

WISCONSIN Counties

NOVEMBER 2026

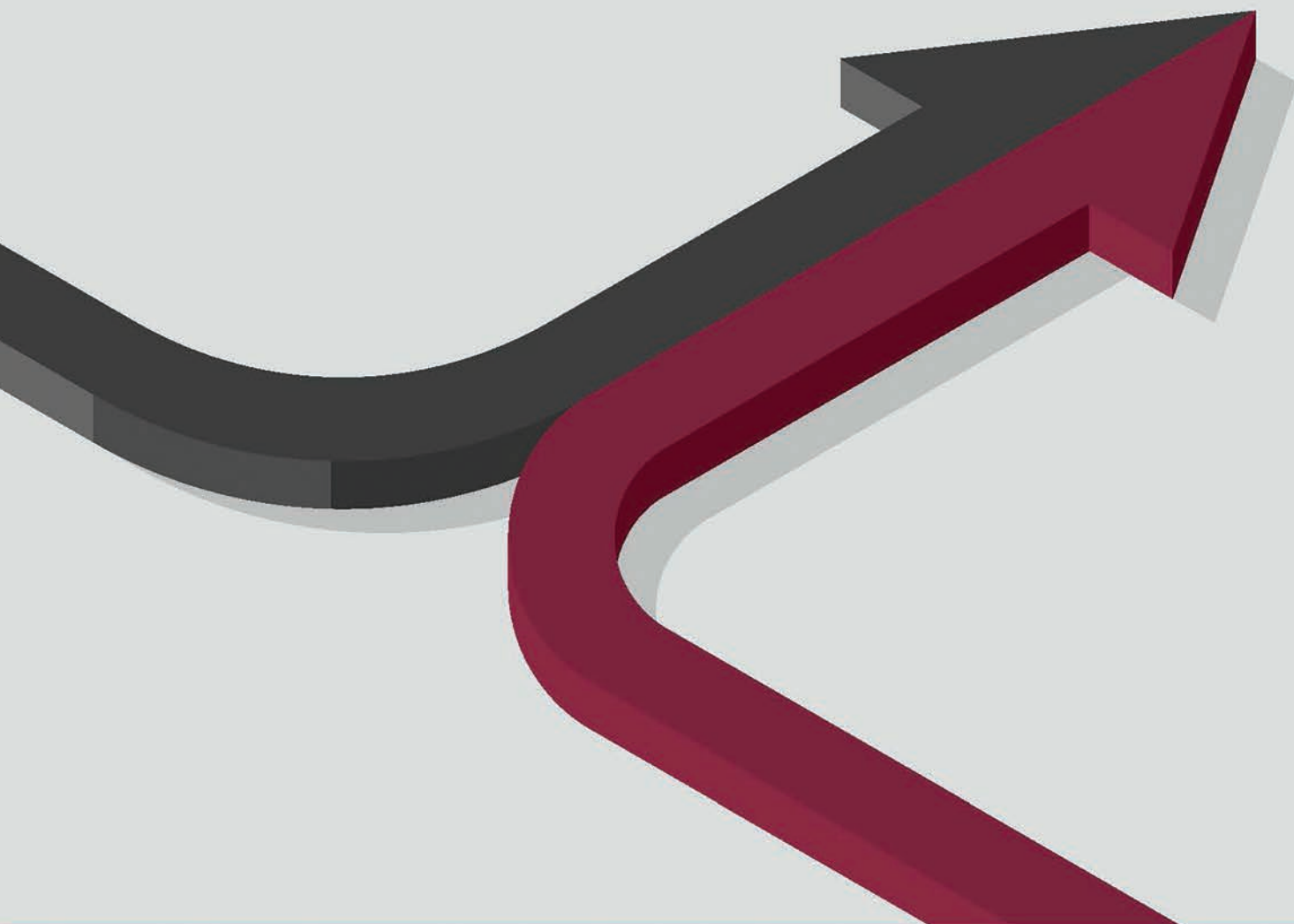
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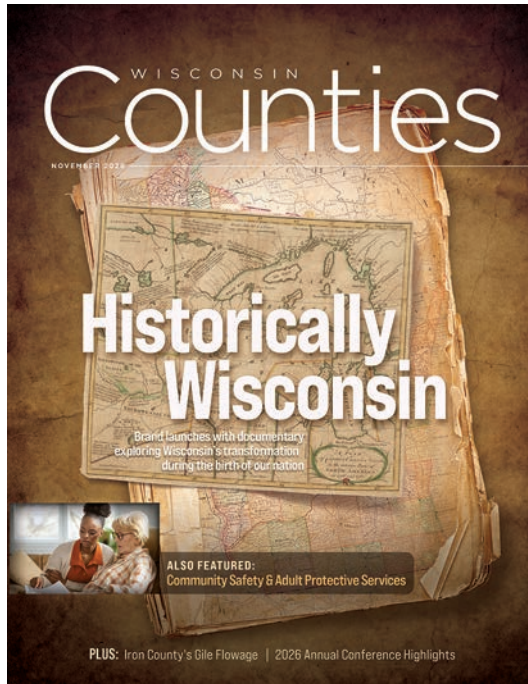
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WISCONSIN Counties

NOVEMBER 2026 | Volume 90, Number 11



Cover image (top map): "Plan of Captain Carvers Travel in the Interior Parts of North American in 1766 and 1767," Wisconsin Historical Society George S. Parker II map collection

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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

The Important Work Ahead

There is something energizing about bringing county officials from across Wisconsin together in one place. In September, close to 1,000 of you joined us for our WCA Annual Conference in Sauk County. We saw firsthand that while you may serve different communities, face different local challenges and have different perspectives, you share many of the same responsibilities and opportunities. I hope you returned home with timely information, valuable connections and new ideas to address the challenges facing your county.

As this issue of Wisconsin Counties arrives in your mailbox, the 2026 general elections are close at hand. Regardless of the outcome, at the state level at least, we know for certain that the Legislature and the East Wing will have new leadership.

That makes the months ahead particularly important for county government. Newly elected policymakers will be learning their responsibilities, legislative leaders will be setting priorities, and state agencies will be developing their budgets for the next biennium.

It is vital that county officials reach out to have a seat at the table during this time.

Whether it is policies related to transportation, public safety, behavioral health, human services, courts, land use, elections, or any of the many other responsibilities counties carry, the decisions made in Madison affect how counties deliver services. Our state policymakers need to understand not only what counties do, but also what it takes to do that work effectively.

The WCA Board of Directors will soon be approving the association's legislative agenda for the next biennium. That agenda will help guide our advocacy efforts, but the document

itself is only part of the equation.

The most effective advocacy happens when we work together; when county officials share their experiences, explain what they are seeing in their communities, and build relationships with their legislators. Your voice matters because you see the impact of state policy firsthand.

In addition to your local efforts, we encourage you to save the dates for two important opportunities to participate at the state level.

On Feb. 10, the WCA will be hosting a Counties in the Capitol legislative advocacy event in Madison to give county officials an opportunity to be briefed on the state budget by the WCA Government Affairs team and key state officials and meet with their legislators. The 2027 WCA Legislative Conference will be held March 9–10, also in Madison. The conference will offer an opportunity to learn more about the issues facing counties, receive an update on the state budget and legislative process, connect with fellow county officials, and engage with state lawmakers at a critical point in budget negotiations.

We are most effective when we work together. As always, we need your involvement. Talk with your legislators. Participate in WCA advocacy efforts. Share what is happening in your county. The more county officials participate, the better we can show the breadth of county responsibilities and the importance of providing the tools and resources needed to meet those responsibilities.

Important work lies ahead, and together we can ensure the experiences, expertise and voice of Wisconsin counties are part of the conversation. Thank you as always for your work in making our state's future stronger. ■

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

2026 WCA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

THANK YOU, SPONSORS!

The generous contributions of these organizations helped make the 2026 WCA Annual Conference a success.

See pages 32-36 for highlights of the event.

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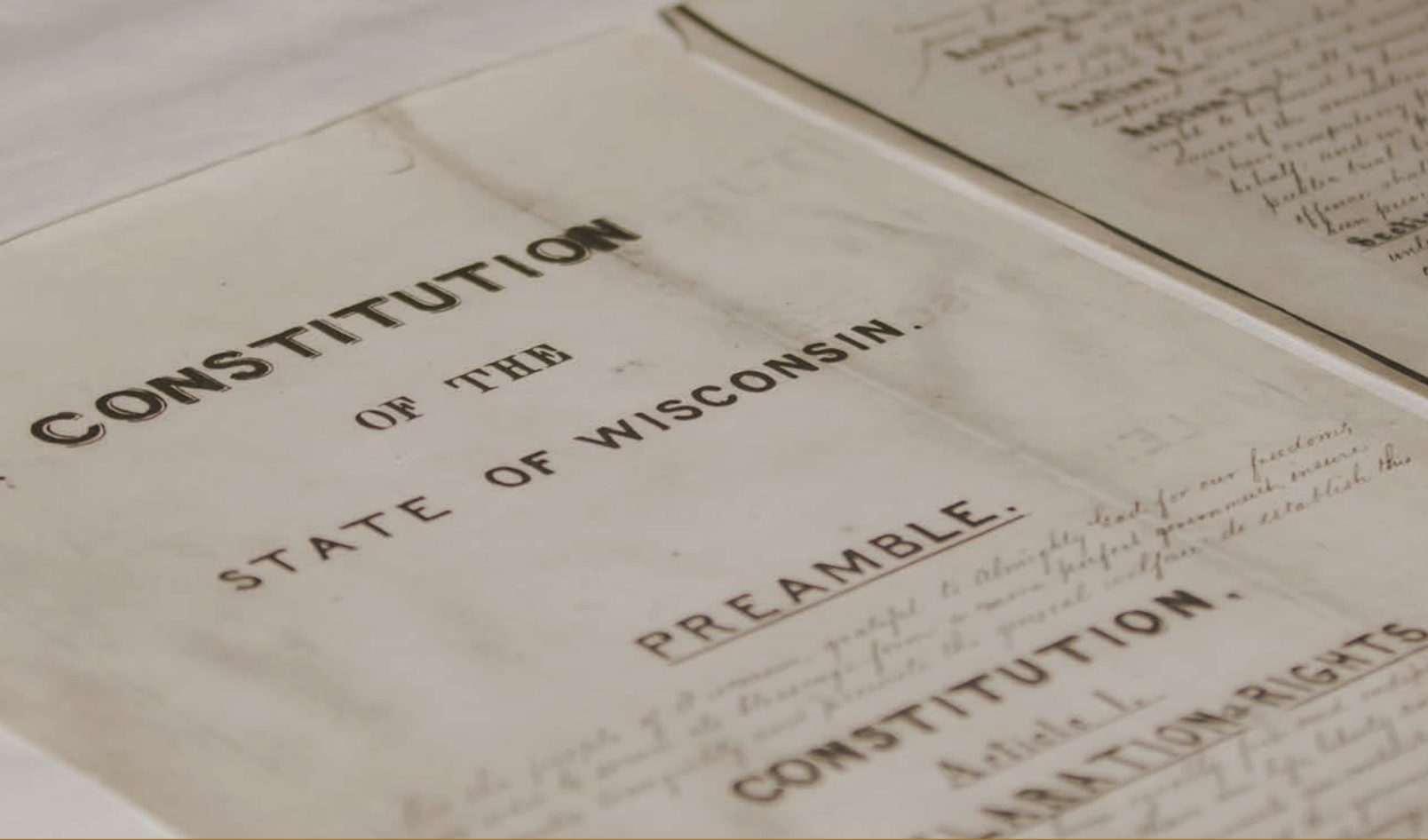


