

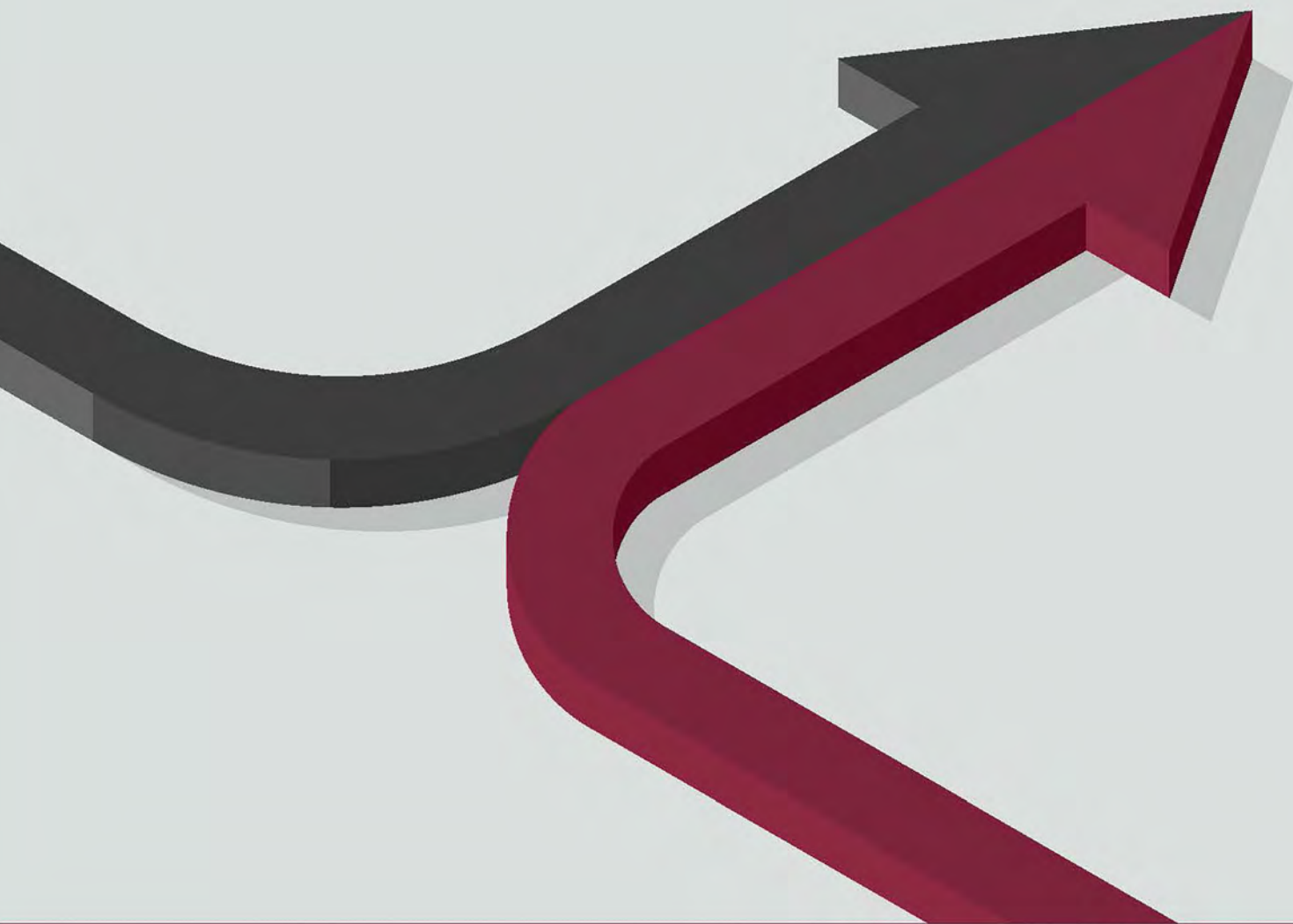
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FEBRUARY 2026

THE Wisconsin Idea IN ACTION



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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

Transportation Delivers

With only a short time remaining in the 2025–26 legislative session, the Wisconsin Counties Association remains focused on advancing our collective legislative priorities. At the same time, it is critically important that we begin laying the groundwork for the priorities that will shape the next biennial state budget. Chief among them must be sustainable transportation funding.

For years, the state's administration and Legislature have partnered to increase investment in our roads and infrastructure, directing funding toward highway repairs, local road improvements, and critical bridge projects throughout Wisconsin.

When state revenues were strong, state policymakers could transfer surplus general fund dollars to the transportation fund. Those transfers helped backfill chronic shortfalls and provided needed increases in local road funding. Counties across the state are grateful for that bipartisan commitment, and we appreciate the state leaders who recognized the importance of investing in our transportation system, even when dollars were tight.

But the landscape is changing, and that approach is increasingly unsustainable. State surpluses are shrinking, construction costs continue to rise, and the cost of maintaining aging infrastructure shows no sign of slowing. Unlike in the past, future budgets may not have excess general fund dollars to plug holes in the transportation fund. When that day comes, local governments will feel the impact through flat or declining transportation aid.

That reality should concern every county leader. Roads and bridges are not optional services. They are the backbone of local economies and essential to daily life. When transportation funding lags, it not only delays projects but also limits opportunities, strains local budgets, and shifts costs to residents and businesses.

That is why the WCA is taking action now. We are working with a broad coalition of local government partners and industry stakeholders to urge lawmakers to address

this challenge directly. We are not advocating a single solution or prescribing a specific revenue source. Instead, we are calling on state leaders to identify and commit to a sustainable, long-term funding mechanism that closes the gap in the transportation fund and provides counties and municipalities with the predictability they need.

Your voice matters in this effort. The WCA has drafted a model resolution calling for sustainable transportation funding, and our goal is to have every county in Wisconsin pass it or their own version by April 30. Doing so sends a clear, unified message: Local transportation funding is critical to our communities and cannot rely on one-time fixes or uncertain surpluses. A strong transportation system requires a stable, dedicated funding source. Visit wicounties.org to learn more and join us in advocating for your roads.

As county leaders know well, Wisconsin's future depends not only on our physical infrastructure but also on the strength of the institutions that generate new ideas, talent and solutions to complex challenges.

That is why this issue of Wisconsin Counties turns its attention to the flagship of the state's world-class university system: the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We invited its leaders to share some of their recent groundbreaking initiatives and scientific advances. The stories they chose to highlight showcase innovation that extends far beyond campus boundaries. These initiatives embody the Wisconsin Idea in action — applying research and creativity to improve lives, strengthen communities, and support economic growth across every county.

At a time when federal research funding is increasingly uncertain, understanding and supporting this work is more important than ever. Just as our transportation system requires stable, long-term investment to remain reliable, so too does the research and innovation ecosystem that drives progress. Together, strong infrastructure and strong ideas will keep Wisconsin moving forward today and for generations to come. ■

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Building a Stronger Wisconsin COUNTY BY COUNTY

By Jennifer L. Mnookin, Chancellor, UW-Madison

There are many inspiring parts of being chancellor of UW-Madison, from welcoming new students to campus to supporting and celebrating the cutting-edge research that is changing people's lives. But one of the most powerful reminders of our mission isn't found in a classroom or research laboratory in Madison; it's found when I'm on the road, witnessing the Wisconsin Idea in action in communities across the state.

I've held a piglet at the Brown County Fair, waded through a cranberry bog in Black River Falls, and toured the high-tech manufacturing floor of Mercury Marine in Fond du Lac. I've shared brats with Johnsonville employees; met with potato farmers in Waushara County; and talked to physicians and nurses at Reedsburg Area Hospital and with veterinarians in Marathon County. In every one of these places and so many others, I see our students and faculty working alongside community partners (some of whom are alums themselves!) to solve real problems facing Wisconsin communities.

- You see it in health care, where programs like the Orion Initiative and the Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine are connecting researchers with local providers to reduce isolation and build capacity. Just last year, thanks in part to these partnerships, the adjacent villages of Adams and Friendship in Adams County welcomed their first full-time physician in more than seven years — a huge benefit for the residents of that area!
- You see it in infrastructure, where the College of Engineering's Project 72 is bringing tailored environmental expertise to every county in our state.
- And you see it in agriculture, where our 12 Agricultural Research Stations are partnering with farmers to test new crop varieties and even building robotic field equipment to keep Wisconsin globally competitive.

The result is a university that works for Wisconsin's wallet, too. We now generate a total state economic impact of \$30.8 billion — a return of \$26 for every state dollar invested — as well as nearly 190,000 jobs.

Continued on page 8



► Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin (left) and College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Dean Glenda Gillaspie (right) get into the action during a visit to the Russell Rezin & Son Cranberry Marsh in Monroe County.

