



Human Development &  
Relationships Institute  
DIVISION OF EXTENSION  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

# IMPACT REPORT



## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Over the past two years, the Human Development & Relationships Institute has remained deeply committed to centering human development in every aspect of our work. The American Human Development Index reminds us that a person's ability to live a healthy, fulfilling life is influenced by many factors — access to information, financial stability, safe environments, and meaningful support systems. Our institute's work is guided by this concept, and invested in connecting individuals, families and communities to the resources they need to thrive, strengthening the well-being of Wisconsin residents across the lifespan. As Measure of America defines it, human development is “the process of enlarging people's freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being.” At its core, this work is about expanding the real freedoms people have to shape their own lives and futures.

*As Measure of America defines it, human development is “the process of enlarging people's freedoms and opportunities and improving their well-being.”*

Across 37 counties in Wisconsin, the Human Development & Relationships Institute works every day to make that vision a reality. Through research-based programming, strategic partnerships, and community-responsive initiatives, we support individuals and families in building resilience, strengthening relationships, and preventing crisis before it begins.

This report highlights stories of impact that reflect the dedication of our educators, staff, and collaborators. It also celebrates the statewide partnerships that made this work possible, including two signature conferences that have engaged more than 3,000 participants since 2024.

Together, we are creating pathways for healthier families, stronger communities, and lasting impact across Wisconsin.



*Danielle Y. Hairston Green*

**DANIELLE Y. HAIRSTON GREEN, PhD, CFCS-HDFS**

Assistant Dean and Human Development & Relationships Institute Director  
University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension



### MISSION

We promote the development of resilient individuals and communities across Wisconsin and at every stage of life through meaningful collaborations and research-based education.

### VALUES

#### Service

We meet community needs by collaborating with local residents and partners and connecting them with university resources.

#### Inclusion

We foster belonging and respect and amplify diverse voices within our communities and our work.

#### Growth

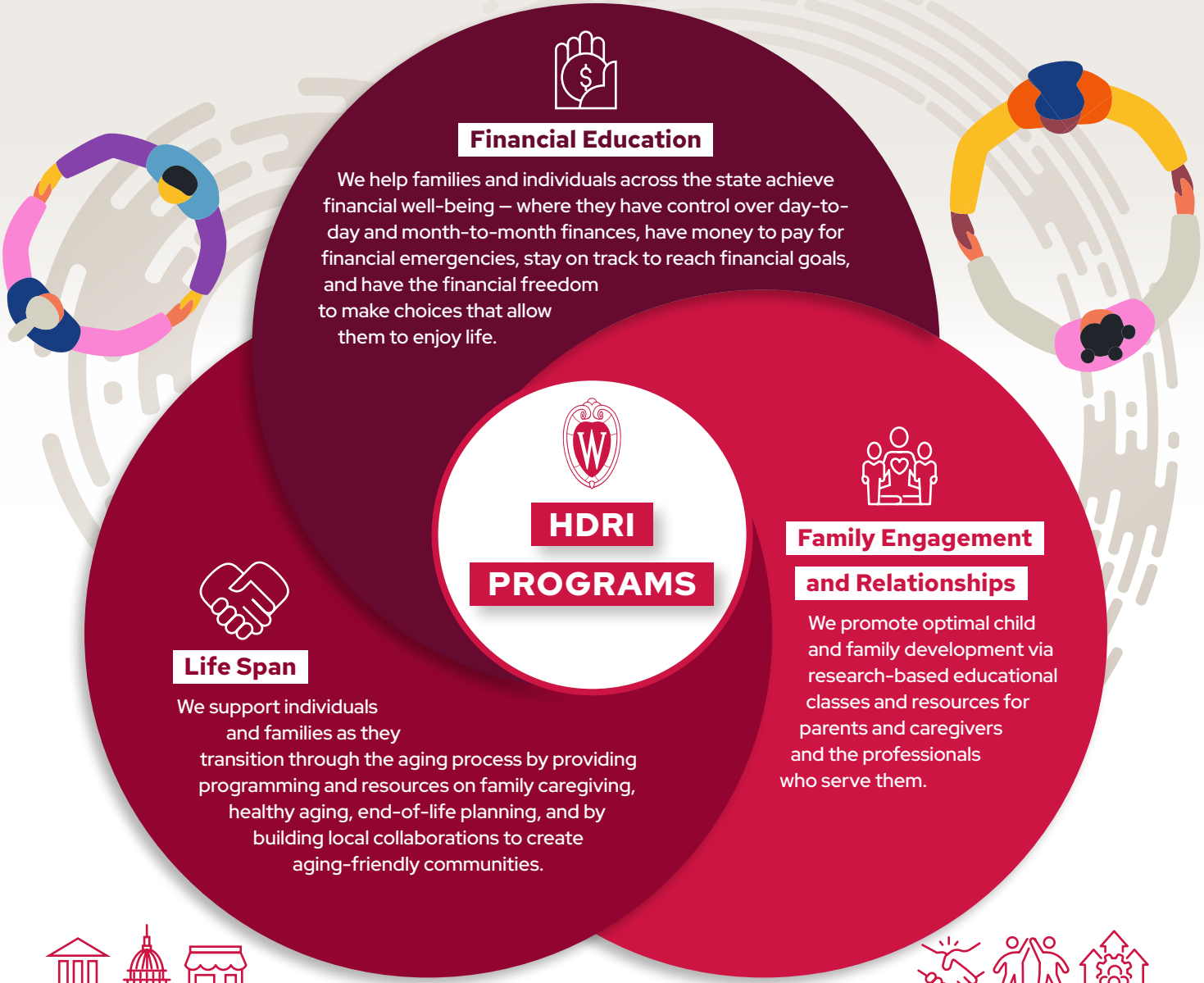
We rely on current research to guide our work and evolve through innovation and quality improvement.