Photo credit: Historically Wisconsin

Historically Wisconsin

BRAND LAUNCHES WITH DOCUMENTARY EXPLORING WISCONSIN'S TRANSFORMATION DURING THE BIRTH OF OUR NATION

By Hailey Marien, Copy and Communications Strategist, Discover Mediaworks

A milestone year for America, and a milestone moment for Wisconsin history. This year marks not only the 250th anniversary of America but also the launch of Historically Wisconsin — the newest series under the Discover Wisconsin umbrella.

Formed through a partnership between Discover Mediaworks and the Wisconsin Historical Society, with support from the University of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Counties Association, Historically Wisconsin joins a family of brands, including Discover Wisconsin and Uniquely Wisconsin.

“Our company has won Addy, Telly and Emmy awards



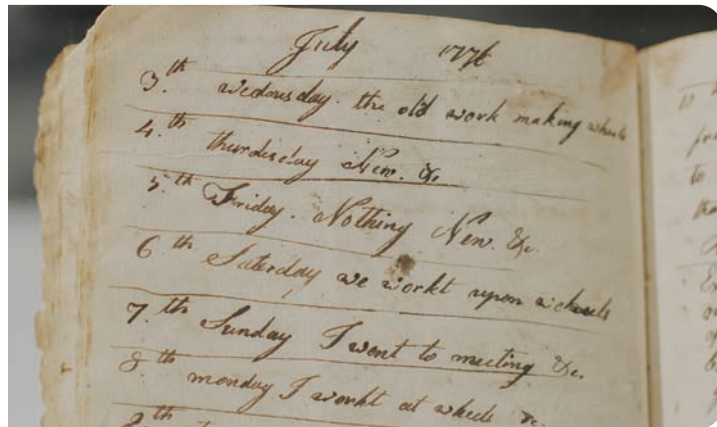
for our storytelling; however, our storytelling is only as good as the stories themselves,” said Mark C. Rose, CEO of Discover Mediaworks. “This partnership with the Wisconsin Historical Society

will have an impact for generations to come.”

The new media brand will extend the Wisconsin Historical Society’s storytelling ability, bringing Wisconsin’s rich and vast history to viewers across the state and beyond. Drawing from countless stories preserved in the Historical Society’s archives, Historically Wisconsin will explore the captivating stories that shaped Wisconsin — and Wisconsin’s role in the greater American story.



For thousands of years, Indigenous tribes used dugout canoes carved from single tree trunks as a vital means of transportation. Recently discovered canoes in Madison's Lake Mendota are estimated to be 700 to 5,200 years old.



While the entries may be sparse, handwritten journals from the 18th century provide invaluable insight into people's lives as our nation was founded.

► A debut documentary for America's 250th

As America celebrates 250 years, Historically Wisconsin's debut documentary explores how the land that would become Wisconsin became part of the United States.

Through powerful artifacts, historic places, and voices from across the region, this hour-long documentary follows the transformation of the western Great Lakes from Indigenous homelands only to a contested borderland shaped by empires, revolution, treaties, migration and statehood.

Rather than retelling the familiar story of 1776, the documentary reveals how the founding of the United States forever changed the people and places of Wisconsin and how those events continue to shape the state today.

It brings together the perspectives of some of the state's leading history experts, historic locations, and

artifacts preserved in the Wisconsin Historical Society's collections to emphasize that history is not a single story; it is a collection of voices, experiences, struggles and achievements woven together over generations.

"I'm excited for people to see this documentary, but I'm even more excited about the future of Historically Wisconsin," said Regan Ernst, director of production. "So many talented and passionate people have come together with one shared purpose: to highlight and celebrate the rich history of our state."

► When and where to watch

Watch your local television channels for announcements of when a special 30-minute cut of the documentary will premiere.

For the full one-hour documentary, tune in to Discover Wisconsin's YouTube channel and social platforms for the digital premiere coming soon.

► The beginning of many more stories

Building on the foundation of Discover Wisconsin's first-ever documentary, "The 50-Year Mystery of the Edmund Fitzgerald," released in 2025, Historically Wisconsin's debut documentary marks the start of many more stories to come.

Through the partnership between Discover Mediaworks and the Wisconsin Historical Society, Historically Wisconsin will bring a vast collection of stories to life for viewers throughout Wisconsin and beyond.



An old five-dollar banknote provides a glimpse into the state's financial history. It was issued by the Miner's Bank in Dubuque, which was chartered by the Wisconsin Territorial Legislature in 1836 as the first bank in the future state of Iowa.

Continued on page 8



The history of Indigenous beadwork in Wisconsin is directly tied to the arrival of European traders in the 17th century. Today, the art continues to hold deep cultural and historical significance to many tribes, including the Menominee Tribe, which is renowned for its plant-inspired and floral beadwork.

Continued from page 7

“The Wisconsin Historical Society is proud to steward one of the most significant collections of state and American history anywhere in the country, and our team is always looking for new ways to share the stories of the people and places behind the collections,” said Wes Mosman Block, chief operating officer of the Wisconsin Historical Society. “Historically Wisconsin helps us bring more of those stories

out of the archives and into living rooms, classrooms, and our phones. We believe history has the power to change lives, and everyone deserves the chance to experience it.”

This collaborative partnership is one of the many ways the Wisconsin Historical Society is expanding access to Wisconsin’s past as it prepares to open the new Wisconsin History Center in early 2028. Located on Madison’s Capitol Square, the History Center will invite visitors to connect with history firsthand through immersive exhibitions, interactive experiences, and public programs and events.

► Join the journey

Historically Wisconsin would not be possible without the collaboration and continued support of its partners, funders and communities across the state. As this brand-new series launches, premiering across both digital platforms and broadcast television, it invites viewers to see Wisconsin through a new lens.

Join the journey for the latest updates, premiere details and more at DiscoverWisconsin.com and on Discover Wisconsin’s official social channels. This is only the beginning of a new way to experience Wisconsin’s treasured history. ■

Hailey Marien is a copy and communications strategist at Discover Mediaworks, which provides a full range of marketing services from strategy to production and distribution. Discover Mediaworks is the parent company of Discover Wisconsin, which produces the Uniquely Wisconsin content.

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*By Matt Strittmater, Sheboygan County Health and Human Services Director,
and President, Wisconsin County Human Service Association*

Community safety is more than responding after something goes wrong. It also involves preventing harm, maintaining stability and intervening early enough



Matt Strittmater



- 20%–30%
- 31%–39%
- 40%–54%

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to ensure vulnerable residents are safely supported in their communities.

► Adult protective services (APS)

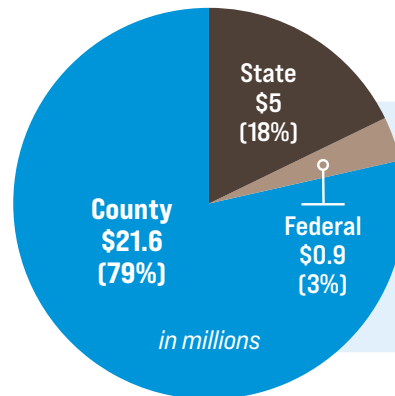
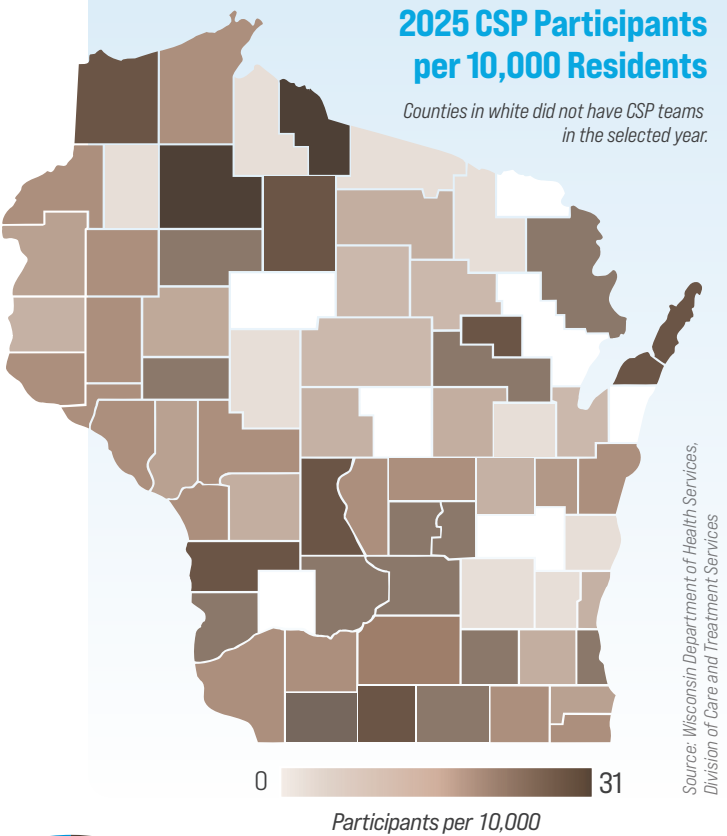
APS is, at its core, a community safety function — protecting vulnerable adults from abuse, neglect, self-neglect and financial exploitation while helping them safely remain in their homes and communities whenever possible. APS professionals are often called when an individual's health, safety, finances or ability to remain independent in the community is at risk. They work alongside law enforcement, healthcare providers, financial institutions and other community partners to prevent further harm.

