

HOW TO CREATE

Resilient Communities in Wisconsin by focusing on BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



Extension
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This document contains considerations for communities or organizations to prioritize the behavioral health of residents in a community. There are many opportunities to work in partnership with the public and private sector toward healthier communities for all Wisconsin residents. Communities and organizations should take different approaches based on local resources, partnerships, cultures and circumstances.

Everyone deserves an opportunity to **thrive** in Wisconsin. And to thrive, we need to be healthy and safe in our communities. The conditions of the places where we live, learn, work and play, influence overall health and impact the behavioral health of communities.

Communities can prioritize behavioral health, which includes mental health and substance use disorders, through equitable practices and policies. These practices and policies can create more resilient and connected communities where there are opportunities for everyone to be healthy and feel connected to their environment.

Resilient communities also offer a source of support during times of stress and buffer from common effects of community-wide trauma or challenges. While the goal is to create better opportunities for all to persevere during times of stress and trauma, communities should make specific behavioral health considerations for priority settings or populations that are most impacted.

SUPPORTING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Social support improves individual resilience and reduces mental health and substance use disorders. It also strengthens connection to the community and empowers individuals to care for others. This can be especially important after disruptive community-wide events such as a pandemic or natural disaster.

What your community can do to build social support and connectedness

? Is your community socially inclusive and connected?

Socially connected and inclusive communities recognize the strengths that different people and groups have and provide opportunities for residents to interact in positive ways. You can build connectedness and inclusivity into your community by:

- Promoting opportunities for civic engagement, like volunteer participation, membership in civic organizations and voting.
- Celebrating the diversity and culture of your community through events like county fairs, community festivals, [community gardens or community art projects/programs](#) that can facilitate a sense of togetherness.
- Supporting neighborhood gatherings or neighborhood projects such as parades, chalk art contests, or neighborhood scavenger hunts, breakfasts on the farm, and park and recreation events.
- Creating a group like [The Greater La Crosse Area Diversity Council](#) to strengthen community connection by cultivating diversity, access, inclusion and equity through collaborative projects and programs. They facilitate discussions or projects around diversity, racism and equity in their local communities.
- [Organizing and promoting community wellness activities.](#)

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Older adults

? Is your community providing additional efforts to connect with and provide social support for the elderly populations?

[Group programs](#) that are specifically for older adults can decrease social isolation and improve mental health. You can encourage older people to develop a social support network by:

- Providing places for adults to meet such as senior, neighborhood or religious centers. UW-Extension La Crosse County partnered with ADRC and Parks and Recreation to host [Wise Wednesdays](#), a social connection group for older adults at a building managed by the Parks and Recreation department.
- Organizing social gaming groups or book clubs, or exercise classes specifically aimed at older adults. For example, the [StrongBodies™](#) program facilitates social support and physical activity through a series of strength-training classes.

- Providing opportunities to share their skills with others such as financial management, gardening, cooking or sewing.
- Promoting opportunities for intergenerational contact with activities like:
 - The [Foster Grandparent program](#) where adults aged 55 years and older volunteer to serve as mentors, tutors and caregivers for children and youth with special needs.
 - [Reading Buddies in Marathon County](#). Adult volunteers are matched with kindergarten youth who need extra help learning to read.

Workplaces

- ? Are your employees socially connected?
- ? Can you provide opportunities to create relationships between coworkers?

[Social connection between employees](#) improves their mental health and the cohesiveness of your workforce. You can encourage social support among work colleagues by:

- Taking group walks during breaks
- Providing a welcoming common space
- Holding group lunches

Individuals in recovery

- ? Is your community providing opportunities for those in recovery to gain social support and support their overall well-being?

You can provide support by:

- Reaching out via email, phone or personal visits
- Providing and promoting accessible support groups.
- [Encouraging individuals in recovery](#) to take time to discover what values and beliefs are important to them to expand one's purpose in life.