## About UW–Madison Extension

Founded in 1891, UW–Madison Extension embodies the Wisconsin Idea to extend university knowledge to every corner of the state. Extension works toward community, family, and business development; youth engagement; and natural resources and well-being programming all across Wisconsin. Through a statewide network of educators and specialists, Extension responds every day to emerging and long-standing hurdles faced by individuals, families, and communities. We leverage local resources and collaborations to lead research with community input, making changes that improve lives throughout Wisconsin.



In 2024–25, the Human Development & Relationships Institute (HDRI) had more than **84,000 interactions** with people who took part in our classes, used our resources, and worked together with us.



**Financial Education**

We help families and individuals across the state achieve financial well-being – where they have control over day-to-day and month-to-month finances, have money to pay for financial emergencies, stay on track to reach financial goals, and have the financial freedom to make choices that allow them to enjoy life.

**Life Span**

We support individuals and families as they transition through the aging process by providing programming and resources on family caregiving, healthy aging, end-of-life planning, and by building local collaborations to create aging-friendly communities.

**Family Engagement and Relationships**

We promote optimal child and family development via research-based educational classes and resources for parents and caregivers and the professionals who serve them.

**HDRI PROGRAMS**



In 2024–25, HDRI worked together with **more than 900** federal, state, and county government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses.



**We work together** to benefit local communities. Our county-based educators and campus-based specialists collaborate with people, organizations, and agencies across Wisconsin. We are the link to the university’s world-class resources and research.

# We Build Community Capacity

**Building community capacity** means empowering communities to solve their own problems and shape their future. The Human Development & Relationships Institute strengthens partnerships to achieve shared goals and helps organizations plan strategically to address complex issues, fostering collaboration and sustainable community growth.



## Raising Wisconsin's Children Conference Celebrates Five Years

**For children to thrive**, parents and the professionals who serve them need better support. When caregivers have the skills and resources they need, they provide care that results in children reaching their full potential.