The following articles in this feature series will explore the work of APS staff in more depth.

In 2026, counties will receive \$5.9 million in state funding for APS services. The state APS allocation to individual counties is generally small, with 45 counties receiving less than \$50,000 annually, an amount insufficient to support a full-time staff position. Counties also receive about \$2 million for elder abuse direct support services, but they cannot use those funds for APS investigations.

According to data reported by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services for the federal Social Services Block Grant, counties spent an estimated \$27.5 million on APS in fiscal year 2022. Based on that estimate, counties currently provide 79% of APS funding, using Community Aids or county levy funds.

Unlike other community safety programs, few federal grants support APS services. Notably, in 2023, the APS



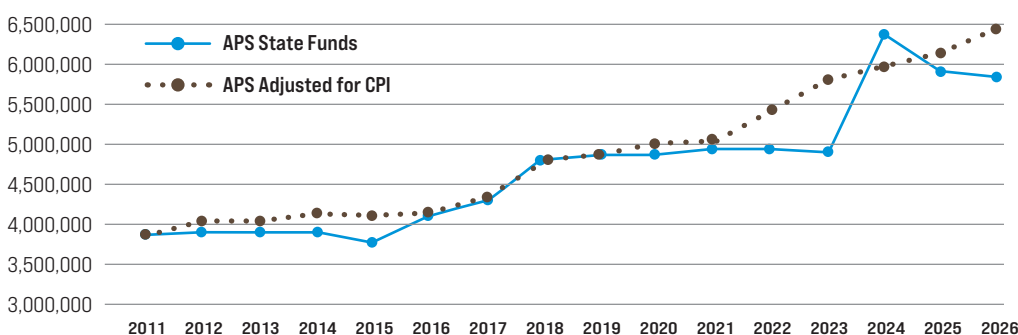
Adult Protective Services Spending

In the 2022 fiscal year, counties spent an estimated \$27.5 million on APS using local, state and federal funding.

program moved to a population-based funding formula to address Wisconsin's growing elderly population. The Legislature also invested an

additional \$1 million in the program in 2023. However, it still fails to keep pace with inflation and the growing service population, forcing ongoing reliance on the county levy.

Adult Protective Services Actual State Funding vs. Adjusted for Inflation



► Community Support Programs (CSP)

CSP offers intensive community-based care for adults whose mental illness and functional limitations might otherwise require institutional care. In this way, CSP also serves as a community safety program. It provides intensive treatment and support where people live, helping individuals with serious mental illness remain stable, connected and safely supported in their communities, rather than relying on institutional or crisis-based care.

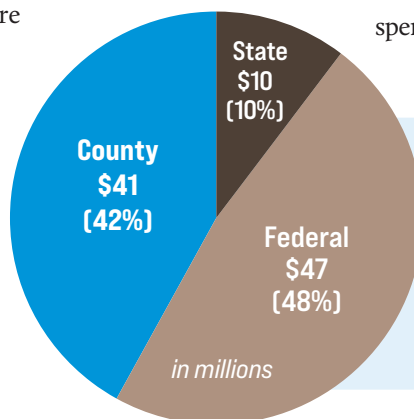
Persons receiving CSP services have more severe and persistent mental illness and require support services for longer periods. According to DHS information for calendar year 2022, counties spent approximately \$50 million on CSP services, which are reimbursable under Medicaid at 60%. Sixty-five certified counties received about \$30 million in federal reimbursement. Those

counties are responsible for the approximately 40% non-federal share of the reimbursement, or \$20 million in calendar year 2022. The state does not contribute.

► Crisis intervention services

Every county must have an emergency mental health services program to serve people in crisis. At a minimum, emergency programs must offer 24-hour crisis telephone service and 24-hour in-person response on an on-call basis. According to calendar year 2022 expenditure data, counties spent about \$98 million on crisis intervention

Continued on page 14



Crisis Intervention Services Spending

*In the 2022 calendar year, counties spent an estimated **\$98 million** on crisis intervention using local, state and federal funding.*

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Continued from page 13

services, of which \$78 million was Medicaid-reimbursable (\$47 million paid by the federal government, \$10 million by the state, and \$21 million by counties). The remaining \$20 million comes from the county levy, with only a small amount paid by private insurance.

► **Community safety in action: Sheboygan County**

In Sheboygan County, the Health and Human Services Department administers APS, CSP and the crisis intervention services. In recent years, the department expanded innovative, community-based services to reduce reliance on higher-cost systems.

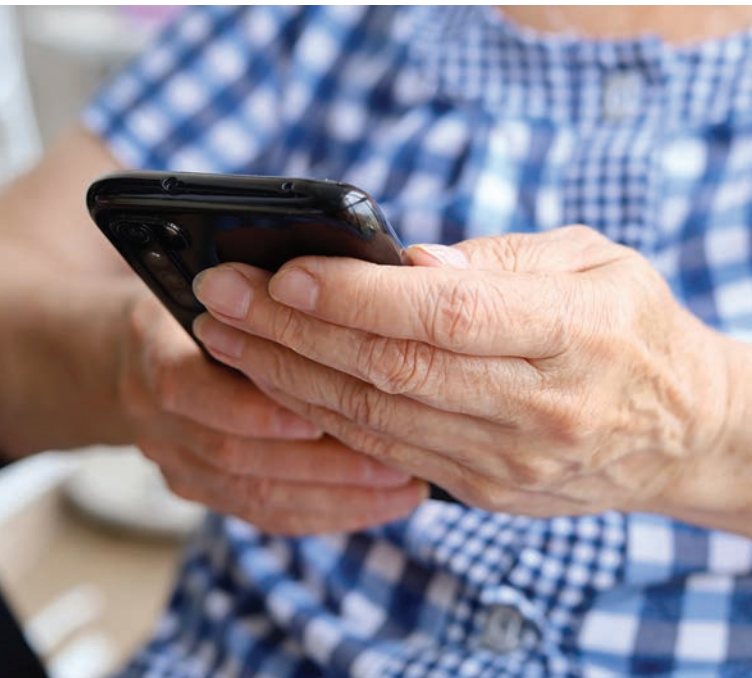
The Sheboygan Mobile Crisis Co-Responder Program pairs clinicians with law enforcement for trauma-informed response. Thus far, the program has shifted crisis intervention toward stabilization, resulting in a 55% reduction in Chapter 51 emergency detentions. However, it utilizes American Rescue Plan Act funds, and with those ending this year, the county will reduce the program by 50% due to funding constraints.

ARPA funding also supported an expansion of Sheboygan

County Connect, an enhanced rural transportation program operated by the local Aging and Disability Resource Center. The county added nearly 650 trips to the volunteer-based program, which was already providing more than 1,000 rides for veterans and elderly or disabled residents to access medical appointments and essential services. The program maintains high service standards and has received strong community feedback for supporting health and independence.

Together, APS, CSP and crisis intervention services are essential to Wisconsin's community safety infrastructure — protecting vulnerable adults from harm, helping people with serious mental illness remain stable in their communities and responding quickly to behavioral health crises. Without further change to our current financial model for APS, CSP and crisis services, more programs like the Sheboygan Mobile Crisis Co-Responder Program will be cut, pushing residents into more expensive service settings. ■

Matt Strittmater is director of the Sheboygan County Health and Human Services and president of the Wisconsin County Human Service Association, which serves as the voice of county human service professionals before state agencies, the Legislature, and other stakeholders.



NO WRONG DOOR, NO JUDGMENT

According to a 2023 AARP report, Wisconsin has the best network of community resources to help adults and their caregivers find public and private long-term services and supports. The network's approach is called “no wrong door.” The concept is that finding the right solutions can be daunting, often clouded by crisis and illness. Therefore, an individual in need may contact any agency in the network to access services and supports and will be appropriately connected to those services. This concept applies to long-term services and supports, mental health services, substance use supports, and other services and supports available to adults with disabilities, older adults, and their family members and caregivers. □



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Aging Well

Helping At-Risk Adults Live Their Best Life

By Nichol Wienkes, Behavioral Health Manager, Green Lake County

The adage that a society is best measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members has been expressed throughout history. It may evoke images of compassion and caregiving or a dissonance gap as we consider the challenges our aging population faces, from increasingly difficult-to-detect scams to the deeply personal loss associated with dementia.

As Wisconsin's aging population steadily increases, adult protective services (APS) staff across Wisconsin's counties and tribes play a crucial role in helping ensure that everyone has the opportunity to age well.

► Aging well and adult protective services

It sounds like a beautiful idea — “aging well.” But what does it mean, and how does it relate to APS?

Simply put, aging well means maintaining quality of life as much as possible while navigating the changes of aging, including physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being. There are as many ways to age well as there are people aging. One person's idea of aging well may include protein shakes and jogging. Another's may be attending bingo at their assisted living home.

Critically, aging well always includes dignity, respect and

*... aging well always includes dignity, respect and
as much autonomy as safely possible —
and that's where APS (adult protective services) comes in.*

as much autonomy as safely possible — and that's where APS comes in.