Photo credit: Anna Barry, UW-Madison

Continued from page 7

Of course, maintaining this momentum requires two things: strong local leadership and a pipeline of talent. To ensure the next generation of teachers, doctors, pharmacists, farmers, engineers and scientists can afford to stay and serve in Wisconsin, we have created programs like Bucky's Tuition Promise, Bucky's Pell Pathway, and the Wisconsin Tribal Educational Promise, designed to make a UW-Madison education affordable and accessible to more Wisconsinites.

And it's working. For the first time in more than a decade, this year's freshman class includes students from all 72 Wisconsin counties, and more than two-thirds of our undergrads now finish their degrees completely debt-free! Here's another fact you might not have known: Any Wisconsin undergraduate who qualifies for a Pell grant will pay zero tuition at UW-Madison — that's right, zero tuition

— and we'll help support their living expenses, too.

We care deeply about the kind of leaders we are sending back to Wisconsin communities.

To truly serve the state, we must ensure that our future

leaders are ready to navigate a complex world. It's more important than ever to help students build the skills needed to engage productively across differences. We want our graduates to be neighbors who can disagree without being

disagreeable, and leaders who approach conflict with curiosity instead of contempt. Our new campus-wide effort, the Wisconsin Exchange, is designed to do precisely that.

It's this same commitment to both service and innovation that you will find in the feature of this issue of the Wisconsin Counties. As you read about our rural health training tracks or the latest discoveries in organ transplant research, I hope you see a university that is relentlessly focused on solving



LEARN MORE

Visit impact.wisc.edu to see some of the data, stories and partnerships UW-Madison is highlighting from across the state!



**To ensure the next generation
of teachers, doctors, pharmacists, farmers,
engineers and scientists can afford to stay and
serve in Wisconsin, we have created programs ...
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problems with and for the people of Wisconsin.

So, to all of you, thank you for welcoming us into your communities. I'm proud to work with you to create a thriving Wisconsin. Thank you for your leadership and your partnership. And On, Wisconsin! ■

Jennifer L. Mnookin has been the chancellor of UW-Madison since August 2022. Prior to coming to Wisconsin, Mnookin served as dean of the UCLA School of Law, where she spent 17 years on the faculty. Before that, she was a professor of law at the University of Virginia School of Law and a visiting professor of law at Harvard Law School.



► Chancellor Mnookin poses in Rhinelander, in front of a representation of "The Hodag," a legend that has become the city's official symbol [and high school mascot].

Photo credit: Katie McMullen, UW-Madison

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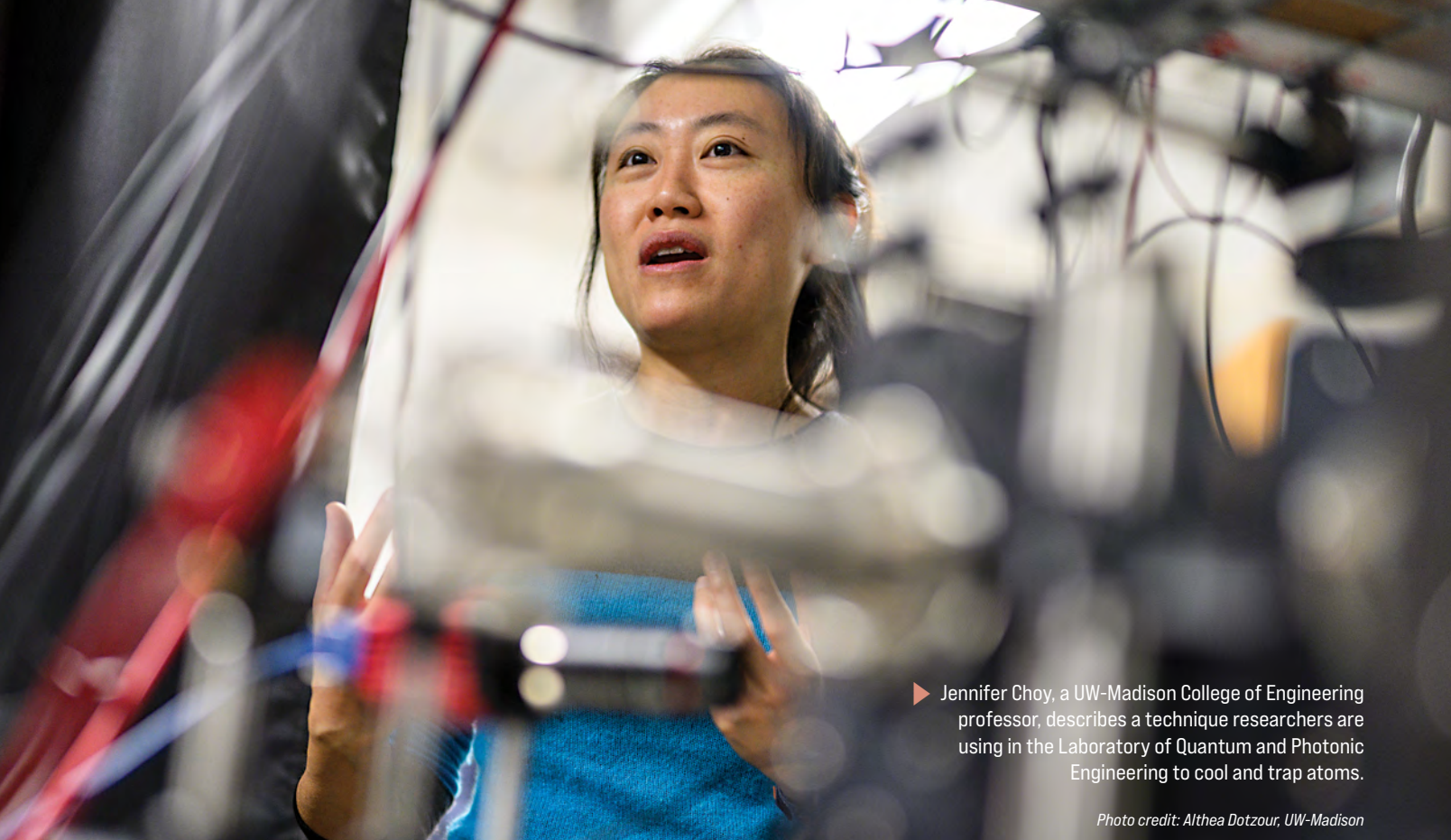
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► Jennifer Choy, a UW-Madison College of Engineering professor, describes a technique researchers are using in the Laboratory of Quantum and Photonic Engineering to cool and trap atoms.

Photo credit: Althea Dotzour, UW-Madison

From Research to Regional Growth

Why Quantum and Fusion Matter for Wisconsin's Future

Victoria Comella, Director of Media Relations, UW-Madison

At a congressional hearing in September 2025, UW-Madison engineering professor Stephanie Diem told members: “In a world facing urgent energy challenges and geopolitical tensions over access to energy and energy resources, fusion gives us hope.”

Fusion is the process that powers the sun. It occurs when elements release vast amounts of energy by being forced together under extreme conditions. On Earth, researchers like Diem use magnetic bottles or powerful lasers to create fusion conditions.



If successfully commercialized, fusion could offer virtually limitless power, stabilize electric grids, reduce energy costs, and fuel energy-intensive sectors, from manufacturing to biotechnology.

In Wisconsin today, fusion is fueling industry. UW-Madison has produced more fusion-trained graduates than any other institution worldwide, and those graduates span national labs, private companies, and new start-ups driving the field forward.



Photo credit: Bryce Richter, UW-Madison

- Stephanie Diem, a UW-Madison College of Engineering professor, peers into a spherical tokamak, a fusion device that is part of the Pegasus experiment with the U.S. Department of Energy. Diem is studying innovative ways to start up fusion power plants and working to build a strong fusion workforce.

Those start-ups include: Realta Fusion, which is developing modular, scalable fusion systems with the potential to power energy-intensive industries and deliver industrial heat; Type One Energy, which is leveraging decades of research and partnering with the Tennessee Valley Authority and Oak Ridge National Lab to build a small fusion power plant at a former coal site; and SHINE Technologies, which is already demonstrating the commercial potential of fusion-adjacent technologies through its production of medical radioisotopes.

UW-Madison also has one of the longest-running fusion programs in the country, dating back to the 1950s. Today, university researchers are leading world-class fusion experiments aimed at informing future fusion reactor development and improving conditions to create fusion, including pioneering techniques that could reduce the cost and complexity of future reactors.

UW researchers bring additional strengths in reactor design, materials development and plasma-edge physics, creating an ecosystem that spans fundamental science to real-world application.

► Quantum leaps

At the same time, UW-Madison is helping advance quantum technologies. These technologies include secure

communications networks that protect people from fraud and identity theft; powerful computers that solve problems that classic computers can't (and solve them much faster); and sensitive sensors that could improve navigation, cancer detection, and more.