That's why the free, virtual, all-day Raising Wisconsin's Children conference:

- Gathers parents, caregivers, and the professionals who support them and provides science-based, practical approaches to strengthening children's growth and development
- Provides thousands of continuing education hours for professionals so that they stay connected to the latest evidence-based practices
- Is available live or as a recording, so busy parents and professionals can access the latest research and information when it works best for them

The Raising Wisconsin's Children conference will celebrate its fifth year in 2026. By request, upcoming conferences will offer continuing education hours for social workers and other human service professionals.



**“** I work for a Head Start program and a lot of what was said really connected with what we try to do as a program.”

– RWC Participant

### In 2024–25:



More than **1,500 caregivers** from Wisconsin earned more than **1,000 hours** of continuing education through the RWC conference



**75%** of participants shared something they learned with a family member, friend, or colleague

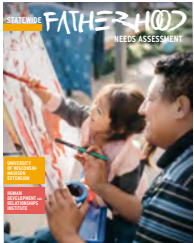


**87%** of childhood professionals and **88%** of parents were likely to apply what they learned at the conference in their daily work and family lives



# Fathers in Focus Conference

Over the past two years, the **Fathers in Focus** initiative has become a cornerstone of the Human Development & Relationships Institute’s efforts to strengthen father engagement across Wisconsin. Informed by the [Wisconsin Statewide Fatherhood](#)



[Needs Assessment](#), the conference centers fathers’ lived experiences while addressing the realities they navigate every day — including co-parenting, mental health, economic stability, legal systems, and relationship well-being. The 2024–25 Fathers in Focus conference season engaged more than 500 registrants, reflecting both strong demand and a clear gap in father-centered learning spaces. Designed as a free, full-day convening, the conference blends research-based content, peer learning, and relationship-building in ways that are accessible and relevant to dads and those who support them.

Beyond its impact on individual fathers, Fathers in Focus plays a critical role in strengthening the capacity of educators, advocates, policy makers, and service providers statewide. The conference received over 120 presentation proposals from across the country, positioning Wisconsin as a leader in advancing father-inclusive practice and innovation. By intentionally convening practitioners alongside fathers themselves, the conference fosters cross-sector learning, sparks collaboration, and informs more responsive programs and policies. Nearly \$50,000 in donations and sponsorships further demonstrate shared investment in this work and its long-term sustainability. Through Fathers in Focus, Extension strengthens both individual families and the systems that support them — advancing HDRI’s mission to build resilient families and thriving communities across the state.



“The sharing of resources, opinions, love, ideas, and self care was second to none. Fathers in Focus was a safe space for individuals to learn, connect, and support one another. I’m grateful for the opportunity to attend and will be back for years to come.”

-TERRY JONES, Youth Counselor, Foster Parent, and Mentor,  
Wisconsin Department of Corrections

“The conference provided opportunities to learn about resources available to families in Wisconsin, time to collaborate with others on topics relevant to the needs in my community, and a chance to make positive connections with others.”

-JASON HOLZEMER, Principal, Cuba City  
Elementary School





Financial conversations



Setting goals



Maximizing income



Spending



Saving



Borrowing



Protecting your money

## Teaching Community Members to Teach Community Members

When people and families are financially stable, they live better lives, promote the local economy, and rely less on public services. When there are people in the community who can help others be financially stable, they reach more people.

**Encouraging Financial Conversations** is an HDRI class that helps social workers, case managers, and other community service providers to work with people to set and achieve goals with their money.

**In the six-class series, participants learn to teach their clients how to:**

- Set financial goals and priorities
- Track bills and spending
- Manage expenses
- Save and borrow
- Build credit and check credit reports

**Following the class:**



of participants felt more prepared to bring up a financial topic with clients



plan to incorporate financial topics into conversations with clients



understand the role they can take in working with clients on financial concerns

## Designing Welcoming Spaces in Communities

Communities across Wisconsin are growing older. In the next 10 years at least 10 counties are projected to have 40 percent or more of their population age 65 and older. This shift provides an opportunity for Extension educators to provide leadership and support for communities to adopt age-friendly practices that promote social connection, strengthen community well-being, and ensure people of all ages can participate fully and safely in their own communities.