Wisconsin APS agencies are responsible for responding to concerns about abuse, neglect, financial exploitation and self-neglect among adults with disabilities and older adults (adults at risk). In general, anyone can refer a concern to APS. The most frequent referrers are healthcare providers, family, friends, law enforcement and neighbors. APS workers assess each situation and then offer supportive resources.

Wisconsin's Annual Report on Abuse, Neglect, and Financial Exploitation of Adults at Risk: 2023 (the most recently published) breaks reports into eight categories: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; treatment without consent; unreasonable confinement or restraint; neglect; self-neglect; and financial exploitation.¹ According to the annual report, the most reported concerns were related to self-neglect, followed by financial exploitation.

► Dignity of risk

APS workers maintain broad knowledge of community resources so they can readily connect individuals to appropriate supports. Often, this support is helpful on its own. The person may simply not have known what to do, but once they learn, they voluntarily take the steps needed to improve their circumstances.

When someone does not want to or is unable to follow the recommendations, the assessment becomes more complex. Between “living your best life” and “dangerous situation” lies a spectrum of choices. If you have ever set out to improve your sleep habits, only to find yourself up at 1 a.m. watching “just one more episode,” you can relate. No one is arguing that this is “best” or “healthy.” But are there adverse consequences? Absolutely! It's never fun to start the day exhausted. However, it's your choice. Similarly, if a situation does not rise to the level of being deemed dangerous by an APS worker, the individual retains autonomy to make that decision.

In a smaller portion of cases (fewer than 20%, according to the state's 2023 annual report), Wisconsin APS workers used “substitute decision-making” to best assist a person.

Substitute decision-making means someone is legally appointed to act on another person's behalf. When someone needs decision-making help and can express who they want to assist them and how, less restrictive options such as a supported decision-maker or a representative payee may be used. If someone does not need assistance now but wants to plan for when they do, they can establish a power of attorney.

A referral for legal guardianship of the person or estate may be made when a physician determines that the person is so incapacitated that they cannot meet essential requirements for their health or safety, provide for their basic financial needs, or avoid financial exploitation. In this situation, and only in this situation, the court legally limits the individual's decision-making rights and transfers them to the legal guardian, who may make decisions even if the individual disagrees.

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► Looking forward

As Wisconsin's aging population grows exponentially, APS workers face new and persistent challenges.

Rural areas of the state are geographically isolated from, or entirely lack, the specialized care facilities needed in emergencies. Even in more urban areas where such resources exist, they are frequently at capacity. While restrictive measures such as guardianship or emergency protective placement (when an adult is involuntarily placed in a residential care facility) are last-resort options to ensure safety, these situations do occur. If specialized facilities equipped to care for individuals with dementia or other high-acuity conditions are unavailable, individuals

spend more time in emergency departments, hospitals or other settings not appropriate for their needs.

Shortages of less restrictive levels of care can also have an impact: personal care, in-home healthcare, and respite are critical preventive services that can de-escalate situations before they become emergencies. These services exist throughout the state, but as the aging population grows, demand exceeds availability. These services can be even more difficult to locate when an individual has multiple co-occurring needs, such as mental health or substance use diagnoses. Typically, service providers are trained and equipped to address one need but not the other.

APS workers often serve as a bridge among many parties

WISCONSIN'S FINANCIAL ABUSE SPECIALIST TEAMS A Statewide Model for Protecting Older Adults

"FAST creates trust and respect for each member's expertise that benefits the vulnerable adults with whom we work."

— Amy Scarr, Dane County APS Senior Victim Advocate and FAST Coordinator

Financial exploitation rarely announces itself. It hides in bank statements, in "helping out," and in family members who insist they have only Mom or Dad's best interests at heart. Untangling it takes more than any single agency can do alone, which is exactly why financial abuse specialist teams (FASTs) exist.

A FAST is a multidisciplinary team, including adult protective services, law enforcement, financial institutions, prosecutors, aging and disability services, and others, that meets regularly to review cases, share expertise, and coordinate a faster, more comprehensive response to the financial exploitation of older and vulnerable adults. No single discipline sees the whole picture; together, they can spot patterns that would otherwise slip through the cracks.

Wisconsin's oldest team, Dane County's, started in 2000. For years, growth was slow and organic. In 2023, the Wisconsin Elder Justice Coalition set out to change that. Learning from Wisconsin's veteran FAST chairs and programs in Vermont, California, and New York, they built a statewide committee and created a toolkit to help new counties start their own teams.

The results have been significant: from four FASTs in October 2023 to 26 teams today, spanning 35 counties and eight tribal collaborations — nearly half the state. Teams have built strong local partnerships with financial institutions, hosted community fraud-prevention events, and strengthened relationships with local law enforcement and prosecutors, all while building the trust that makes coordinated case review possible.

We've learned from building this network that no one-size-fits-all team exists. Every community tailors its FAST to its own resources and needs. Recruitment requires persistence and the right local champion. New teams need real technical support to get off the ground and remain sustainable over the long run.

Any Wisconsin county interested in starting or strengthening a FAST can find free resources, sample memorandums of understanding, and direct support through the Wisconsin Elder Justice Coalition. □

Debi Leis is a program specialist for the Wisconsin Elder Justice Coalition at UW-Green Bay. She can be reached at leisd@uwgb.edu.



GET THE FAST TOOLKIT

Download at bit.ly/UWGB-FAST. For more information, contact the Wisconsin Elder Justice Coalition at elderjustice@uwgb.edu.



Community partnerships are vital for cross-disciplinary training and collaboration, ensuring APS workers feel supported and prepared each time they go into the field.

seeking to support an adult at risk. While competent individuals make their own care choices, concerned family and friends, healthcare providers, caregiving staff, and others may still pressure them and look to APS to help navigate difficult situations. There may be a misperception that APS workers can or should intervene when a person is making “bad” decisions, even though APS may determine that “dignity of risk” is the best response.

APS workers spend a significant amount of time home-visiting, bearing witness to the array of hardships caused by abuse, neglect and self-neglect among a vulnerable population. Community partnerships are vital for cross-disciplinary training and collaboration, ensuring APS workers feel supported and prepared each time they go into the field.

Across Wisconsin, APS staff lead or participate in interdisciplinary teams and financial abuse specialist teams that bring together local agencies to improve responses and

expand available resources. These partnerships help break down the silos among service providers, creating stronger connections between aging services, healthcare, mental health, law enforcement, financial institutions and other community supports. Through statewide networking, collaboration and data collection, APS professionals also share knowledge, learn from one another’s experiences and build a clearer understanding of the challenges facing adults at risk across Wisconsin.

By supporting people through some of life’s most difficult circumstances while honoring autonomy and individual choice, APS helps ensure that every Wisconsinite has the opportunity to age well. ■

Nichol Wienkes is a licensed mental health therapist and a behavioral health unit manager for Green Lake County. Her unit provides outpatient and community-based behavioral health treatment, including 24/7 mobile crisis response and adult protective services response.

1. Wisconsin Department of Health Services, “Wisconsin’s Annual Report on Abuse, Neglect, and Financial Exploitation of Adults at Risk: 2023,” April 2025, dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p00123.pdf.



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A State-Local PARTNERSHIP

ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES IN WISCONSIN

By Beth Freeman, Adult Protective Services Manager, Dane County Department of Human Services

It is no understatement to say that adult protective services (APS) staff save lives. They help people escape unsafe situations, call EMS during home visits, help bring charges against perpetrators of physical abuse, work to recover lost funds, and much more. APS is a quiet army of professionals committed to their work and the statutes that guide them every day.

Wisconsin is one of only 15 states with an APS system administered at the county level and supported by the state. The remaining 35 states have state-administered APS systems, with state employees directly operating programs and handling investigations from local or regional offices.

In Wisconsin, state APS staff in the Department of Health Services “... provide leadership, coordination, and resources to the counties so they can effectively carry out APS functions.”¹ However, they do not investigate reports of abuse or neglect. In 2028, DHS staff will also begin overseeing the state’s implementation of the first federal APS regulations issued



by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Community Living.²

Each of the 72 county-administered APS programs in Wisconsin has slightly different operational, referral and intake procedures.

However, all must implement their systems in a way that meets statutory guidelines defined in Wis. Stat. § 46.90, “Elder Abuse Reporting System,” and Wis. Stat. § 55.043, “Adults at Risk Agency.” Those statutes form the foundation of all county APS systems.

APS may be in a county’s Aging and Disability Resource Center, under the ADRC umbrella or part of a crisis or behavioral health program. APS professionals are responsible for responding to and investigating reports of alleged abuse or neglect of vulnerable adults, such as a 65-year-old man who has gotten entangled in a “romance” scam resulting in a significant loss of money, a 32-year-old woman with an intellectual developmental disability who



APS receives approximately 10,000 reports statewide each year. In 2025, those reports included 3,000 people over age 60 who lost an estimated \$92 million to fraud, an increase of 69% in the number of victims and 85% in losses compared with 2024.

was harmed by her caregiver, or an 85-year-old woman with dementia whose financial power of attorney is using her money, leaving her at risk of being evicted from assisted living due to non-payment.

Anyone in the community can call their local APS helpline anonymously. APS responds to all calls, in some way, within 24 hours, excluding weekends and holidays. Again, while procedures and follow-up may vary by county, APS professionals are all dedicated to ensuring vulnerable adults have the resources, services and information to address concerns, minimize ongoing risk, and, when appropriate, seek involuntary protective interventions.

APS receives approximately 10,000 reports statewide each year. In 2025, those reports included 3,000 people over age 60 who lost an estimated \$92 million to fraud, an increase of 69% in the number of victims and 82% more in losses compared with 2024.³

County APS professionals are increasingly having to do more with less. The population over 60 is growing, state and federal funding is reduced and/or flat, and cases are increasingly complex. Additionally, counties are now responsible for following up on alleged abuse and neglect in licensed and certified residential settings.⁴

Previously, the DHS Division of Quality Assurance primarily investigated reports of resident-specific abuse or neglect in licensed settings. However, citing staffing issues, the division's focus has shifted in recent years to investigating reports of facility or regulatory violations.