Quantum technology relies on quantum mechanics, the physics that govern the behavior of matter at the atomic and sub-atomic levels. In recent decades, scientists have been working to leverage these properties for real-world applications. The United States has identified quantum as a national priority, with more than \$4 billion in proposed federal investment.

As part of the Chicago Quantum Exchange — spanning Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana — UW-Madison has emerged as a global leader in quantum science and engineering. The university has more than 50 faculty working across major areas of quantum computing, networking, sensing, materials, and workforce development, and draws more than \$20 million annually in federal quantum research funding. UW-Madison also created the nation's first dedicated quantum computing master's degree program, which trains more than 30 students each year.

The university is helping to bring together researchers,

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“We are training students to have this broad base of expertise that will equip them to make a high impact in this developing field of technology.”

— Marc Eriksson, UW-Madison physics professor

Continued from page 11

industry, educators, investors and government to accelerate discovery and economic impact in quantum. For example, supported and coordinated by statewide organizations such as the Wisconsin Technology Council, Tiletown Tech and gener8tor, industrial partners are beginning to work with UW-Madison’s quantum applications and sensing groups.

Meanwhile, a growing cluster of hardware-focused startups is engaging with the university’s Innovation Center, developing new quantum devices and materials and pushing forward the hardware side of the field.

Workforce development is also a central pillar of this effort.

“Developing a next-generation quantum workforce is a huge priority nationally and worldwide,” said UW-Madison physics professor Marc Eriksson

when the university’s participation in the Chicago Quantum Exchange was first announced in 2019. “We are training students to have this broad base of expertise that will equip them to make a high impact in this developing field of technology.”

At the same time, Madison Area Technical College and UW-Stout are partnering to build training pipelines that prepare students and workers for the wide range of careers the quantum economy will generate, from specialized technical roles to applied industry positions. These collaborations help ensure that Wisconsin doesn’t just advance quantum research but also equips its communities to benefit from the high-quality jobs and new opportunities that come with it. ■

Victoria Comella is the director of media relations for UW-Madison.

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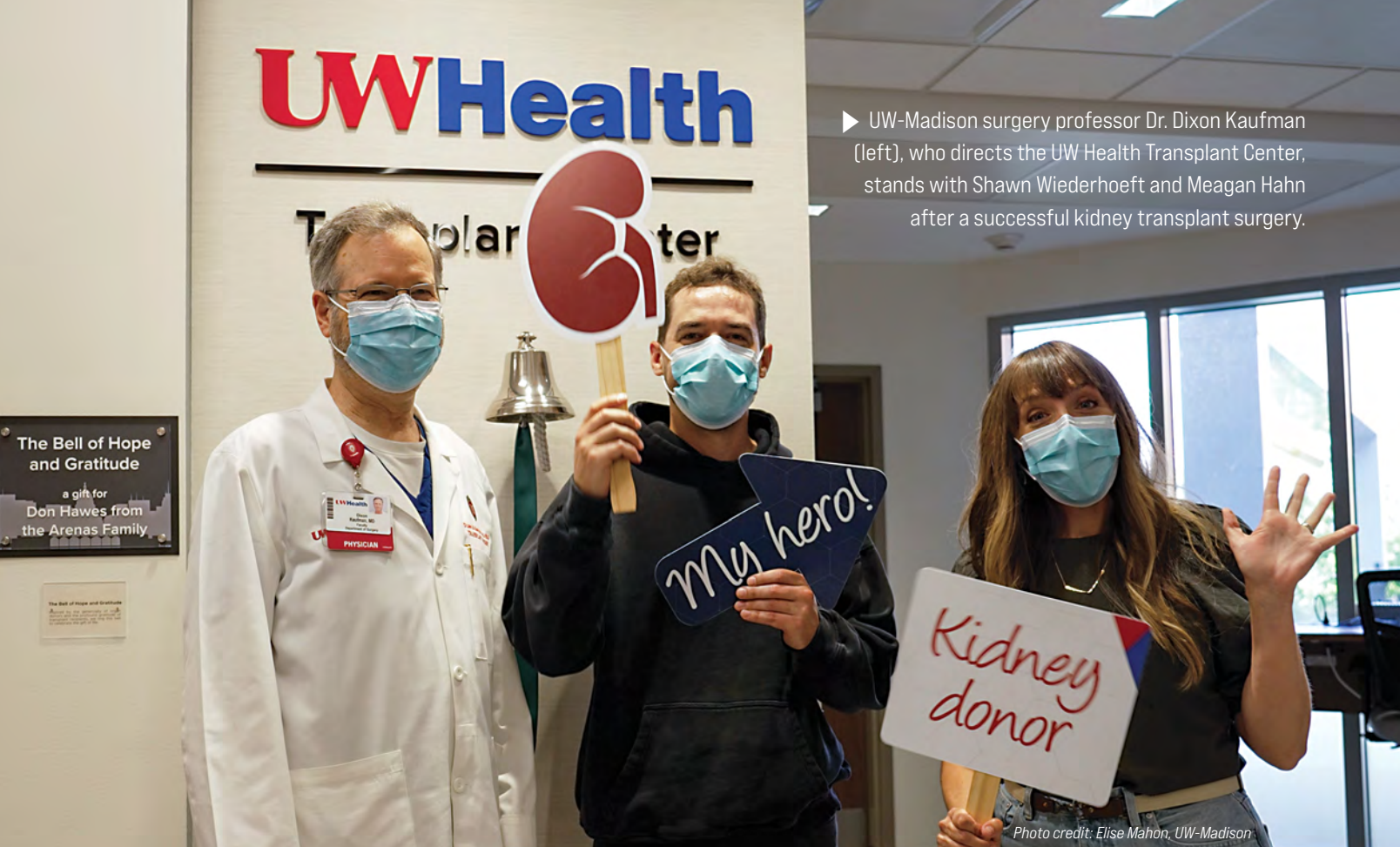
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► UW-Madison surgery professor Dr. Dixon Kaufman (left), who directs the UW Health Transplant Center, stands with Shawn Wiederhoeft and Meagan Hahn after a successful kidney transplant surgery.

Photo credit: Elise Mahon, UW-Madison

Cutting-Edge Clinical Trials Bring New Lease on Life

Transplant patients return to healthy life without anti-rejection drugs.

By Will Cushman, Research Communicator, UW-Madison Office of Strategic Communication

Shawn Wiederhoeft is a pretty regular guy in his 30s. The Madison native works as a video game developer and maintains an active lifestyle. He's healthy — in the best shape of his life — and regularly spends time with friends and family in southern Wisconsin.

But it wasn't always a given that Wiederhoeft would be able to participate in life so fully. In fact, "Uncle Shawn," as he's known to family, is healthy today thanks



in large part to a new kidney he received in 2020 from his sister, Meagan Hahn, of Wauwatosa.

The transplanted kidney has given Wiederhoeft a new lease on life, and because he and his sister chose to participate in a cutting-edge clinical trial at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, he's also able to live without the need for anti-rejection medications.

With no daily medications and only occasional medical



► **Shawn Wiederhoeft** (right) received a new kidney from his sister, **Meagan Hahn** (left).

checkups, Wiederhoeft says he sometimes almost forgets he's the recipient of a kidney transplant.

"I have to consciously remind myself that there's a third kidney in here," he says. "I feel healthier than I've ever been."

Wiederhoeft's remarkable journey from serious illness to a medication-free recovery is just one of a growing number of living kidney transplant success stories that an international team of physicians and researchers reported in the July 2025 issue of the *American Journal of Transplantation*.

Led by UW-Madison surgery professor Dr. Dixon Kaufman, who directs the UW Health Transplant Center, the team shared results of a Phase 3 clinical trial that evaluated the effectiveness and safety of a living kidney transplant tolerance protocol that also includes the transplantation of certain stem cells from the kidney donor to the transplant recipient.

These stem cells are injected into the recipient several days after transplantation and take up residence in bone marrow, where they divide and multiply into immune cells that share the genes of the donated organ. The goal is to keep the recipient's immune system from attacking the new organ, which it would otherwise recognize as a threat.

"This procedure doesn't replace the immune system, but it complements it with around 5% to 10% of the immune system being from the donor," says Kaufman.

In doing so, the new method removes the need for costly anti-rejection medications that severely suppress the

recipient's immune system, carrying a whole host of lifelong side effects.

The prospect of participating in a clinical trial that carried such a possibility was surreal for some of the study's initial participants, including Wiederhoeft and Hahn.

"It felt straight out of a science fiction novel," says Wiederhoeft.

The feeling of entering uncharted territory was even more pronounced for the trial's first participants, sisters Barb Okey and Brenda Quale, both of Platteville.

