permanent, standing or continuously flowing bodies of water ‘forming geographic[al] features’” and to wetlands only if they are jurisdictional “in their own right” and “are as a practical matter indistinguishable from waters of the United States, such that it is difficult to determine where the water ends and the wetland begins.” The EPA and Army Corps of Engineers issued a new definition, known as the 2023 Conforming Rule, in line with the Supreme Court’s decision, but separate litigation invalidated it in 26 states.

► What does the new rule say?

The 2025 Proposed Rule clarifies the existing definitions of the terms “relatively permanent,” “continuous surface connection,” “ditch,” and “tributary,” and makes other adjustments to the definition’s language. Broadly, the new definitions in the 2025 Proposed Rule narrow the scope of federal jurisdiction, principally by imposing more stringent qualifications for wetland environments.

► What happens next?

The EPA and Army Corps of Engineers have opened a 45-day public comment period as they work to finalize the rule. Interested or affected counties can submit their comments by Jan. 5, 2026. □



LEARN MORE

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is still evaluating the rule, as it is not yet clear how this new federal definition may interact with or influence state permitting processes.

In March 2025, the Natural Resources Defense Council created a GIS model to help visualize potential changes on the landscape, available at on.nrdc.org/4oQ5hbQ.

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LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

U.S. Supreme Court Takes Up Another Tax-Foreclosed Property Case

By Andy Phillips and Matt Thome, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

In 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court held the Takings Clause in the U.S. Constitution is violated when a county retains the surplus proceeds from the sale of a tax-foreclosed property. In that case, *Tyler v. Hennepin County, Minnesota*, Geraldine Tyler accumulated about \$15,000 in unpaid property taxes, penalties and interest on her condominium. The county took ownership of the property for the unpaid tax liability and subsequently sold it for \$40,000. The county retained the \$25,000 in surplus proceeds. The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously concluded that when there is money remaining after a home has been sold by the government to satisfy past due taxes, the remaining value is property of the property owner, protected from uncompensated appropriation by the government.

In the wake of the *Tyler v. Hennepin* decision, Wisconsin enacted 2023 Wisconsin Act 207 to implement that decision and ensure state law complies with the requirements of the U.S. Constitution. Specifically, Act 207 codified an obligation to sell tax-deeded properties and a requirement that any excess proceeds be returned to the former owner. And, although the WCA is continuing to engage in discussions regarding additional statutory changes to clarify and simplify this process for counties, Wisconsin law currently meets the mandate that surplus

proceeds from the sale of tax-foreclosed properties be returned to the former property owner.

In the coming months, the U.S. Supreme Court will again weigh in on the constitutional implications of tax foreclosures. Specifically, in *Pung v. Isabella County, Michigan*, the court will decide whether the Fifth Amendment's Takings Clause (which was the crux of the *Tyler* decision) or the Eighth Amendment's ban on excessive fines requires that a county foreclosing on a property for unpaid taxes compensate the former owner for the difference between the "fair market value" of the property and the tax debt (rather than any surplus proceeds from a subsequent sale). As part of its analysis, the court may also determine when a "taking" occurs — at the time a foreclosure deed is given or at the time of the sale of the foreclosed property.

In this dispute, Isabella County foreclosed and took title to a home for unpaid tax bills, which, with penalties and interest, totaled \$2,242. Pung claims the home had an assessed fair market value of \$194,400. When Isabella County auctioned the property, however, it sold for \$76,008. The subsequent purchaser of the home then resold it for \$195,000. Pung claims this confirms the actual value of the home. Pung sued, and the lower courts

As part of its analysis, the court may also determine when a “taking” occurs — at the time a foreclosure deed is given or at the time of the sale of the foreclosed property.

concluded that under the Takings Clause, Pung was only entitled to the surplus proceeds generated by the auction price — in other words, the difference between \$76,008 and the tax debt. Pung argues the Takings Clause requires that “just compensation” be measured by the fair market value of the property and not what Pung calls “the depressed proceeds of an inadequate auction conducted by the taker.”