As a result, county APS staff are increasingly responsible for investigating alleged abuse or neglect of residents in licensed settings that do not involve regulatory violations. These additional responsibilities have not been accompanied by additional funding from the DHS or the federal government. Instead, counties must find tax levy dollars or other means to increase their APS teams' capacity. Unfortunately, securing such limited funds is not feasible in these difficult economic times.

Despite the challenges, Wisconsin has teams of dedicated APS professionals across the state. They work with vulnerable adults, family members, caregivers, law enforcement, first responders and anyone else who may play a role in helping to negate and minimize harm to the most at-risk members in their community. ■

Beth Freeman is the manager of adult protective services in the Dane County Department of Human Services.

1. Wisconsin Department of Health Services, "Adult Protective Services (APS): Professionals, Wisconsin APS overview" webpage, dhs.wisconsin.gov/aps/pros.htm.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, "Final Rule: Establishing Adult Protective Services Regulations," April 2024, bit.ly/ACL-regulations.
3. Human Cybersecurity Knowledge for Seniors, "Senior Scam Prevention & Fraud Resources in Wisconsin," bit.ly/HCSK_WIFraud.
4. Wisconsin Department of Health Services, "APS and Key Partners Role and Responses to Reports of Abuse, Neglect, and Financial Exploitation in Residential Care Settings," July 2024.



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Partnering to Protect Adults at Risk

HUMAN SERVICES AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

By Sharlene Lopez, Health and Human Services Deputy Director, St. Croix County

As the baby boomer generation ages, counties can expect rising demand for services addressing dementia, abuse and neglect, financial exploitation, caregiver challenges, and other vulnerabilities.

Strong partnerships can help communities prepare for these evolving needs.

Since 2021, St. Croix County's demand for adult protective services (APS) investigations and interventions has risen by nearly 65%. At-risk adult cases may involve safety concerns, cognitive impairment, mental health needs, substance use, exploitation, medical issues, and/or caregiver stress. St. Croix County has found that

closer coordination between human services and law enforcement can improve residents' outcomes and create opportunities to use county resources more effectively.

The approach is based on the premise that law enforcement and human services are most effective when they respond together and coordinate on cases rather than acting independently. In St. Croix County, partnership takes several



Sharlene Lopez

For counties, the broader lesson is that stronger partnerships do not always require creating a new program or adding staff.

forms, including behavioral health crisis co-response, 24/7 access to APS, multidisciplinary case review, specialized training, and practical tools for officers in the field.

All law enforcement jurisdictions in St. Croix County have a memorandum of understanding with APS. Most jurisdictions' law enforcement participates in APS interdisciplinary team meetings, and many also join the county's Abuse in Later Life Coordinated Community Response Team alongside APS, the district attorney's office, emergency medical services, and sexual and domestic violence providers.

Financial exploitation underscores the value of this partnership. In 2025, APS and law enforcement collaborated on more than 200 financial exploitation cases, with more than \$3 million in reported losses. They recovered more than \$1 million for older and vulnerable St. Croix County residents.

APS contributes knowledge of the individual, available services and protective options. Law enforcement contributes investigative and evidence-gathering expertise, while early prosecutor involvement can help identify and preserve evidence when criminal charges may be appropriate.

Training has strengthened those working relationships. In 2024, St. Croix County received a four-year, \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence



Against Women to strengthen the community response to abuse in later life. Nearly 70 local law enforcement officers completed a full day of specialized training on recognizing and investigating abuse in later life, collecting evidence, understanding the related Wisconsin statutes, and learning about local resources. Law enforcement and the St. Croix County District Attorney's Office co-trained officers, grounding the material in cases and procedures they encounter locally.

The federal grant also supported development of a Legal Remedies Guide for law enforcement, giving officers practical, field-ready information to identify available resources and connect with the appropriate partners when additional expertise is needed. In 2027, detectives and investigators will have the opportunity to participate in advanced Department of Justice training that builds on the broader law enforcement training, with greater emphasis on complex adult at-risk investigations, evidence development, and building cases that can support successful prosecution.

Dementia-related crises demonstrate why counties benefit from having more than one response option. A person with diagnosed or suspected dementia may need something different from traditional behavioral health, law enforcement,

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emergency department or institutional response.

With \$600,000 in state grant funding, the Kitty Rhoades Memorial Memory Care Center reopened in February 2025 as Wisconsin's second Dementia Crisis Stabilization Unit. The unit adds a specialized stabilization option to the local continuum of care. To expand this type of response beyond St. Croix County, staff also partnered with UW-Green Bay to develop a Dementia Crisis Stabilization Unit Replication Toolkit, available as a zip file on the Wisconsin Department of Health Services website at bit.ly/Dementia-toolkit.

The same cross-system approach extends beyond APS. Two behavioral health crisis co-responders also work alongside law enforcement. Shared clinical supervision between APS and crisis services supports consultation, cross-training and continuity of care when needs overlap. The federal grant funding has further strengthened this collaboration by providing training for professionals across human services, healthcare, criminal justice and



GET THE TOOLKIT

A Dementia Crisis Stabilization Unit Replication Toolkit is available at bit.ly/Dementia-toolkit.

community organizations.

For counties, the broader lesson is that stronger partnerships do not always require creating a new program

or hiring additional staff. They can begin with practical connections: an APS worker available after hours, a specially trained and supported crisis worker responding alongside law enforcement, a detective bringing a complex exploitation case to a multidisciplinary team, or an officer who knows where to access additional resources.

Adults at risk often have needs that span organizational boundaries. When law enforcement, APS, behavioral health, prosecutors, healthcare providers and community partners understand one another's roles and know how to connect quickly, residents are more likely to access the right services sooner. In St. Croix County, strengthening these relationships has helped build a more coordinated response that better protects adults at risk and uses existing community resources more effectively. ■

Sharlene Lopez is the deputy director of Health and Human Services for St. Croix County.

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MEET TYLER MARTELL, THE NEW MANITOWOC COUNTY EXECUTIVE

For Tyler Martell, public service has always been about looking ahead.

The new Manitowoc County Executive grew up in Manitowoc, where his family has lived for several generations. After graduating from the local public schools, he attended Marquette University in Milwaukee with the intent to go to law school. That plan changed after Martell worked in a few law offices, including the Manitowoc County District Attorney's Office, and realized a legal career was not the right fit.

Instead, Martell got a job in sales. "I'm thankful for that job because it gave me the flexibility to go back to school to become a teacher." Martell spent seven years teaching middle and high school social studies. During that time, he ran for the Manitowoc County Board and, after his second election, was selected chairman.

"Leaving teaching to become the county executive was an extremely difficult decision," Martell said. "But I'm hoping to substitute teach occasionally once I get the hang of my new job."

► A commitment to service

Martell's path from teacher to county executive may seem unconventional, but he sees a common thread running through his career: service. His educational background instilled in him the value of serving others, along with the Jesuit ideal of being "a man for others."



"I've never been one to see a challenge and be content sitting on the sidelines," he said.

His years as a history teacher also shaped how he approaches his new role. While teaching history might seem to encourage a focus on the past, Martell said his attention has always been on what comes next. "If I had the chance to play a small part in making a better future for my

students and for my own children, how could I say no?" he said.

That future-focused perspective will be important as Martell takes on the challenges facing Manitowoc County.

► Making the most of limited resources

"The biggest challenge is having to make the tough decisions about how to manage increasingly limited resources while still providing the services that the people in my community rely upon," Martell said.

For a county that is not experiencing rapid growth, local levy limits add another layer of difficulty. But he sees the financial constraints as more than a challenge. They also create an opportunity to rethink how county government operates. "Because we can't just go to the people asking for more money, we have the chance to be creative, to innovate, and to reimagine what county government can be," he said.

An emphasis on efficiency is likely to be an important part of Martell's tenure.



“The biggest challenge is having to make the tough decisions about how to manage increasingly limited resources while still providing the services that the people in my community rely upon.”

► **Listen first, then act**

Martell describes his leadership style as collaborative. “I think we accomplish more when we work together,” he said. “Too often we worry about who gets credit or whose resources get used, and that just blocks important things from happening.”

Since taking office, Martell has tried to put that philosophy into practice. In his first few months as county executive, he has spent time in the field with county employees, meeting with department directors and getting out into the community. The goal is to understand the work of county government from the people doing it and the residents relying on it. “The best leaders listen first before acting decisively,” Martell said.

Each chapter of his career has given Martell a different perspective on public service. With his background rooted

in Manitowoc County, his focus is firmly on its future. For Martell, that means finding new ways to deliver services, making the most of limited resources and, perhaps most importantly, making sure residents know their county government is listening.

As he settles into his new role, he is not looking to simply maintain the status quo. He wants to help build what comes next.

Martell is quick to say it is too early to talk about a legacy. After all, he is just getting started. But if he looks ahead, he knows how he wants to be remembered. “I’d hope people will think about me as someone who made county government more efficient,” Martell said. “But more importantly, I’d like to be known as someone who worked hard, loved his community, showed up, and made people feel heard.” ■

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Gile Flowage

LAND CONSERVATION PROJECT

*By Lydia Salus, Program Coordinator, Wisconsin Coastal Management Program;
Eric Peterson; Forest Administrator, Iron County; and Cathy Techtmann, Environmental Outreach Specialist,
UW-Madison, and President, Friends of the Gile Flowage Lake Association*

The Gile Flowage is the largest Laurentian Shield lake in Wisconsin. The 3,384-acre lake in Iron County was formed in 1947 by the construction of a dam on the West Branch of the Montreal River, which flows north from the flowage to Lake Superior for hydroelectric power generation.

The environmental quality and resiliency of the Gile Flowage ecosystems directly impact downstream water quality and Lake Superior coastal resources.

The Laurentian Shield is a geologically significant region of ancient bedrock that was exposed by glaciers during

the Wisconsin glaciation 20,000 years ago. The region is characterized by rocky outcrops, boreal forests and clear lakes. Featuring rocky shores and diverse riparian, wetland, island and upland habitats, the flowage remains one of the last undeveloped large water bodies in northern Wisconsin.