"To say I was nervous — that's an understatement," says Okey, who received one of Quale's kidneys followed by an infusion of her stem cells in 2018. Within months of the procedure, as hoped, tests showed that Quale's cells had begun multiplying and circulating in Okey's blood, and Okey was eventually weaned off her anti-rejection medications. Today, the only medication Okey takes is to help control her blood pressure.

"It's amazing," Okey says. "To have an opportunity to continue life with a new kidney and without taking medications is pretty fabulous."

Okey and Wiederhoeft are among the small group of kidney recipients who can forgo anti-rejection medications thanks to UW-Madison's clinical trial, but there are plans to

Continued on page 16

► **Barb Okey** (left) and **Brenda Quale** (right), both of Platteville, were the trial's first participants. Okey is among the small group of kidney recipients who can forgo anti-rejection medications thanks to UW-Madison's clinical trial.





“Getting [the patients] back on the road to living a happy and fulfilling life is really what this is all about.”

— Dr. Dixon Kaufman, UW-Madison surgery professor and director of the UW Health Transplant Center

Continued from page 15

expand eligibility for the procedure.

The initial phase required donors and recipients to be siblings and a “perfect,” or identical, match, meaning they have compatible blood types and other physiological compatibilities. Kaufman says that the initial trial’s success means that eligibility could soon be extended to living donor transplants of non-identical matches and eventually to recipients of organs from deceased donors.

Kaufman described the trial’s positive results as “immensely gratifying” and a testament to the value of long-term investments in research.

Indeed, before the procedure could be attempted in human patients, researchers at the Wisconsin National

Primate Research Center and elsewhere spent years testing its safety and effectiveness in non-human primates. In 2023, the team led by Kaufman reported promising results from its latest primate studies that could pave the way for expanding the procedure to non-identical transplant pairs.

The studies that enabled this clinical trial received substantial support over the years from the National Institutes of Health. Kaufman credits UW-Madison’s proven track record of executing complex biomedical research for the sustained federal investment.

“The clinical and research environments at UW are outstanding,” he says. “I’ve been to other programs, trained at other programs, and been faculty at other programs, and the unique things that make the ability to do complicated



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Photo credit: Elise Mahon, UW-Madison

- UW-Madison surgery professor Dr. Dixon Kaufman (right), talks to Shawn Wiederhoeft and Meagan Hahn about Wiederhoeft's progress after a successful kidney transplant surgery.

clinical trials like this successful at the University of Wisconsin are the strong collaborative culture and fantastic resources. We've got a history and a tradition of advancing the field in innovative ways for the benefit of many. We want to keep reaching higher and keep making those advances."

While the recognition and support from the NIH and other funding agencies have underpinned the trial's success, Kaufman says it's the patients and donors who are willing to participate in new and potentially risky trials who are ultimately responsible for helping to advance the field.

"Getting [the patients] back on the road to living a happy

and fulfilling life is really what this is all about," he says.

For Hahn, who felt compelled and grateful to participate in the trial as Wiederhoeft's donor, the results have been immeasurably positive.

"To be able to have Uncle Shawn there for all the family events, and for it to be the most normal version of him — the most healthy version of him — I have to remind myself that this all happened and that this isn't normal for so many people. But for us, it's quite a blessing." ■

Will Cushman is a research communicator for the UW-Madison Office of Strategic Communication.



With the Wisconsin Exchange, UW-Madison is Strengthening a Culture of Civil Dialogue Across Difference

How do you help a campus of people with different viewpoints and perspectives learn to engage effectively? You turn civil dialogue into daily practice at events that model how to discuss difficult issues, in courses that teach civic engagement as an essential skill, and through partnerships with national organizations advancing this work. These are the goals behind UW-Madison's new initiative, the "Wisconsin Exchange: Pluralism in Practice," which aims to help students, faculty and staff learn to engage, live and lead in a polarized world.

The effort connects existing programs — such as "Deliberation

Dinners," where students discuss political issues, like state gun regulations, in a setting where they're exposed to multiple and competing ideas — with new opportunities to make constructive conversation a visible and integral part of life on campus. In addition to other activities this spring, the university is working with the Center on Civility and Democracy, a part of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, to host a forum featuring conversations on bipartisanship, mutual respect, and productive, results-oriented cooperation across ideological differences. **Learn more at wisconsinexchange.wisc.edu.**



► Dr. Mike Medich (center) demonstrates a procedure on a medical dummy with two UW-Madison medical students.

Photo credit: Bryce Richter, UW-Madison



Medical Training Program Improves Health Care for Rural Communities

By Will Cushman, Research Communicator, UW-Madison Office of Strategic Communication

Having grown up in a small town in northern Minnesota, Dr. Mike Medich knows all too well how difficult it can be to receive prompt, quality health care when you live in the countryside, or anywhere outside of a large metro area.

“We had physicians in town, but sometimes, depending on the medical problem, we had to go to a bigger city, and

the closest one for us was about an hour away in Duluth,” says Medich, who now directs medical education at Aurora BayCare Medical Center in Green Bay.

Unfortunately, access to health care has only gotten worse for most rural communities in the United States since Medich’s childhood. UW-Madison and its partners are tackling the pressing problem by bringing medical students



Photo credit: Bryce Richter, UW-Madison

- Dr. Mike Medich (left), who directs medical education at Aurora BayCare Medical Center in Green Bay, talks with Dr. Joe Holt, Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine program director at UW-Madison, about the benefits of the program.

out of the city and into rural hospitals and clinics around the state.

► **Reimagining the pipeline from med school to rural practice**

The Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine (WARM), part of the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, is at the leading edge of reimagining the pipeline from medical school to rural practice.

WARM allows students with a demonstrated commitment to rural medicine to relocate for 28 months of their training to academic campuses in northeast, central and western Wisconsin. There, they receive hands-on training, often across a wider breadth of primary care specialties than they might experience in a traditional setting on a large medical campus.

The benefit is mutual, says Medich, who is the regional program director for WARM at Aurora BayCare, which operates clinics throughout northeast Wisconsin, from Marinette to Sturgeon Bay to Howards Grove.

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► Shane Hoffman at the Aurora Medical Center–Manitowoc County in Two Rivers, where he shadowed a physician for several weeks while he was a UW-Madison medical student.

Accelerated UW Program Aggressively Takes on Physician Shortage in Rural Wisconsin

In 2025, Wisconsin native Shane Hoffman became the first graduate of a UW School of Medicine and Public Health program that reduces the time it takes to train doctors interested in serving rural parts of the state.

Hoffman earned his nursing degree from UW-Madison and returned to the university to start medical school in 2022. His passion for rural health care led him to apply for a new offering in the school's Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine, known as WARM, which has been successfully addressing the physician shortage in rural areas since 2007.

Students in the new accelerated program take all the same required courses but graduate in three years instead of four, through a combination of factors, such as earlier clinical rotations and fewer requirements for elective courses.

Hoffman's clinical rotations as a medical school student took him to rural areas across the state. What he witnessed only increased his resolve to practice rural medicine. Now a medical school graduate and in his first year of residency, Hoffman will continue to train at hospitals and clinics around Wisconsin.

"My residency years will be all about putting tools in my belt that I can use in a rural community to hopefully keep that patient in their community or treat them until we can get them to a larger facility," Hoffman says. □

Continued from page 19

"We don't have residents or fellows in medical training at any of our facilities, so the students are working one-on-one with the attending physician and not uncommonly, they're also asked to serve as a first assistant in surgery and deliver babies," says Medich. "And for the patients, the students are able to provide more personal care than a busy physician might be able to, and the patients appreciate that."

The lasting benefit for rural patients, though, is WARM's track record for graduating medical students who end up returning to rural communities to practice full-time. Only about 6% to 10% of graduates from traditional medical programs go on to practice in rural settings, while about half of the 331 WARM graduates to date have settled in rural communities.

"We have students who finish training and then return to practice in a community or town that hasn't had a doctor in a decade," says Dr. Joe Holt, director of WARM.

Continued on page 22

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NRM-21961M1-NX (12/22)



► Dr. Mike Medich (center) speaks with two medical students from UW-Madison who are training in a rural hospital as a part of the WARM program.

Photo credit: Bryce Richter, UW-Madison

“In rural areas, a physician needs to be able to deal with anything that walks through the door, and so our students need to be really well prepared with a lot of direct and hands-on experience.”

— Dr. Joe Holt, WARM program director at UW-Madison

Continued from page 20

“We’ve got graduates working in critical access hospitals that would close if they weren’t there.”

► Training doctors for rural care

Holt is a physician at University Hospital in Madison but previously practiced for more than a decade in Rusk County, a period he remembers fondly. Now, he’s helping to train new generations of medical students who have all sorts of motivations for practicing in small communities, whether they want a rural lifestyle, feel called to fill a critical role, or are attracted to the variety rural practice provides.