This case is still in briefing, but it poses significant implications for how counties and local governments across the country handle tax foreclosures.¹ If the U.S. Supreme Court adopts the position that the Takings Clause requires compensation based on fair market value, rather than simply

refunding surplus proceeds of a subsequent sale to a former property owner, numerous questions will arise.

For example, would such a holding be limited only to those cases in which a local government uses a sales process that results in a depressed price? Would it be enough if local governments use a process for selling tax-foreclosed properties that is likely to result in sale prices reasonably equivalent to fair market value, or will former property owners be able to bring a takings claim whenever they believe the subsequent sale price was not sufficient? Will counties that foreclose on properties for unpaid taxes

Continued on page 46

► PLAYLISTS IN THE COUNTY JAIL – A CAUTIONARY TALE?

Coming off another festive holiday season, it is a good time to reflect on the extent of a sheriff’s authority to mandate the music playlist in county jails. In the case *Curley v. Arpaio*, the U.S. District Court for the District of Arizona was forced to decide the very important question of whether a sheriff can play holiday music on loop over the objection of inmates.

According to the allegations in the complaint, the music being played included a variety of genres such as Dr. Demento’s Christmas album, with humorous holiday songs; Alvin and the Chipmunks; Elvis Presley, including “Blue Christmas;” Celtic chanting; traditional carols by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir; and a CD with titles such as “Feliz Navidad,” “Ramadan,” “Betelehui,” “Over the Skies of Ysrael,” and “A Christmas/Kwanzaa/Solstice/Chanukah/Ramadan/Boxing Day Song.”

Several inmates objected to the music and complained the holiday music, which included Christian songs, violated the inmates’ rights under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The court disagreed with the plaintiffs and found the sheriff’s stated purpose for playing the music (to reduce inmate tension at a difficult time of year for inmates) adequately demonstrated a secular purpose for the playlist. In other words, even if the music did not have the intended effect, the sheriff’s desire to create a festive holiday atmosphere was allowed.

The *Curley* case serves as a reminder of two important concepts. First, sheriffs enjoy a measure of discretion in determining what music will be played in jail so long as there is a secular purpose associated with the playlist. Second, it appears there is a segment of the inmate population that prefers litigation over holiday music.

If you have any questions regarding this tongue-in-cheek review of a sheriff’s authority over music selection or if you have complaints about your sheriff’s particular tastes in music, please do not hesitate to contact Attolles Law. □



LEGAL ISSUES

Continued from page 45

need to compensate the property owner for the difference between the tax debt and the fair market value of the property at the time the county takes title to the property? Obviously, the answers to the questions presented in Pung, and these subsequent questions, could potentially result in the need for counties to reassess how they handle tax foreclosures and/or for additional legislative action in Wisconsin.

Given the stakes for Wisconsin counties,² the WCA intends to participate in the case by filing what is known as an amicus curiae brief — a brief filed by a nonparty that is intended to assist the court in making a decision. The WCA and its general counsel are preparing that briefing to defend the interests of Wisconsin counties in being able to

collect unpaid taxes via tax foreclosure actions.

In the meantime, if you have any questions surrounding the issues regarding the collection of unpaid property taxes via tax foreclosures of property, please do not hesitate to contact the WCA or the WCA's general counsel, who authored this article. ■

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

1. It is important to note that different states follow different processes for foreclosure of tax delinquent properties. In Wisconsin, counties are the entities that foreclose on such properties, according to the processes set forth in Wis. Stats. Chaps. 74 and 75.
2. In addition to the important practical and administrative implications, all 72 Wisconsin counties are currently parties to a lawsuit alleging the counties unlawfully retained proceeds from the previous sale of tax foreclosed properties. Depending upon the outcome of the Pung case, additional litigation may follow.



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