Long before settlement, generations of Ojibwe people followed a 40-mile overland portage trail that skirted the non-navigable Montreal River and crossed what is now the Gile Flowage. The trail linked Lake Superior Ojibwe communities with those further south through a network of trading routes. Later used by fur traders and named



Photo: Iron County Forestry Department

On Dec. 30, 2025, 1,104 acres of diverse habitat surrounding the Gile Flowage were successfully acquired by the Iron County Forestry Department from Xcel Energy.

This massive six-year conservation effort ensures the permanent protection of nearly 18 miles of shoreline and vital forested wetlands within the Lake Superior coastal zone.

the “Flambeau Trail,” voyageurs laden with fur and trade goods traversed this portage until the mid-1800s.

The Gile Flowage is in Wisconsin due to an 1840 surveying error by Capt. Thomas Jefferson Cram. Cram was ordered to find the Montreal River’s origin and use it to form the border between Wisconsin and Michigan. He incorrectly identified the East Branch of the Montreal River as its

source, setting the state line eight miles further east.

By 1885, the area was booming. Iron ore mining operations began at the Montreal Mine, adjacent to what would become the Gile Flowage. The mine’s massive waste rock piles are still visible from the flowage today. That same year, the Montreal River Lumber Company built the first dam on or near the site of today’s Gile Dam for floating logs to mill. By the 1920s, the company and dam were gone. Mining ceased by the 1960s, adding to the area’s economic distress.

The Gile Flowage began filling in 1941 following the completion of the Gile Dam built to provide steady water supply for Lake Superior District Power Company’s (now Xcel Energy) downstream hydroelectric facilities. Stewardship of the lands purchased by the power company to create the new flowage kept them undeveloped for decades.

Through the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

licensing process of the Gile Flowage, Xcel Energy looked to divest in the uplands not affected by the water levels required for power generation. Consequently, the land around the flowage faced imminent threat of encroachment by non-riparian owners and private development. Such development would fragment the flowage’s riparian corridors and uplands, impact water quality, reduce public and tribal access, diminish recreational and aesthetic values, and decrease overall ecosystem resilience to changing climate conditions.

Xcel Energy approached Iron County in 2019 about the possibility of acquiring this land. This lump sum acquisition of more than 1,000 acres of land from Xcel Energy was a one-time opportunity for the Iron County Forestry Department to protect the flowage lands for their

Continued on page 30

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The environmental quality and resiliency of the Gile Flowage ecosystems directly impact downstream water quality and Lake Superior coastal resources.

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resilience values while ensuring perpetual public and tribal access. The project received broad support from local municipalities, tribes and conservation groups.

The acquisition included 592 acres in the town of Carey and 513 acres in the town of Pence, both of which provided formal resolutions of support for the project. While there was immediate interest from the county in purchasing this unique property, funding was a barrier for the county to move forward with the acquisition.

Conservation takes coordination and collaboration at all levels of government. This landmark \$5.6 million project was 100% grant-funded through a strategic partnership between federal and state agencies. \$4.1 million was secured through the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. An additional \$1.5 million was leveraged through a Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Grant through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

On Dec. 30, 2025, 1,104 acres of diverse habitat surrounding the Gile Flowage were successfully acquired by the Iron County Forestry Department from Xcel Energy. This massive six-year conservation effort ensures the permanent protection of nearly 18 miles of shoreline and vital forested wetlands within the Lake Superior coastal zone.

The parcels are connected to a contiguous block of more than 68,000 acres of the Iron County Forest that are managed for multiple uses, including habitat corridors, climate resilience and public access. This newly acquired land will be enrolled into the Iron County Forest and managed under its existing 15-year comprehensive land use plan, guaranteeing public access and habitat preservation for future generations.

Additionally, this land is within the ceded territory of the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, who retain treaty rights to hunt, fish and gather on non-tribal lands that are

in public ownership. The conservation of this land protects treaty rights usage, including by the neighboring Bad River Band and Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, who offered project support together with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. Ultimately, this project will result in transformational effects on both the ecological and human communities connected to the flowage. ■

Lydia Salus is a program coordinator at the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program within the Department of Administration. Established in 1978 under the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act, the program and its partners work to achieve balance between natural resource preservation and economic development along Wisconsin's Great Lakes coasts. Eric Peterson is the forest administrator with the Iron County Forestry Department. Cathy Techtmann is an environmental outreach specialist at UW-Madison and president of the Friends of the Gile Flowage Lake Association.

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Planning for the Future of Gile Flowage

A conversation with Wisconsin Counties

With the lands around Gile Flowage now part of the **Iron County Forest**, the county is beginning to plan how to enjoy and care for them in the coming years.

The land has been designated “special use,” meaning that conservation and protection of the flowage’s sensitive wetlands will remain the primary priorities. At the same time, the property is now public land, opening new possibilities for recreation and access.

“There’s a long history of camping on the islands and around the flowage, even though it was prohibited,” said Iron County Forester Eric Peterson. “Now it’s welcome, and there’s been discussion about adding hiking or biking trails.”

As the county completes its detailed inventory of the property, it’s assessing where it can best invest in recreational improvements. This summer, the county posted signs with QR codes at popular access points, inviting visitors to share feedback.

For Cat Techtmann, UW Extension outreach specialist and president of the Gile Flowage Lake Association, protecting the flowage’s character will be an important part of that planning.

“The Gile Flowage is a local treasure,” she said. “It’s like the Boundary Waters and one of the last dark-sky lakes in the state.”

As use of the flowage increases, particularly among kayakers and boaters, Techtmann said the lake association will continue its stewardship and educational efforts. These include fish and habitat work, shoreland management education, and efforts to prevent the spread of aquatic invasive species, such as spiny water fleas.

The future, she said, is about balancing access and protection. “We want to focus on good water-based stewardship,” Techtmann said.

The acquisition also brings financial benefits to the townships. When it was private utility property, it did not generate property tax revenue. As county forest land, however, the property will generate payments in lieu of taxes and severance tax payments from harvested timber.

For Iron County, the acquisition offers an opportunity to preserve the natural character of Gile Flowage while allowing future generations to enjoy its beauty. □



Honoring the Past Building *the* Future

Celebrating 250 Years



Photos courtesy of Misty Bindl of Lasting Impressions Photography, Erin Cowan with Erin Lenore Photography, and WCA staff.

2026 Highlights

ONLINE CONFERENCE RESOURCES

Take advantage of online resources from the WCA Annual Conference, including coverage of the opening and closing general assemblies and three workshops, courtesy of WisconsinEye (a free user account is needed to access their recordings).

The videos that were shown at the general assemblies, including “Conversations in Cars with County Officials,” are posted on the WCA website, as are the PowerPoint presentations for most workshops.

The three recorded workshops available online by WisconsinEye:

- PFAS 101: Background, Regulations and Local Landfill Leachate Management, presented by Marathon County and Wisconsin Green Fire’s Contaminants of Emerging Concern Work Group
- AI, Agents and Automation, presented by GIPAW and Waukesha County
- Why Municipalities are Turning to Counties for EMS, presented by the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health

► **TO ACCESS THE LINKS AND MATERIALS**, visit wicounties.org and click on “Past Event Materials” under the Events tab.





2026 WCA ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING

The 2026 WCA Annual Business Meeting began with a welcome from Lance Pliml, board chair of the WCA and the Wood County Board of Supervisors, followed by a moment of silence honoring Paul Farrow, the former Waukesha County Executive who passed away in office earlier this year.

Voting delegates from 68 of the 71 member counties acted on 35 resolutions submitted by the membership on topics ranging from transportation funding to public health and EMS funding. In addition to a report from Pliml, they heard from WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell, who provided an association and government affairs update. Final action taken on the resolutions can be found at bit.ly/2026-WCA-Resolutions.

INSPIRING GENERAL ASSEMBLIES

A Strategic Approach to Leading

With 28 years of service in the U.S. Navy, including in command and senior positions; eight years as a college president and university chancellor; and his current role as director of Executive Leadership Programs at the Washington Leadership Institute, **Dr. Peter Cressy** understands leadership. His keynote address presented historical examples of leadership during times of crisis and great change through the lens of Winston Churchill, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington. Focusing particularly on Washington, Cressy showed key characteristics these leaders displayed during the historical crises they endured.



An Inside Look at the State Supreme Court

Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Dallet joined Andy Phillips of Attolles Law (left) and WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell (right) to discuss the inner workings of the state Supreme Court as the "court of last resort" for complex or ambiguous cases. Dallet explained how the justices work through a case, the importance of oral arguments and written amicus briefs, and the effort behind the final written opinions.

INSPIRING GENERAL ASSEMBLIES



Candidates for the 2026 Elections

The major candidates (from left) in the race for governor, U.S. Rep. **Tom Tiffany** and Milwaukee County Executive **David Crowley**, and in the race for state attorney general, Attorney General **Josh Kaul** and Fond du Lac County District Attorney **Eric Toney**, each spoke at the closing general session and shared their vision for Wisconsin's future.



Local Government Leadership Academy

Recent graduates of the UW-Extension Local Government Leadership Academy were recognized at the closing general session. The academy is a nine-month cohort program to help participants develop professionally while also contributing to the improved capacity of their local government.

INSPIRING GENERAL ASSEMBLIES



Friend of County Government

Gov. Tony Evers was recognized by the WCA as the 2026 Friend of County Government for his commitment to working with and understanding county government. Over the past eight years, he has led his administration in recognizing that state-level policies can have very different consequences when they reach county highway departments, human services offices, public health departments, and courthouses.



Friend in County Government

Fond du Lac County Clerk **Lisa Freiberg** was honored with the WCA's 2026 Friend in County Government Award for her strong advocacy on behalf of Wisconsin county clerks and the important work they do. Her ability to explain government in terms people can understand is one of Freiberg's greatest strengths. She attends legislative hearings, follows the details and helps state policymakers understand the practical implications of their decisions.

INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT HALL



Networking in the Exhibit Hall More than 100 vendors, offering services ranging from utilities and construction to information technology and financial advice, were actively engaged in the conference's exhibit hall. Attendees had the opportunity to meet with exhibitors, learn about their services, and take home valuable knowledge about their resources.