“WARM provides students with really extensive training and experiences that are pertinent to doctors who practice in rural areas,” says Holt. “A doctor in a hospital in Madison sees all sorts of complex cases, but may have dozens of consultants and other support services available. In rural areas, a physician needs to be able to deal with anything that



walks through the door, and so our students need to be really well prepared with a lot of direct and hands-on experience.”

This preparation can lead medical students down unexpected paths and specialties they may not have considered. Holt says that while primary care is a critical need across all of rural Wisconsin, all specialties are needed, so the WARM program accepts students interested in pursuing any area. In recent years, WARM students at Aurora BayCare have gone on to specialize in family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, general surgery and psychiatry, among others.

“Wisconsin needs all forms of specialty care,” says Holt. “So when a student comes to us, whatever their future path is going to bring, we support that.” ■

Will Cushman is a research communicator for the UW-Madison Office of Strategic Communication.

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Photo credit: Jeff Miller, UW-Madison

Bucky's Tuition Promise Makes College Dreams Come True for Wisconsin Families

By Doug Erickson, Assistant Director of Media Relations, UW-Madison

As students arrive for the school day in Mackenzie Straub's third-grade classroom in Fish Creek, they check in on a large, interactive screen that includes a photo of their teacher and another notable: Bucky Badger.

It's a nod to Straub's fond feelings toward her alma mater, UW-Madison.

Straub earned a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from the UW-Madison School of Education in 2021. She now teaches in the same school district — and in the same school building — where she once attended third grade.

It's a full-circle moment for Straub, one of many for the second-generation Door County resident. Her daily life abounds with the kinds of deep connections forged in small towns across the state.

Community members swooped in to support Straub when, at age 13, she lost her father, the owner of a local clothing store. His death, from esophageal cancer, upended the family's financial situation. Affording college became questionable for Straub, but as she approached the end of her senior year of high school, UW-Madison unveiled an initiative intended to help students just like her.

When announced in 2018, Bucky's Tuition Promise

◀ Mackenzie Straub earned her degree in early childhood education from UW-Madison. She is a recipient of Bucky's Tuition Promise and teaches third grade at Gibraltar Elementary School in Door County.



pledged to cover four years of tuition and segregated fees for any incoming freshman from Wisconsin whose family's annual household adjusted gross income was \$56,000 or less. The figure has since been raised to \$65,000 — roughly the state's median family income, meaning half of all Wisconsin families qualify.

Transfer students who are Wisconsin residents and who meet the same income criteria receive two years of free tuition and segregated fees.

"When my husband died, our future changed dramatically," says Straub's mother, adding that they had to close the family business when he became too ill to work. "We no longer had his income. Bucky's Tuition Promise was a huge stress relief. We'll forever be grateful for it."

► A head start on life

Straub is a graduate of the first cohort of students to receive Bucky's Tuition Promise. Hundreds of recipients

have now earned degrees from UW-Madison and are starting their careers.

"It alleviated so many financial burdens," Straub says. "I still worked during the summers, but the idea of being able to focus solely on school during the academic year was huge."

The benefits of Bucky's Tuition Promise continue to reverberate in Straub's life. She was able to graduate with no student debt — now the case for 66.3% of all UW-Madison undergraduates. That gave Straub a head start on many more of life's milestones. She was able to quickly pursue an online master's degree from Concordia University, thereby boosting her teacher's salary. And recently, she and her husband, who works at a nearby cherry orchard, built a house kitty-corner from her mom's residence. For Straub, this will always be home.

Continued on page 26



Photo credit: Jeff Miller, UW-Madison



Photo credit: Jeff Miller, UW-Madison

Continued from page 25

► Bringing success back to communities

UW-Madison now has three major financial aid initiatives that benefit Wisconsin residents. Bucky's Pell Pathway, added in 2023, is an even more robust complement to Bucky's Tuition Promise. Designed to assist Badgers from low-income Wisconsin households who qualify for federal Pell Grants, it pledges to meet the full financial need without loans for incoming first-year students for four consecutive years and for transfer students for two consecutive years. In most cases, it covers tuition and fees, housing expenses, food, required course material, travel, and other miscellaneous costs.

The Wisconsin Tribal Educational Promise Program, announced by Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin in 2023, offers financial support to cover the full cost of pursuing an undergraduate degree for state residents who are enrolled members of federally recognized Wisconsin tribal nations.

Together, these three initiatives have benefitted more than 8,000 students from Wisconsin over the past seven years. They help ensure talented Wisconsin students get the chance to succeed at UW-Madison. And after graduation, many of them bring that success back to their communities.

The programs are supported by private donations and other institutional resources, not taxpayer funds.

► The cycle of opportunity

"Don't forget to turn in your homework," Straub tells her students as they arrive on a recent February morning.

Unprompted, third-grader Luca Torcivia tells a classroom visitor that Straub is the best teacher ever. "She's super nice.



[Straub] was able to graduate with no student debt — now the case for 66.3% of all UW-Madison undergraduates.

At the start of the year, she gave us candy."

Straub says it was always her goal to return to her hometown.

"I love this place so much," she says. "It's great to be able to run into my students when I'm out in the community — at the grocery store or at sports events. When you live in a community like this, you just know everybody."

Straub's first-grade teacher still teaches in the district — her classroom is just across the hall. The principal taught high school English to Straub. Straub's mother, a substitute teacher in the district, often works near her daughter.

Straub and her husband welcomed their first child in spring 2025. A future Badger? Possibly, Straub says. Bucky's Tuition Promise already has given her daughter a gift, she says.

"I'm able to start saving for her college education." ■

Doug Erickson is the assistant director of media relations for UW-Madison.

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MILWAUKEE COUNTY'S WEHR NATURE CENTER IS A Place for All Seasons, A Place for Everyone

By Luke Román, Marketing & Communications Manager, Milwaukee County Parks

Wehr Nature Center, nestled within Milwaukee County's Whitnall Park, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024 by reaffirming its commitment as "a place for all seasons, a place for everyone." That year, Wehr launched a groundbreaking accessibility and engagement initiative, which earned the county a prestigious 2025 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties in the "Parks and Recreation: Revitalize and Reimagine" category.

The Wehr Nature Center project addressed long-standing challenges, including limited visibility, outdated signage, and accessibility barriers, through a thoughtfully planned eight-



month campaign. As part of Milwaukee County Parks' broader equity and accessibility goals, the Wehr team worked closely with staff, volunteers and community partners to ensure that the center would be a welcoming destination for visitors of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

One significant area of focus was the website. For years, Wehr's online presence lacked a dedicated website with accessibility features and did not fully reflect the center's inclusive values. The redesign changed that. Wehr's new website boasts user-friendly tools, such as superzoom and dark mode for those with vision impairments and an English/Spanish bilingual translation. In an accessibility



analysis, the new site was given a 92% score, a significant jump from the previous score of 45%.

Since its launch, the website has attracted over 68,000 active users, significantly expanding Wehr's reach online and within the local community. Digital campaigns and media articles reinforced this outreach, highlighting Wehr's offerings each season and making it clear that the center is open and accessible year-round.

Complementing these digital upgrades were equally important physical enhancements. The team installed new bilingual, inclusive signage throughout the facility, creating an environment that feels more navigable, welcoming and equitable for all. Visitors arriving at Wehr are now greeted with clear, updated maps, wayfinding tools and visual cues that reflect the center's commitment to accessibility.

Continued on page 30

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The Wehr team and Milwaukee County staff joined Milwaukee County Supervisor Patti Logsdon (front row, second from left) in celebrating their 2025 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

Continued from page 29

Infrastructure upgrades, including adaptive equipment and accessible trails, ensure that everyone, from children and families to individuals with mobility aids or sensory needs, can enjoy the outdoor spaces.

The combined effect of these improvements was transformative. Wehr experienced a 60% increase in visitor numbers in one year, demonstrating that the initiatives resonated deeply and made a measurable difference in community engagement. Testimonials from visitors echoed the impact, with many noting how much easier it was to find



LEARN MORE

Visit wehrrnaturecenter.com to learn more about Wehr Nature Center and plan your visit. To learn more about Milwaukee County Parks, visit county.milwaukee.gov/EN/Parks.

and navigate the center, and how meaningful it was to see bilingual resources and adaptive amenities prioritized.

What was once primarily thought of as a seasonal destination has evolved into a thriving,

year-round public gem. The accessibility and awareness initiative has positioned Wehr Nature Center as a model for inclusive design in parks and recreation, proving that when public spaces are reimagined with equity and accessibility at the forefront, entire communities benefit. ■

Luke Román is the marketing and communications manager for Milwaukee County Parks, which oversees 154 parks and parkways, 185 miles of trails, 27 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, and more than 9,000 acres of natural areas.