What your community can do to build engagement

- ? Do you meaningfully engage with a diverse set of groups?

Meaningful engagement starts by forming relationships in your community.

- When it comes to decision making, authentic inclusion leads to better decisions and people are more likely to feel connected to the community and supported by the community when they feel like a valued member.
- It's important to [engage community leaders and minority leaders](#) in urban and rural areas in the beginning of planning, rather than in the middle or end of planning, to co-create initiatives that support all residents.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Youth

- ? Are you engaging youth as equal partners in important decisions that impact them in your community?
- ? What opportunities do you have for youth to create social support systems with the community and its members outside of the school hours?

Youth have a unique perspective of their environments. They may suggest solutions that adults may not have considered. Extracurricular and volunteer activities [create social support systems](#) for youth and create more cohesive communities. To engage youth, you might:

- Form community health coalitions that have both youth and adult members
- Include youth in community panel discussions and town hall meetings about mental health.

Community-based organizations

- ? Are you a part of behavioral health coalitions with diverse stakeholder participation?
- ? If not, who is missing from the table and how can you meaningfully form relationships and invite them to participate?

You might try a variety of methods to reach different populations:

- Map your community to physically see where you are missing representation.
- Hold meetings when and where it's convenient for the most vulnerable community members.
- Advertise for coalition members in various networks and public places.
- Use [County Health Rankings and Roadmaps' Guide to Partnering with Residents](#).

SUPPORTING A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

The environment influences the community's ability to be resilient and healthy. The environment can refer to both the built, physical environment and also the social or economic conditions that shape people's ability to thrive and be healthy. It is important to understand how social and economic factors can shape behavioral health and how they can be addressed through local practices and policies. Communities can use the following suggestions to consider how their environment is impacting the well-being of their community.

What your community can do to build healthy physical environments

Does your community provide access to safe, free spaces for residents to participate in physical activity or to spend time in nature?

Physical activity, greenspaces and safe neighborhoods [promote mental wellness](#) and community well-being. You can encourage a physical environment that promotes behavioral health in your community by:

- Promoting use of local or state parks, community exercise programs, playgrounds, pools, sport courts, greenspaces, and affordable gyms.
- [Creating safe routes](#) for pedestrians and bikers for exercise, access to parks or green spaces and everyday destinations.
- [Promoting safe walking routes](#) with landmarks or mile markers that residents can use to stay on the path such as story walks, painted crosswalks and street art.
- Engaging community members to consider how they might repurpose existing space to create a park or green space.
- Hosting a community-wide campaign to encourage physical activity.
- Using the [CDC's strategies to increase physical activity](#).

? Have you considered if residents of all cultures, races or ethnicities feel safe in the community?

Perception of safety impacts mental health and ability to move freely through the community.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Older adults

? Is your community easily accessed by older adults?

Accessibility can influence how residents are able to interact in the environment. Look for barriers and improve access for older adults in your community. Identify problem areas like:

- Parking that requires they cross a busy street
- Stairs to enter a building
- Lack of parking
- Lack of sidewalks or cross walks

Community-based organizations

? Are you serving in locations where people can access your programming?

You could provide parking or bus tickets to participants. You could also consider using alternative locations for specific programs where you are more accessible.

Individuals in recovery

? Is your community offering outdoor experiences or encouraging exercise for those in recovery?

[Physical community recreation](#) can aid in the recovery of individuals with mental health challenges.

What your community can do to support healthy economic and social conditions

? Do residents in your community have access to safe and affordable housing?

[Affordable housing decreases financial stress](#) for community members and allows them to spend money on other basic needs that support healthy living. Establishing a housing coalition may be one way to identify local needs and advocate for change.

? What local practices or policies can you implement to limit substance use or harm reduction, creating a healthier environment?

You might implement:

- Local-level policies for alcohol and tobacco advertising
- Community-based efforts to decrease alcohol, tobacco and other drug use
- Needle disposal stations
- [Naloxone education and distribution](#)

? Does your community have access to healthy and affordable food?