ENGAGING WORKSHOPS



Meeting the Needs of the Aging Population: The Role of County Nutrition Programs

Staff from the Aging and Disability Resource Center of Barron and Rusk Counties were joined by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services' Elder Nutrition Program manager for a discussion about the role of the Wisconsin Elderly Nutrition Program in supporting healthy aging and keeping older adults in their homes longer, as well as innovative practices strengthening local support systems.



Building Stronger Communities Through Strategic Investment

Dodge County hosted a workshop that focused on two initiatives that invest in the county's future in very different ways. County officials provided an overview of their Community Development Fund, which uses sales tax to provide financial resources and leverage local community investment in economic and community development projects. The second initiative they discussed involves teaching and training employees in emotional intelligence to improve their resiliency.



Mandated and Underfunded: Health and Human Services Funding and County Budgets

Kevin Dospoy and Jacob Anderson of Forward Analytics joined Calumet County Administrator Todd Romenesko for a discussion about the structural funding realities facing county health and human service departments and the data, service design and statewide advocacy needed to drive change and build sustainability.

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YERKES OBSERVATORY Gateway to the Stars

For more than 125 years, Yerkes Observatory in Walworth County has invited people to look into the vastness of the universe.

The compelling story, “Wisconsin’s Gateway to the Stars: Yerkes Observatory,” takes a closer look at the history of the observatory, but also does a deeper dive into how the property, once owned by the University of Chicago, has transitioned into a space where art, history, science and community intersect.

Opened in 1897, Yerkes Observatory quickly became a landmark in the development of modern astronomy and astrophysics. At the center of its scientific legacy is the 40-inch Great Refractor, one of the world’s most famous telescopes and, at the time of its completion, the largest refracting telescope ever built.

For generations, some of the world’s leading astronomers conducted research at Yerkes, helping advance humanity’s understanding of stars, planets and the universe. The observatory became a center for groundbreaking research



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

and scientific education, and its legacy includes the work of renowned scientists who would go on to shape modern astronomy.

But today, the story of Yerkes is about more than what happened under

its famous dome.

After the Yerkes Future Foundation acquired the observatory from the University of Chicago in 2020, the historic observatory began an ambitious effort to preserve its architectural and scientific legacy while creating new opportunities for the public to experience the property. That transformation is bringing new energy to the historic site.

“You talk about the most influential science institute in the history of Wisconsin and that is Yerkes Observatory,” said Yerkes Future Foundation Executive Director Dennis Kois. “Today, we are open and honor that history. We have concerts, exhibits, tours, programs and telescope nights. Research is still happening here. It is an incredible place to be.” □

► **WATCH NOW:** discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin



SAWYER COUNTY

MOXI LOUNGE A Cocktail Bar in the Middle of Nowhere

Who puts a cocktail bar in the middle of the Flambeau River State Forest? Matt and Roxi Plath did.

Their lodge and lounge, aptly named “Moxi,” sits on the shores of Connors Lake in Wisconsin’s Northwoods, roughly 30 minutes from the closest anything. It’s in the midst of a recreational area with miles of forest and water, and the kind of remoteness that makes a cocktail bar seem almost comically out of place. And that’s exactly the point.

The Plaths’ story, “A Cocktail Bar in the Middle of Nowhere: The Moxi Lounge,” features this Sawyer County gem and highlights the work and dedication that brought the gathering spot into existence and what this special establishment means for the community.

The Plaths bought the lodge in September 2020, spent

long hours renovating the four units and then added a cocktail lounge by the water a couple of years later. Customers, family and friends arrive at the unique spot by boat, bike, UTV, snowmobile, car and on foot.

“We get people walking in saying, ‘Well, this is not supposed to be here. I feel like I’m in Madison or Milwaukee right now,’” said Matt. “Which is why we did it,” added Roxi.

“There’s something wonderfully unexpected about finding a great cocktail bar tucked away in the Northwoods,” said Discover Mediaworks, Inc. President & CEO Mark C. Rose. “It’s the people who take a chance, create something special, and build a community around it. That combination is what makes this the perfect Uniquely Wisconsin story.” □

► **WATCH NOW:** discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin

To see season five 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 date for the final 2026 webinar:

▪ December 16

Nov. 18 “In the Board Room” Webinar on 2025 Act 196 and Sheriffs’ Authority

2025 Wisconsin Act 196 reorganized and updated several statutes relating to the office of sheriff. While most of a sheriff’s statutory authority and responsibilities did not change, the legislation addresses important concepts that have raised questions. Join the Attolles Law team at noon on Wednesday, Nov. 18, for the next “In the Board Room”

webinar to discuss Act 196 and what it means for your county.

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. ■

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.

2027 Civic Games Registration Opening

Registration for the Wisconsin Civic Games for high school students is expected to open on Nov. 1 for the 2027 competition. Founded by the Wisconsin NewsMedia Association and sponsored by the WCA, the games encourage students to deepen their understanding of civics and current issues. County officials are encouraged to share information about the games with their local high schools.

More information is available at bit.ly/WNA_CivicGames.

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SAVE THE DATE:

WCA 2027 Counties in the Capitol, Feb. 10

County officials' advocacy is crucial to helping legislators and state agency officials understand counties' vital role and why county priorities matter.

Be a part of the conversation and make your voice heard. Attend the WCA 2027 Counties in the Capitol legislative advocacy event on Feb. 10 in Madison. Similar to past WCA County Ambassador Program (CAP) team meetings, the WCA Government Affairs team and key state officials will brief attendees, who will be encouraged to meet with their state legislators.

Counties in the Capitol is open to all members. The day will start at the Best Western Premier Park Hotel on the Capitol Square in Madison. Attendees are responsible for scheduling individual meetings with their legislators.

Watch the WCA website and your inbox for more information.



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.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

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	Total No. Copies (Net press run)	4,150	4,150
	Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions	3,443	3,447
	Paid/Requested In-County Mail Subscriptions	103	104
	Paid Distribution Outside USPS	0	0
	Other Classes Mailed Through USPS	0	0
	Total Paid	3,546	3,551
	Free/Nominal Rate Outside-County	343	351
	Free/Nominal Rate In-County	15	15
	Free/Nominal Rate Distribution by Mail-Other Classes Mailed Through USPS	36	30
	Free/Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail	134	134
	Total Free/Nominal Rate Distribution	528	530
	Total Distribution	4,074	4,081
	Copies not Distributed	76	69
	Total	4,150	4,150
	Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation	87%	87%

White House Orders Increased Support For Veterans' Access to Benefits

Editor's note: The following information is adapted from updates by the National Association of Counties.

On Sept. 8, the president signed Executive Order 14426, which outlines new federal agency initiatives for improving coordination and access to benefits for military personnel and veterans. The executive order, “Accelerating Access to Veterans’ Benefits and Employment Opportunities,” impacts the U.S. Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, Labor, and Health and Human Services, and the Office of Management and Budget.

The executive order establishes a number of directives to the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, including the following:

- Update IT systems, policy guidance and memoranda to ensure coordination of all military personnel files and service treatment records from the start of military service to the end of a need for veteran benefits
- Create and deploy new digital tools to streamline veterans’ applications for and access to benefits earned through military service into a comprehensive single source, including offering job training and opportunities through the Department of Labor
- Ensure that the Department of Defense shares all military personnel files, service treatment records and health records with the Department of Veterans Affairs the moment a service member is discharged from the armed services
- Ensure all present and future procurement contracts for IT systems and services, relevant to the purpose of the executive order, be interoperable with any other military personnel records systems, health records systems or service treatment records systems operated by the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs
- Update the Transition Assistance Program and other workforce programs to ensure every service member leaving active military service is connected to jobs or education in fields relevant to their skills, interests and the specific goals or is connected with appropriate veterans’ representatives acting on behalf of a federal, state or local government to facilitate their application for healthcare, disability, home loan, job placement or education benefits ■



Washington County Government Center (left) and courthouse (right) were lit up for Operation Green Light in 2025.

NACO OPERATION GREEN LIGHT FOR VETERANS

America’s counties have a long and proud history of serving our nation’s veterans, a legacy that continues today as we work with federal, state and local partners to ensure former service members have access to the resources they need to thrive.

This November, the National Association of Counties and the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers invite the nation’s 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs to show support for veterans by lighting their buildings green from Nov. 4-11, 2026. By shining a green light, county governments and their residents will let veterans know that they are seen, appreciated and supported. Download resources at bit.ly/GreenLightToolkit.



Photos courtesy of Washington County

HUD Expected to Revise Notice of Funding Opportunities for Homelessness Programs Following Court Decision

On Sept. 11, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a notice titled “Notice of Research Justifying Additional Incentives for Certain Activities to Reduce Homelessness.” The agency is seeking public comment regarding several eligible activities under the Continuum of Care Program that it looks to promote through bonus payments and other incentives.

This follows a recent federal court decision to vacate a proposed notice of funding opportunity for fiscal year 2026. The notice of funding would have directed a significant amount of Continuum of Care Program funding toward transitional housing and supportive service projects through a \$1.3 billion set-aside, effectively limiting its use for permanent supportive housing projects. The court ruled, in part, that HUD failed to conduct an adequate public notice-and-comment process required for such sweeping program changes.

The activities in the updated notice largely reflect the administration’s focus on short-term housing support and supportive service participation, as well as a shift away from permanent housing models.



The updated notice activities include:

- Transitional housing with supportive services concentrated on behavioral health treatment and improving economic self-sufficiency through employment income
- Supportive services-only projects
- Sober homes and other housing that supports treatment and recovery from substance use disorder
- Coordination with law enforcement and first responders in addressing homelessness

This notice is likely a precursor to HUD revising and reissuing its fiscal year 2026 Continuum of Care Program notice of funding opportunity once it has satisfied its public notice-and-comment requirements. As of this writing, the National Association of Counties was planning to submit comments before the Oct. 13 deadline.