In Oconto County, the Extension educator sent letters to the superintendents and athletic directors in all five school districts sharing observations of school spaces most likely to be used by the general public. The letters also included practical, cost-effective recommendations that would improve accessibility for all people, create a sense of belonging, and increase social connection opportunities during youth sporting events and other community events on school property.

As a result of this effort, 60 percent of districts that were contacted have discussed environmental improvements at their schools with the Extension educator.

**With help from HDRI, schools made easy changes that made a big difference, like:**

- Installing handrails along bleachers in gyms
- Adding handrails along outdoor sidewalks to cut down on trips and falls
- Shuttling people from the parking lot to outdoor bleachers with golf carts
- Making areas aside from gyms where people can watch livestreams of events to cut down on crowding and chances to trip or fall
- Reserving lower bleacher rows for people who can't make it to higher rows

**These changes:**



Can be part of long-term community planning in any county with help from HDRI



Are lasting ways to make it easier for people to get around



Encourage social connection



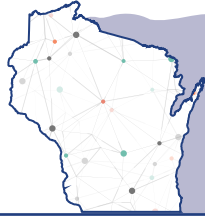
Make sure people of all ages can take part in community life fully and safely



Make communities stronger



# Collaborations that Build Community Capacity



In 2024–25, HDRI collaborated with **nearly 1,000** local, state, and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other groups to benefit local communities throughout Wisconsin.



## FINRA (Financial Industry Regulatory Authority) Foundation and United Way Worldwide

With a \$20,000 grant to provide financial education in the workplace, HDRI developed the Financial Wellness at Work program.

### In Chippewa, Dodge, and Fond du Lac Counties:

All new county employees get the Grow Your Green workbooks and financial calendar with their onboarding materials. They can learn more through posters and table tents in common areas and lunch and learn financial workshops. The information is also shared in employee wellness newsletters.



In Wood County, this financial information is included in the employee wellness incentive program.

County employees can even earn points for incentives when they watch a financial wellness video and take a short quiz.



## Wisconsin Department of Corrections

In four counties, individuals residing in DOC facilities can take part in HDRI programs.

### Re-entry Ready: Focus on

**Finances** helps people who will soon leave correctional facilities prepare themselves to be responsible with their money after they are released. Participants learn to set and achieve financial goals, plan and manage their income and expenses, and build credit.

**The Literacy Link** connects young children with their parents in jail and prison. Parents gain access to parent education and support, including providing interactive reading opportunities for their children. For more on this program, see **The Literacy Link** on Page 12.



**Roots and Wings Foundation and Milwaukee Bucks Foundation** support The Literacy Link program.

**Their generous contributions** provide high-quality books to children with parents in jail and prison and turn waiting and visiting areas into comfortable, child-friendly spaces.



The **UW–Madison Office of Child Care and Family Resources** and HDRI worked together on a **statewide needs assessment** and learned that childcare providers want the following:



- Education to understand and respond to child development because it's different for each child
- Ways to work better with parents, including having difficult conversations and showing them where to find community resources
- Better support for new professionals, including education to get them started off on the right foot

The office also collaborates with HDRI on the Raising Wisconsin's Children and Fathers in Focus conferences.

# We Help Families Overcome Challenges

Every family faces tough times, including financial stress, relationship struggles, or unexpected transitions. The good news is that families can recover and grow stronger. The Human Development & Relationships Institute equips families with the tools and support they need to navigate challenges, build resilience, and thrive at every stage of life.



## Co-Parenting Support Helps Families Adjust

When parents separate or divorce, families face challenges that make it difficult for children to adjust. With the right support, parents can cooperate, reduce conflict, and make good decisions in the interest of their children. Our co-parenting classes and supports make a real difference for parents raising children together while living apart.

**Parents Forever**, a year-long series of monthly classes, fulfills a local court requirement of co-parenting education for parents who are getting a divorce or changing custody arrangement of their children.