Access to healthy food makes eating healthier easier and evidence shows that fueling your body with healthy food positively influences mental health. Youth in Dane county addressed access to healthy food in their neighborhood by [forming a relationship with their local co-op to increase use of food assistance programs at their store](#). This allowed families to stretch their food dollars and buy healthy food in their neighborhood. Other examples to address access to health food in your community are:

- Conducting outreach and education to ensure all individuals eligible to participate in federal food programs like SNAP, WIC and school meals are able to make use of these services.
- Subsidizing the cost of fruits and vegetables for individuals participating in federal food programs (i.e. SNAP, WIC) by supporting local incentive programs at farmers markets and food retailers.
- Implementing a [fruit and veggie Rx program](#).
- Strengthening child nutrition programs and [school lunch initiatives](#).
- Implementing universal school breakfast programs.
- Implementing Farm to School and Farm to Early Childhood Education, and expanding the number of sites offering the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).
- Assuring availability of healthy foods at emergency feeding operations like food pantries, community meal sites.
- Implementing healthy food [initiatives in food banks](#).

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Workplaces

? Does your workplace pay a living wage? Above minimum wage?

Higher wages have the [potential to lessen financial stress](#).

? Do you address trauma in your workplace?

Trauma-informed practices can create a better environment for employees. You can support trauma-informed practices in the workplace by:

- Providing agendas for staff to know what to expect during meetings
- Educating supervisory staff on trauma-informed practices to avoid re-traumatizing employees.
- Understanding [mental health concerns](#) in the workplace.

SUPPORTING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SERVICES

Access to mental health care and services is an important factor influencing behavioral health. Communities can examine what care is available, who has access to receive care and what other barriers exist in their community to receive services.

What your community can do to support access to care and services

? Do all individuals in your community have access to mental health care?

? If you are in a community where mental health care is not readily available, are you advertising or supporting access to telecare mental health options?

[Telehealth care](#) can be an effective alternative when in-person care is not an option.

? Do you know what systems and programs exist in the community that connect individuals to services and/or support?

Create a “where to get help” guide that includes services, contacts, and links that are useful to your community, like the [Lincoln County Social Needs Resource list](#). Post it on a website and/or distribute hard copies.

? Are you recommending care that is culturally appropriate as possible?

[Culturally appropriate care](#) adapts health care practices to the patients’ norms, beliefs, values, languages and skills, and improves mental health outcomes.

? Do you share national, state or county helplines or crisis lines?

While not a substitute for local access, hotlines can help individuals deal with immediate behavioral health concerns:

- The Wisconsin Division of Health Services provides a list of [suicide crisis hotlines](#) for different populations.
- Prevent Suicide Wisconsin provides a list of [county crisis lines](#).
- National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) WI provides a list of [crisis resources](#) ranging from suicide, substance abuse and domestic violence.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Workplaces

? Do you provide sick leave to all employees?

Sick leave supports individuals in being able to take care of their health needs to stay healthier, more resilient and productive.

? Does the company insurance policy make it easy to access mental health services?

If not, some employers may have options to work with their insurance company to make mental health services more accessible to their employees.

? Do you have an employee assistance program (EAP)?

[Employee assistance programs](#) show evidence of decreasing depression and anxiety and increasing productivity.

Schools

? Can youth access mental health services directly in the school building?

Community-based organizations

? Are you intentionally reaching out to high-risk individuals/populations about services you can provide?

? If needed, can you facilitate access to appropriate health services if they need care that is beyond your focus?

? Do you have a plan for when your clients may need help with a mental health issue?

Being aware of a written plan can help employees and volunteers intervene when necessary.

OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD SKILLS

Individual behaviors and actions are dependent on the environment in which people live. Resilient communities provide healthy opportunities for all residents to build stress coping skills. Coping skills help individuals effectively manage stress or other mental health issues on a day to day basis. Use the following suggestions to think about how your community supports healthy coping skills.