The notice and additional background information are linked on the NACo legislative advocacy page at bit.ly/NACo_COC_Update. □

New BEAD Policy Notice Released

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration, the federal agency responsible for

administering the Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program, published a Supplemental Deployment Policy Notice on Sept. 3. The policy notice allows Wisconsin to use a portion of the remaining BEAD funds for additional broadband deployment projects to reach unserved locations. In contrast to the initial BEAD Program, the spending will be limited to unserved homes and businesses — specifically those without access to 25 Mbps download and 3 Mbps upload internet service.

The notice provides a specific timeline for supplemental deployment. Upon receiving a location list from NTIA and after review, Wisconsin has 30 days to conduct an Abbreviated Challenge Process, followed by up to 30 days to adjudicate. After the Challenge Process is complete, NTIA reviews the final location list, allocates the available funding, and authorizes Wisconsin



**Public Service Commission
of WISCONSIN**

to proceed with a second Benefit of the Bargain (BOB2) grant round. Wisconsin will have 90 days to

complete the BOB2 round. NTIA will then have 90 days to review and approve the Supplemental Deployment Plan. As of this writing, Wisconsin has not yet received its location list.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission will use docket 5-BD-2025 to communicate about the supplement eligible locations, Abbreviated Challenge Process, and BEAD BOB2 application process for new and existing applicants. For more information, access the Wisconsin Broadband Office September 2026 newsletter at bit.ly/PSC_Sept2026.

In addition, as of this writing, the NTIA has not yet released important BEAD Program non-deployment guidance. Gov. Tony Evers and U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) sent a joint letter in April calling for the release of the guidance and the full remaining BEAD funding. The letter is available at bit.ly/Evers_BEADLetter. □



LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Social Media, Public Officials and Free Speech

By Andy Phillips and Micaela Brinsley, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

As technology accelerates by the minute, the law struggles to keep up. But simply because social media did not exist in 1791 does not mean the First Amendment does not apply. Local governments — and local government officials — must be mindful when operating social media accounts, especially when the accounts provide citizens with a public forum to comment, reply to posts, or otherwise engage. This is true for official local government social media accounts and for personal accounts if the local official is posting as a public official rather than as a private citizen.

► The U.S. Court of Appeals split

Until 2024, the U.S. Court of Appeals (which consists of 13 circuit courts) used different tests to determine whether a public official was acting in their official capacity when blocking users or deleting information on personal social media accounts used for official business — a critical test in determining whether the First Amendment applied in a particular circumstance. The Second, Fourth, and Ninth Circuits took similar approaches, focusing on the appearance

of the public official's conduct on social media rather than applying a more objective test. In contrast, the Eighth Circuit focused on the “overall theme of [the] tweets.” Finally, the Sixth Circuit adopted an analysis that differed. “Instead of examining a [social media] page’s appearance or purpose,” the court “focus[ed] on the actor’s official duties and use of government resources or state employees.”

► Lindke v. Freed

In 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Lindke v. Freed*, which resolved the split in circuit court decisions and identified a new test to determine whether an action by a public official constitutes a government action in the context of public forums such as social media or government websites.¹

In that case, James Freed, the city manager of Port Huron, Michigan, maintained a Facebook account on which he posted about a wide range of topics, including his family and his job. Freed occasionally received unwelcome comments on his posts. In response, Freed would delete the comments and block those who made them. One of these

Local governments — and local government officials — must be mindful when operating social media accounts, especially when the accounts provide citizens with a public forum to comment, reply to posts, or otherwise engage.

Counties should work with their corporation counsel on policies to ensure a clear separation between personal and professional social media accounts.

commenters, Kevin Lindke, sued Freed for violating his right to free speech, arguing that Freed acted in his official capacity when he silenced his speech.

Under the Lindke decision, a public official's social media activity constitutes a government action only if the official possessed actual authority to speak on behalf of the government and purported to exercise that authority when they spoke on social media.

In analyzing the first part of the test, a public official's authority to speak on the government's behalf is not determined by whether the official acted as if they had authority to speak for the government, nor does it matter whether others thought the official had such authority. Rather, "the grant of actual authority must come from one of the sources mentioned in 42 U.S.C. § 1983: 'statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage.'" If authority to act is not found, the analysis ends and the claim fails.

In analyzing the second part, whether the public official purported to exercise that authority when they spoke on social media, the test is objective, although the "appearance and function" of the social media activity are relevant.² Resolving this second step requires a post-by-post analysis. The individual must identify "specific posts" in which the public official purported to exercise authority to speak on the government's behalf. In analyzing this prong, however, the court reaffirmed the notion that public officials "have the right to speak about public affairs in their personal capacities," but posts from an account that clearly belongs to the government — such as a page labeled "City of Port Huron," as in the Lindke case — presumptively speak for the government.

► Recent Seventh Circuit cases addressing social media and the First Amendment

In 2025, the Seventh Circuit in *Krasno v. Mnookin*³ addressed conduct on the UW-Madison Instagram

and Facebook accounts used to communicate official announcements, events and policies. The plaintiff, Madeline Krasno, claimed she earned the university's disapproval for calling attention to what she believed to be animal abuse in its primate testing facilities by commenting on the university's social media posts. In response, the university hid Krasno's comments on its social media posts and restricted Krasno's Instagram account, on the grounds that it was hiding "off-topic" comments. The circuit court determined that the university's comment threads were best characterized as limited public forums⁴ and held that the off-topic comment restriction was unreasonable and unconstitutional, as it was not viewpoint neutral and discriminated against Krasno's anti-animal testing and pro-animal rights viewpoints.

The Seventh Circuit again addressed the potential for viewpoint discrimination in 2026, this time in the context of an official town website in the case of *Schulte v. Leners*.⁵ In that case, Elizabeth Schulte sued Kenneth Leners, chair of the board of supervisors for the town of Cedar Lake in Barron County, after he deleted comments she and others posted on the town's website. The website allowed members of the public to comment without restrictions. Schulte disagreed with Leners' position on regulating recreational vehicles, and Leners deleted her comments and those of other critics, calling them "disrespectful." The town later eliminated the website's comment sections altogether.

Schulte argued on appeal that the deletions violated her First Amendment right to free speech because Leners was selectively removing comments based on commenters' viewpoints. Leners argued that he should have qualified immunity because it was not clearly established in 2022 that First Amendment protections applied to a town website's comment section. The Seventh Circuit rejected this argument, explaining that the comment section was a public

Continued on page 46



LEGAL ISSUES

Continued from page 45

forum where private citizens were communicating, and the town had no policy controlling who could comment or what they could say.

The Seventh Circuit held that the First Amendment clearly prohibited Leners from selectively deleting comments because of their viewpoints. The court emphasized that the town could legally shut down the comment section altogether, but while it was open to public discussion, it could not discriminate against people simply because they disagreed with the town or its officials. The court therefore denied Leners qualified immunity and affirmed the district court's decision, allowing Schulte's claims to continue.

► What does this mean for future official (and unofficial, public-official operated) social media accounts and websites?

In the wake of the Lindke decision, the bar appears to have been raised for establishing whether a social media account or website is a public forum, meaning that it will likely be more difficult for plaintiffs to prove that public officials' social media accounts are public forums. This is not to say, however, that social media accounts operated by public officials which appear to include both private posts (i.e., posts about their families, friends, interests, etc.) and public posts (i.e., posts about upcoming official meetings,

activities that the official is conducting related to their office, etc.) are advisable.

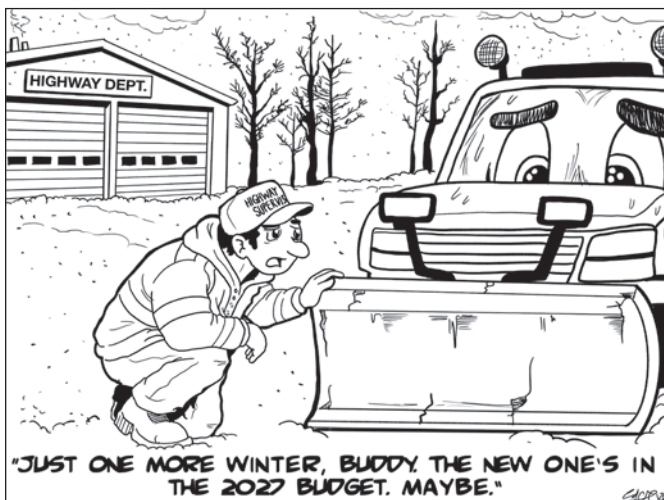
Instead, counties may want to implement policies requiring government employees and officials to separate personal social media accounts from professional accounts and to clearly identify an official government account as such. And, if a government employee or official does operate a government social media account or website, counties may also want to implement policies prohibiting the official from engaging in content that discriminates against constituents' viewpoints, such as blocking individual constituents based on viewpoint disagreements or prohibiting particular individuals from commenting on the forum while allowing others to continue.

► Conclusion

In light of the new Lindke test, only time will tell just how cautious municipalities and their officers will need to be in the operation of government social media accounts and websites. In the meantime, counties should work with their corporation counsel on policies to ensure a clear separation between personal and professional social media accounts. ■

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. Around the same time, the U.S. Supreme Court also heard the case of *O'Connor-Ratcliff v. Garnier*, 41 F.4th 1158 (2022), an appeal from the Ninth Circuit, which involved local officials who had allegedly blocked constituents from their Facebook and Twitter accounts or removed comments from an official government website because of the constituents' negative or repetitive comments.
2. "For example, if a government website links to an official's social media posts, it's likely that such posts exercised state authority." *Lindke v. Freed*, 114 F.4th 812, 818 (6th Cir. 2024).
3. The Seventh Circuit did not apply the Lindke test in *Krasno*.
4. Courts recognize that government may impose reasonable restrictions on speech in limited public forums such as certain social media accounts or public comment periods in official meetings, which is in contrast to the relatively few restrictions that government may place on speech in a traditional public forum such as a public park or sidewalk. See *Perry Educ. Ass'n v. Perry Educators' Ass'n*, 460 U.S. 37 (1983).
5. The Seventh Circuit did not apply the Lindke test in *Schulte*.





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