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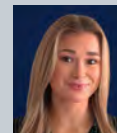
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PANDEMIC HIT AND RESET

Employment in Wisconsin Rebounds Without Reshaping

By most headline measures, Wisconsin's economy looks healthy. Employment levels have recovered from the depths of the pandemic and, in some cases, surpassed pre-pandemic levels. As of September 2025 (the latest data available), the state's unemployment rate was 3.1%, significantly lower than the national rate of 4.4%. In September, the state had more nonfarm jobs (3,057,100) than at nearly any point on record, except for two summer months last year.¹ Additionally, Wisconsin's labor force participation rate was 64.5%, compared with the national rate of 62.4%.

On the surface, these numbers suggest a strong rebound from the pandemic. Indeed, given the scale of job losses and the uneven impact across industries, it would be reasonable to expect lasting changes in employment composition, particularly in the health care and social

assistance sector² and the leisure and hospitality sector. Yet employment data in Wisconsin show little evidence of structural shifts in either industry.

► Pre-pandemic baseline

From January 2018 through February 2020, overall employment was consistently strong, averaging nearly 3 million jobs per month.³ During this 26-month period, the composition of jobs remained very consistent, with 10% of all nonfarm jobs in the accommodation, food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation industries, while 17% of jobs were in the health care and social assistance industries.

► Pandemic employment shock

From March through April 2020, employment declined sharply statewide during the initial economic shock

9.7%

of Wisconsin employment is
in leisure and hospitality

[as of Sept. 2025]

17.8%

of Wisconsin employment is in
health care and social assistance

[as of Sept. 2025]



The return to “normal,” that is, pre-pandemic employment levels, was more of a reset than a restructuring of the overall employment picture in Wisconsin.

of the pandemic. Service-sector employment fell by approximately 15% statewide over the two-month period, but this aggregate figure masks substantial variation across industries. Total employment in the leisure and hospitality industries declined by more than 50% during these two months, whereas employment in the health care and social assistance industries declined by approximately 8%.

Given that health care remained essential while restaurants and tourist destinations were severely restricted, this divergence reflected the realities of the pandemic rather than a shift in the underlying labor market or consumer demand.

► Recovery and reopening

From May 2020 through December 2022, the leisure and hospitality sector of the service economy bounced back as restrictions eased and travel and tourism resumed. By the end of 2022, the number of jobs in the leisure and hospitality industries was within 5% of their pre-pandemic levels, while the number of jobs in the health care industry was within 1 percentage point of its pre-pandemic levels.

The economic recovery immediately following the pandemic restored the job composition between these two sectors, with 9% of jobs in leisure and hospitality and 17% of jobs in health care and social assistance. These figures were virtually identical to pre-pandemic levels.

► Post-pandemic stabilization

From January 2023 through September 2025, these industries continued to stabilize, each mirroring the broader labor market and growing by 6% to 7% in total employment. As of September 2025, just under 10% of

all jobs in the state were in the leisure and hospitality industries, while just under 18% were in the health care and social assistance industries. Again, these figures are virtually identical to their pre-pandemic shares.

Taken together, the past several years indicate that these areas of Wisconsin’s labor market were deeply disrupted by the pandemic but not fundamentally altered. Before the pandemic, these sectors were growing slowly, at roughly the same pace as the overall job market. The pandemic shock in March and April 2020 led to significant service-sector job losses, concentrated in the leisure and hospitality sectors. Employment in the health care and social assistance sector remained comparatively stable. Recovery in the service sectors was uneven, largely because the job losses were uneven.

The return to “normal,” that is, pre-pandemic employment levels, was more of a reset than a restructuring

of the overall employment picture in Wisconsin. The state labor market demonstrated resilience in absorbing a historic shock and then reestablishing its prior balance. At the same time, these findings are limited to job counts. They do not

capture changes in wages, hours worked, or the distribution of employment across regions. Those are issues for further Research Room articles. ■

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

1. 3,057,100 total nonfarm jobs in the state, seasonally adjusted. Source: preliminary September estimates from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
2. The “Healthcare and Social Assistance Sector,” NAICS 62, encompasses employment providing medical care, and social services, including hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and social assistance programs such as child care and vocational rehabilitation services.
3. “Jobs” refers to total, nonfarm jobs in the state, as classified by U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



REVIEW THE REPORTS

Access reports from Forward Analytics
at forward-analytics.net.



OUTAGAMIE COUNTY

Community Emergency Response Team: “Neighbors Helping Neighbors”

Boldly printed on the side of its trailer, “Neighbors Helping Neighbors” is more than a slogan for Outagamie County’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). When fires burn, accidents escalate or disasters strain local resources, CERT steps in to ensure that first responders protecting the community have what they need to continue their work.

Born in the aftermath of 9/11, CERT programs nationwide were created to empower civilians with the training and tools to assist during emergencies. While many CERT teams focus on disaster response, traffic control, or basic medical aid, Outagamie County’s program evolved in a distinctly Wisconsin way, through partnership, innovation and a deep commitment to service.

The program’s origins trace back to the Appleton Fire Department’s identification of a critical gap in first-responder rehabilitation during extended emergency responses. Long hours on scene, particularly during structure fires, severe weather events, and large-scale incidents, take a physical and mental toll. Firefighters, law enforcement and emergency medical service providers need hydration, nourishment, and a place to rest. Recognizing that need, community leaders envisioned a solution to provide consistent, compassionate support.



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

Today, Outagamie County’s CERT is a highly trained, volunteer-powered organization delivering on-scene rehabilitation services with professionalism and care. Members deploy a fully equipped trailer with food, water, medical supplies and a

climate-controlled space where first responders can recover safely. What began as a targeted response to a local challenge has grown into one of the most respected CERT programs in the state and the nation.

“Whether the emergency lasts hours or days, CERT volunteers remain a steady presence, allowing frontline personnel to stay focused on saving lives and protecting property,” said Mark Rose, president & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, Inc. “Outagamie County’s CERT program embodies Wisconsin’s best: people helping people in times of need.”

In a world where emergencies are unpredictable and resources are often stretched, Outagamie County’s CERT stands as proof that preparedness, partnership and neighborly spirit can change outcomes. By caring for those who run toward danger, these volunteers strengthen the entire emergency response system and remind us that sometimes the most powerful help comes from right next door. □

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



PIERCE COUNTY

The People Behind the Cheese: Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery

Wisconsin's identity has long been intertwined with dairy. The milk produced here and the cheeses that have become synonymous with our state are more than agricultural products; they are a cornerstone of our economy, our culture and our state's fascinating story.

In 1910, a group of Pierce County farmers made a decision that would shape that story for generations. They joined together to form the Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery.

More than 115 years later, the scale of the operation has grown dramatically, yet its purpose remains the same. Just under 200 dairy farms now deliver roughly two million pounds of milk to the creamery every day. Each load reflects early mornings, long days and generations of knowledge passed down from farmer to farmer. These are not anonymous suppliers; they are owners, neighbors and stewards of the land whose livelihoods are directly tied to the creamery's success.

It is this connection between farm and finished product that sets Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery apart. Because it is farmer-owned, every decision, from animal care standards to cheesemaking techniques, is guided by people

who understand the work. The result is dairy that reflects both planning and pride, whether it's the creamery's award-winning cheddar curds or its aged specialty cheeses, enjoyed far beyond Wisconsin's borders.

Ellsworth Creamery's success also speaks to the resilience of the cooperative model in a rapidly changing agricultural landscape. While consolidation has reshaped much of the dairy industry, the cooperative has allowed family farms to remain viable by sharing resources, reducing risk and ensuring farmers have a voice in how their milk is used and marketed. It is a reminder that collaboration, not competition, has long been a hallmark of Wisconsin agriculture.

"The Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery is a testament to our state's dairy roots and most importantly, to those farming families and workers that continually strive to be the best," said Mark Rose, president & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, Inc. "It is stories like these that define our state, particularly those of the people whose impact continues to shape it." □

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

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 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:

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

February “In the Board Room” to Focus on Organizational Meetings

Join us for the February installment of “In the Board Room” at noon on Wednesday, Feb. 25. Andy Phillips and the Attolles team will discuss the legal requirements and typical mechanics of the county board’s organizational meeting.

The statutes require each county board to meet on the 3rd Tuesday in April to “organize and transact business,” but what does this really mean? What business must get done at this

meeting? Are there any other items of business that counties should consider for the organizational meeting agenda? Get answers to these questions and more as counties prepare for the next round of organizational meetings.

Visit bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26 to register for the 2026 webinars. There is no cost to register. Recordings of all webinars are available 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.



2026 WCA LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE FEB. 10-11

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. Visit wicounties.org to learn more and register.