What your community can do to support healthy coping skills

? Do you promote positive coping skills, taking mental rests, practicing mindfulness or mindful movements like yoga?

Using these relaxation techniques have been shown to reduce stress for many audiences and reduce disruptive behaviors in youth. These activities could be encouraged in many settings like schools, workplaces, community organizations.

? Do you promote the use of evidence-based or research informed programs for all residents, [including youth](#), to build healthy social and emotional skills?

? Are programs appropriate for diverse audiences?

? Do you require that members of your community/organization are trained in recognizing signs and symptoms of mental illness and substance use and how to appropriately reach out to refer to services?

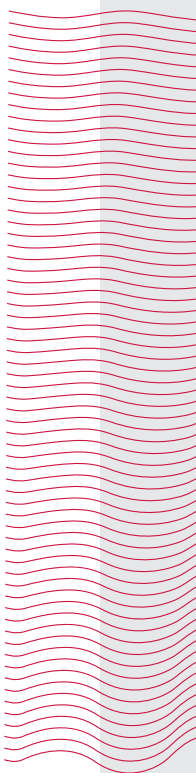
This can help individuals understand their own mental health, but also gain skills to help others. One example of a training used in Wisconsin is [Mental Health First Aid](#). There are many different adaptations for populations (youth, adults, teens, rural, etc.).

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Caregivers/care-giving professionals

? Do you have a plan to address compassion fatigue?

Explore a [compassion resilience toolkit](#) with resources for schools, human service workers, and parents and caregivers.



STIGMA

Stigma surrounding mental health and substance use is a considerable issue in communities and socially influences the health of the community. Stigma impacts how communities and individuals deal with behavioral health concerns.

Reducing stigma in the community can create more opportunities to share experiences and build a shared sense of accountability for improving well-being. Communities can consider the following questions and program examples to encourage open discussion of behavioral health to decrease stigma.

What your community can do to reduce stigma

? Do leaders in your community or organization openly discuss behavioral health or promote discussions to reduce stigma and to change current narratives surrounding mental health or substance use?

Leaders have power to start conversations in their community. Encouraging discussions can decrease the stigma and normalize the occurrence of behavioral health disorders. UW-Extension La Crosse County is on the collaborative board for the [Campaign to Change Direction](#), an awareness group working to normalize discussions at the community level. Collaborators include leaders in health care institutes, La Crosse County, area businesses, school districts, circuit courts, NAMI, Suicide Prevention Initiative and Veterans Affairs.

? Do community members have opportunities to hear from others who live with mental illnesses?

Providing messages of recovery from mental health disorders or sharing stories how people thrive while coping with mental health disorders can provide hope. Wisconsin Initiative for Stigma Elimination (WISE) is a coalition that works to raise the voices of people who are in recovery to eliminate stigma. NAMI Waukesha supports a program called [Stories of Hope](#) that works to reduce stigma by having speakers who live with mental illness facilitate the program.



? Do you share infographics about mental health disorders rates to show all residents that mental health disorders are common and treatable?

The National Alliance for Mental Illness has an [Infographic and Fact Sheet library](#) with a wide range of materials on various mental health related topics. Or, use state or local data to create your own infographics.

? Do you use person-centered language, which respects the consumer by separating the symptoms from the person with thoughtful language?

The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health provides an overview of how [Language Matters in Mental Health](#).

? Do you have signage or messaging in your community that encourages residents to take care of their mental health like they would take care of their physical health?

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Schools

? Do you take steps to reduce the stigma that students face when talking about behavioral health?

You can encourage conversations in the school environment or promote a school-wide campaign about mental health to foster conversations.

- Communities around Wisconsin have been implementing [NAMI's Raise Your Voice](#), which empowers youth to start conversations around mental health through education, leadership and advocacy to reduce stigma in the school or community.

For more information, visit the UW-Madison Division of Extension Behavioral Health Program online.



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