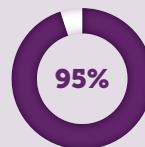
### Through in-person and virtual Parents Forever classes in 2024–25:



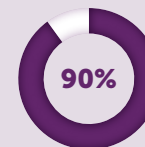
Nearly  
**700**  
parents and caregivers residing in **39 counties** came to a class



94%  
of participants had a **better understanding** of how divorce and separation affects their children



95%  
said they felt like they could **help their children** through challenges related to divorce and separation

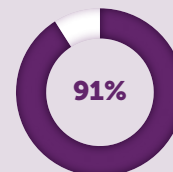


90%  
of participants learned **new co-parenting techniques** like conflict resolution, which helps children adjust during major changes

### Resilient Co-Parenting is a monthly support class for parents who have finished Parents Forever.



**120+**  
participants joined one or more Resilient Co-Parenting classes in 2024–25



91%  
said they learned ways to help their family **communicate better**



## Planning for End-of-Life

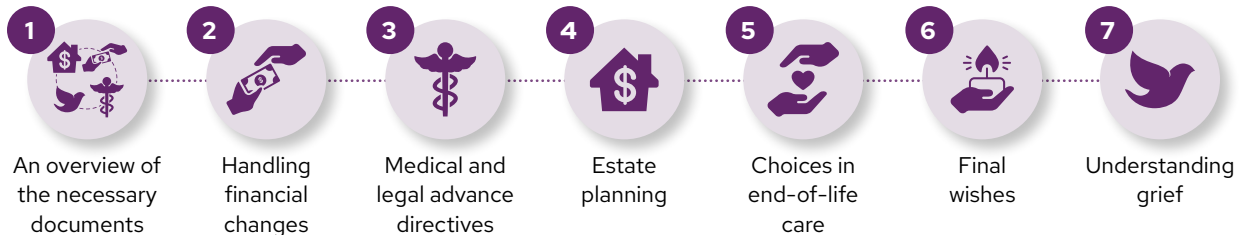
End-of-life planning can be confusing and emotional, yet it is one of the best gifts you can give your loved ones. This process takes time, thoughtful consideration, and can involve having difficult conversations with people you care about. To help guide people through the end-of-life planning process, Extension developed **Planning AHEAD**, a holistic end-of-life planning series.

In 2024-25:

**58**  
**Planning AHEAD**  
 series were  
 offered in person  
 and online

**820**  
 participants  
 attended a  
 Planning AHEAD  
 session

### Planning AHEAD is a series of seven one-hour sessions that include:



### Six to nine months after Planning AHEAD:



**72%**

of participants had **gathered information** like contacts and the locations of documents



**75%**

had **communicated important information** with a loved one or trusted individual



**62%**

of participants were **actively planning or maintaining** their end-of-life planning, up from 23% before the program

### Planning AHEAD participants said they attended the program because they:



Didn't want to burden their family



Wanted to be prepared due to personal circumstances



Had experience with handling family affairs when someone did not have a plan in place

Planning AHEAD is expanding outside the borders of Wisconsin by training Extension professionals across the country to deliver the program in their own communities.

**“** The instructors were able to take so much mystery and fear out of end-of-life planning because they gave us enough education to know how to start.”

– Planning AHEAD Participant

**“** Excellent course for those who need to start their planning journey, very informative and helpful for those who need information on updating their plans.”

– Planning AHEAD Participant



# Learning to Rent Smart Builds Housing Confidence

Stable housing is one of the most important needs in life. But community members who are new to renting don't always have the information they need. That's why HDRI's free **Rent Smart** classes are held in more than 15 Wisconsin counties at high schools, jails, homeless shelters, and libraries. The program is also available online each month to anyone in Wisconsin.