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► SUBMIT YOUR IDEAS

Planning is underway for the 2026 WCA Annual Conference. The WCA wants ideas from its members on potential topics and speakers for the concurrent workshops and general sessions. To submit your ideas, visit bit.ly/2026WCA_Ideas by March 31.

► SHOWCASE YOUR COUNTY:

Apply to Co-Host

The WCA invites counties to step into the spotlight by applying to be a co-host of the 2026 WCA Annual Conference. This opportunity allows counties to showcase what makes their community unique to peers from across the state.

Co-hosts receive a complimentary exhibit booth in the conference exhibit hall on Monday, Sept. 21, to highlight signature programs, attractions, and innovations, along with recognition throughout the conference and a dedicated spotlight in the conference program and the September issue of Wisconsin Counties.

Counties interested in joining as a 2026 co-host with Sauk County should email Amy Dias at dias@wicounties.org by March 27 with a short paragraph sharing their interest and what they would like to showcase.

WCA CALL TO ACTION: Adopt a “Transportation Delivers” Resolution by April 30

In January, the WCA issued a call to action for every county to pass a resolution supporting sustainable transportation funding by April 30.

This call to action is part of a coordinated “Transportation Delivers” campaign to highlight the importance of sustainable transportation funding in the next biennial state budget. With a broad coalition of local government partners and industry stakeholders, we are sending a clear, unified message that local transportation funding cannot depend on temporary fixes, one-time transfers or uncertain surpluses.

To assist counties, the WCA created a model resolution. It does not advocate a specific revenue source. Instead, it calls on state leaders to identify and commit to a stable, long-term solution that provides predictability for counties and municipalities.

We encourage every county to pass a resolution — either the model resolution or their own version — and help strengthen this statewide call for action. Visit wicounties.org for more information or contact WCA Government Affairs Associate Collin Driscoll at driscoll@wicounties.org. □



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.

Scholarship Opportunities Available

By Andrea Treder, Program Manager, Wisconsin Counties Association

Applications are being accepted for 12 scholarships from the **WCA Group Health Trust** and the **Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation**.



■ WCA Group Health Trust

The WCA Group Health Trust is proud to announce that it is increasing the number and size of its scholarships to seven scholarships, each for \$3,000.

To be eligible to receive a scholarship from GHT, the applicant must enroll as a full-time undergraduate student at a Wisconsin university or college, either public or private, in the fall 2026 term. The applicant must be working towards a career in health care services. The applicant or the applicant's spouse, parent, grandparent or guardian must be a GHT member.

More information and scholarship updates can be found at wcaght.org □



■ Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation

The Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation is proud to again sponsor five scholarships for \$2,500 each.

To be eligible to receive a scholarship from County Mutual, the applicant must enroll as a full-time undergraduate student at an accredited two-year technical college or a four-year Wisconsin university or college, either public or private, in the fall 2026 term. The applicant or the applicant's spouse, parent, grandparent or guardian must be an employee of a County Mutual-member county.

More information and scholarship updates can be found at wisconsincountymutual.org. □

For each scholarship, in addition to the application, upload:

1. One letter of recommendation (.pdf required) from a teacher, advisor or peer.
The letter of recommendation must include the author's name, address, phone number and email address.
2. An essay (.pdf required) about your future goals and career plans. The essay should also include information on volunteer work and extracurricular activities. Limit the essay to 1,000 words.
3. The most recent transcript (.pdf required), including your grade point average.

Incomplete forms will not be considered.

Submit your scholarship application no later than May 15, 2026.

Winners will be announced July 17, 2026.

Past recipients are not eligible for consideration.

Scholarships cannot be used for attendance at any out-of-state college, regardless of reciprocity.

QUESTIONS? Contact Andrea Treder at treder@wicounties.org or 866-404-2700.



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CMS Issues New Guidance on Medicaid Community Engagement Requirements

Adapted from an article by Blaire Bryant, Legislative Director, Health / Large Urban County Caucus; and Naomi Freel, Legislative Associate, National Association of Counties

On Dec. 8, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) released a Medicaid and CHIP Services Informational Bulletin directing



states on how to implement the Medicaid community engagement requirements enacted under Section 71119 of H.R. 1, the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act.” The sweeping reconciliation package in H.R. 1 included significant changes to the Medicaid program, including the enactment of community engagement requirements, otherwise known as “work requirements.” This change carries significant implications for counties, which play a central role in financing and administering Medicaid and delivering health care services to residents.

The sub-regulatory guidance issued on Dec. 8 does not establish new policy; rather, it clarifies existing policy information that CMS considers relevant. CMS is required to issue an Interim Final Rule to implement these requirements by June 6, 2026, which will likely include additional operational details and may introduce new policy considerations for states. The recent bulletin is part of a series of CMS documents that will be released as states prepare for implementation.

► What are the community engagement (“work”) requirements

Prior to the passage of H.R. 1, states could impose Medicaid work or reporting requirements only through a Section 1115 waiver. Now, work requirements are mandatory for certain

Medicaid populations nationwide, effective no later than Dec. 31, 2026. States must condition eligibility for adults ages 19-64 in the expansion population on completing at least 80 hours per month of work, qualifying community activities, and/or schooling.

► What does the Dec. 8 guidance do?

CMS’ guidance focuses on who is subject to community engagement requirements, who is excluded, and what states must do to implement the policy.

The guidance clarifies that community engagement requirements apply to adults aged 19-64 enrolled in Medicaid who reside in a state that covers the Medicaid expansion adult group or in a state that covers a similar adult population through an 1115 demonstration that



Now, work requirements are mandatory for certain Medicaid populations nationwide, effective no later than Dec. 31, 2026.

provides minimum essential coverage. CMS frames this policy as aligning Medicaid with long-standing work and engagement requirements used in other public benefit programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Applicable individuals must demonstrate that they work or participate in community service, a work program, or education/career or technical education (or a combination of these) for at least 80 hours per month or meet the income alternative (≥ 80 hours \times federal minimum wage).

Specific populations are excluded from the community engagement requirements, including former foster youth, American Indians, veterans with a total disability rating, incarcerated individuals, and others.

States may offer exceptions for specific groups, including individuals under age 19, Medicare beneficiaries, recently released individuals (within three months of release), and individuals experiencing specific, short-term hardships.

The Dec. 8 guidance outlines that states must: conduct required outreach explaining who is subject, how to comply, and the consequences of non-compliance; use available reliable data first before asking beneficiaries

for documentation (e.g., payroll, education enrollment, encounter data); issue a non-compliance notice and provide a 30-day period to correct or show exemption; and continue Medicaid coverage for beneficiaries during the 30-day response period.

The guidance also provides some flexibility for states, allowing them to: choose whether applicants must show one, two, or three months of engagement prior to application; define “short-term hardship” exceptions (within federal parameters); verify compliance more frequently than renewal cycles; allow beneficiaries flexibility in which months they meet the requirement between renewals; and implement earlier than 2027 through a state plan amendment or 1115 demonstration.

Finally, the guidance outlines that states are not permitted to: waive community engagement requirements through 1115 waiver authority; choose specific months for beneficiaries to demonstrate engagement; or deny or terminate eligibility without giving 30 days to resolve. In addition, states cannot treat failure to meet community engagement requirements as a reason to reduce enhanced

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HUD Temporarily Withdraws Continuum of Care NOFO Amid Program Uncertainty

As reported in the January 2026 Wisconsin Counties, a notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) issued Nov. 14 would have capped permanent supportive housing expenditures within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Continuum of Care program at 30% — marking a substantial change to community efforts to address homelessness.

On Dec. 8, HUD withdrew the new NOFO in light of legal



challenges. Subsequent court action directed HUD to process program renewals under the 2024-25 NOFO while litigation is pending.

The Wisconsin Balance of State Continuum of Care continues to advocate for Congress to prevent further disruptions in service by creating a two-year NOFO cycle, prioritize permanent housing, and indicate preference for a renewal system that ensures stability within the system. □

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federal Medicaid funding or shift individuals to the federal Health Insurance Marketplace.

► Funding and timeline

CMS indicates that federal funds are available to develop systems, support system upgrades and fund operational changes needed for implementation. In total, CMS will award \$200 million across all states and Washington, D.C. Half of these funds (\$100 million) will be divided equally between the 51 eligible recipients; the other half (\$100 million) will be allocated based on the proportion of individuals subject to the work requirement in each state as of Mar. 31, 2025.

States must adopt these requirements by Jan. 1, 2027, though they may implement them earlier. States may also apply for a temporary good-faith effort exemption, which would delay implementation until no later than Dec. 31, 2028.

► County impact

For counties that administer or support Medicaid eligibility and enrollment, CMS' guidance signals increased administrative responsibilities and costs tied to new verification, documentation and reporting requirements associated with community engagement policies.

Counties will likely need to coordinate more closely with state agencies and align workflows across Medicaid, SNAP, TANF and workforce systems, while also helping residents understand and document exemptions or temporary hardships. In addition, if eligible individuals are unable to meet community engagement requirements and lose coverage, counties may face higher uncompensated care costs through county hospitals, health systems and safety-net providers, increasing financial pressure on local health care infrastructure as states move toward the implementation deadline of Jan. 1, 2027. □



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RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

THINK DIFFERENTLY

Innovation Grants Encourage Rethinking Local Government Services

By Andy Phillips and Thomas Cameron, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

In 1997, Apple launched a new slogan: “Think Different.” It worked. In the almost 30 years since, Apple has transformed from a company on the brink of bankruptcy to one of the largest and most influential companies in the world.

For years, local governments have faced two related challenges: the reality of increased costs of goods and services, particularly since 2020; and very limited ways to increase revenue to pay for the increased costs of goods and services.

2023 Wisconsin Act 12 began to address the revenue-side challenge facing local governments by: (1) repealing the personal property tax and creating a replacement payment structure for local governments as part of the broader state aid system; (2) creating the supplemental shared revenue program; (3) creating special sales and use tax authority for Milwaukee County and the city of Milwaukee; and (4) creating the Innovation Grant Program.¹

This article provides an overview of the Innovation Grant Program that reflects formal and informal guidance from the Wisconsin Department of Revenue. It is an update to the related September 2025 Legal Issues column.

Additional information regarding Act 12 generally and the grant program specifically, including a recording of a December 2025 webinar with the Department of Revenue, can be found at wicounties.org under “Past Event Materials.”

► An introduction to the Innovation Grant Program

The Innovation Grant Program creates a direct financial

incentive for counties and other local governments to think differently about how to provide services. The state has made \$300 million available for the program.

Innovation Grant applications must be submitted by a county or municipal clerk to the Department of Revenue by March 31, 2026.² Grants are to be used to implement “innovation plans” that completely transfer certain specified services from a county or municipality to another county or municipality or a nonprofit organization or private entity.³ The plan must include an “agreement or contract” that meets certain specified criteria.⁴

There are 14 categories of eligible services or duties. The Department of Revenue must give priority to public safety (including law enforcement but not including jails), fire protection, and emergency services.⁵ However, plans can also include, 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; and parks and recreation.⁶

► Requirements of the agreement or contract

To receive an Innovation Grant, there must be an “agreement or contract” that meets certain specified requirements. First, the contract must have been entered into on or after Nov. 13, 2024, and specify the service or duty to be transferred. This must be a service or duty the county or municipality provided in the year immediately

preceding the year that the service or duty is transferred under the contract.⁷ The service or duty must be transferred for at least three years.

The contract must include the county or municipality's cost of performing the service or duty in the year immediately preceding the transfer (the "prior cost of performance"). Additionally, if the contract transfers the service or duty to a county or municipality (as opposed to a nonprofit organization or private entity), the contract must include the cost of performing the transferred service or duty in the first year after the transfer. The total cost of performing the service includes the associated wages, fringe benefits, training, and equipment.⁸

Special calculations apply to determine the cost of performance for services involving volunteer firefighters or emergency medical practitioners.⁹ The Department of Revenue has provided guidance on its website regarding these calculations.

If the contract transfers public safety, fire protection, or emergency services, the contract must include a stipulation that the service or duty being transferred will maintain the appropriate level of services.

Finally, the contract must specify the amount that the county or municipality will pay to the entity to which the service or duty is transferred and the allocation of grant money between the parties to the contract for the entire term of the contract.

► **Selection criteria**

The Department of Revenue will allocate points in seven categories when evaluating applications:

- Service categories (with priority given to public safety, fire protection, or emergency services)
- Service transfer between local governments
- Improved service and/or accessibility
- Long-term duration of service transfer
- Process improvements that enhance the service method or delivery
- Increased collaboration with multiple local government participants
- Use of Innovation Planning Grant funds

► **How much is an Innovation Grant?**

The amount of an Innovation Grant depends on four factors: the prior cost of performance; when the recipient receives their first grant payment; the term of the contract transferring the service or duty; and whether there are any issues or complications with the grant during the term of the grant.

The starting point is that an Innovation Grant payment is 25% of the prior cost of performance. This payment will be allocated as provided in the contract. The state will not make a direct distribution of grant funds to a nonprofit or private entity.

A grant recipient can receive up to five payments. The first will be paid during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2026. The final will be paid during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2030. Therefore, if a county's Innovation Grant is approved as part of the initial application cycle, they would be eligible for up to five payments (i.e., up to 125% of the prior cost of performance).

The number of grant payments corresponds to the length of the contract transferring the service or duty. In other words, a contract transferring a specified service or duty for three years would result in three grant payments.

There are certain events that can cause a grant payment to be less than expected. First, no county or municipality may receive more than \$10 million per year. Second, no grant payment will be made if the cost of performing the service or duty in the previous year exceeds 115% of the prior cost of performance.

As an example:

In December 2025, County A and County B entered into a contract pursuant to which County A will transfer certain IT services to County B for five years, beginning Jan. 1, 2026. The cost for County A to perform the IT services in 2025 was \$10,000. Pursuant to the contract, County A will pay County B \$8,000, which is County B's actual costs to perform the IT services. The contract states that County A will receive the entire Innovation Grant.

Assuming County A and County B apply for an Innovation Grant prior to the March 31, 2026 deadline and are awarded a grant, County A would expect five payments of \$2,500 each

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(25% of the prior cost of performance). County A will receive the grant payments as long as County B's actual costs to perform the services are less than \$11,500 (115% of the prior cost of performance) and County A would not receive more than \$10 million in Innovation Grants in a given year. If, however, in 2028, County B's costs to perform the services are more than \$11,500, County A would not receive a grant payment in 2029. However, County A could still receive a grant payment in 2030 as long as County B's costs to perform the services in 2029 are less than \$11,500.

► Reporting and compliance

The Innovation Grant Program has three main reporting and compliance items. First, each participating county and municipality is instructed to maintain "detailed records" for at least four years after receiving its first grant payment. Second, grant recipients must certify to the Department of Revenue every year following the initial grant payment that the cost of performing the services is less than 115% of the prior cost of performance. Third, each year the Department of Revenue is statutorily required to audit at least 10% of the grants for which at least 24 months have passed since the first distribution.

► Practical considerations

As counties consider whether pursuing an Innovation Grant is in their best interest, there are numerous practical considerations.

Counties should consider how transferring services or duties (or how agreeing to perform services or duties previously performed by a different county or municipality) will work. This will require counties to think differently. The contracts governing the transfer of services or duties should be carefully drafted, with clear expectations about the level of services expected. While the Innovation Grant Program requires services or duties to be completely transferred to another entity, the Department of Revenue appears receptive to services or duties being jointly provided by two entities in limited circumstances.¹⁰

Counties should also consider how inflation could impact

future grant payments. As originally drafted, the Innovation Grant Program required that savings result from the transfer of services. In 2025, that requirement was removed and replaced with the requirement that the cost of performing the service or duty not exceed 115% of the prior cost of performance. This limit is not indexed for inflation. Thus, in later years of the contract, inflationary pressures may make it difficult to stay below 115% of the prior cost of the performance, which means a county could miss one or more Innovation Grant payments simply due to inflation.

Additionally, counties should consider how the Innovation Grant funds will be used. The use of the funds is unrestricted; however, the Department of Revenue recommends avoiding the use of funds in a way that would result in a reduction of the county's levy limit.

► Conclusion

Counties are encouraged to work closely with their corporation counsel to ensure the required documentation satisfies the statutory and regulatory requirements and appropriately protects the county's interests.

If you have any questions surrounding 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. The Innovation Grant Program was created by Act 12. Several beneficial changes were made in 2025 Wisconsin Act 15 (see the September 2025 Legal Issues column).
2. Applications are filed online through the MyDORGov electronic filing system for local governments. The Department of Revenue has indicated that if funds remain after the initial grants are awarded, it expects to have a second application cycle. However, there is no guarantee that there will be a second application cycle.
3. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1).
4. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1)(a).
5. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1)(e).
6. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(1)(b)1.
7. In other words, if a county provided certain services in 2025, those services would be eligible for an Innovation Grant in 2026. If a county did not provide certain services in 2025, those services are not eligible for an Innovation Grant in 2026. The Department of Revenue has indicated that providing the service or duty through a contractor is sufficient.
8. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(b)(2).
9. Wis. Stat. § 79.038(b)(3).
10. Specifically, the Department of Revenue's FAQs indicate that a joint merged service is allowable. The department suggests two possible structures: (1) "to have a joint merger that creates a new entity or districts;" or (2) "a joint merger with an existing entity or district."



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