**Rent Smart teaches topics like:**

- Tenant rights
- Landlord relationships
- Rental applications
- Rental agreements



In 2024-25:

# 3,329

people participated in Rent Smart



## 98%

strongly agree or agree that they **understand their responsibilities as a tenant** after the class compared to 54.3% before



## 94%

of respondents to our follow-up survey who moved since completing Rent Smart said their **new housing is safer, more affordable, and/or better quality** than their prior housing



## 79%

of respondents are **now paying their monthly rent on time** compared to nearly 50% who were paying their rent on time before the class



*“I began to note everything prior to moving in and taking pictures of everything in the home. I used the template Rent Smart provided so the landlord and I both know the damages that were there already.”*

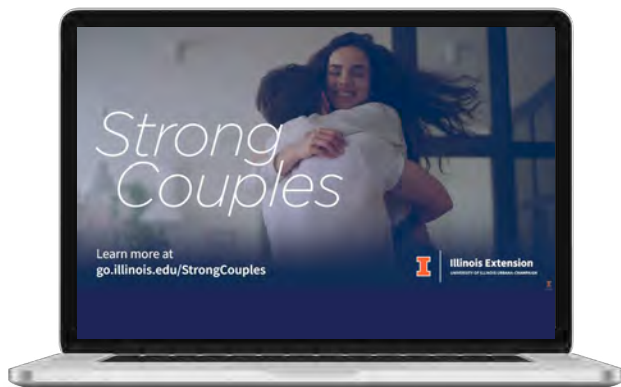
– Rent Smart Participant

*“Before I would just do one walk through of how the apartment look then just accept it. Rent Smart taught me to ask questions confidently and what things to check and look out for since this will be the place that we make our home.”*

– Rent Smart Participant

# We Promote Strong Social Ties

Healthy relationships are vital for individual and community well-being. Strong social ties, sharing resources, offering support, and staying connected help communities flourish. The Human Development & Relationships Institute fosters strong social ties by improving the quality of relationships, linking families to agencies and organizations, ensuring they can access and use community resources effectively.



## Strong Couples are Part of Strong Communities

The quality of our relationships — especially with our significant other — affects our mental well-being. Our partner relationships affect our families, work connections, and community interactions too.

That's why HDRI's **Strong Couples Program**, a collaboration with University of Illinois Extension, offers a free way to learn tools that, according to decades of scientific research, can help improve relationships.

The Strong Couples Program is a series of six online modules for couples of any age who have been together for six months or longer. They can watch the modules together and learn tools to improve their relationships. The modules are focused on topics like communication, commitment, problem-solving, and fun and friendship.

Participants also complete five coach calls with an Extension education to practice the skills they're learning through the online modules.

*“This program is life changing!”*  
— Strong Couples Participant

*“I strongly feel that every couple could benefit from going through a program like this.”*  
— Strong Couples Participant

In 2024–25:

**138** people from **25** Wisconsin counties participated in Strong Couples



**97%** were satisfied or very satisfied with Strong Couples



**80%** used skills and facts they learned with other family members



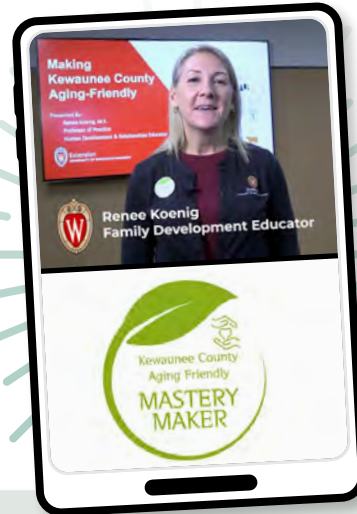
**64%** recommended the class to others



## Helping Older Wisconsinites Connect and Stay Active

Strong social ties play an important role in a person's well-being across the lifespan and are a key factor in healthy aging. As people age, they often experience fewer social connections because they are more likely to live alone, lose loved ones, or have chronic health conditions that limit their ability to leave home. To address this, Extension educators offer educational programs and provide leadership and support for local coalitions that create meaningful opportunities for community members to engage socially and civically.

In Kewaunee County, under the leadership of the Extension educator, Aging-Friendly Kewaunee County received funding from the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation to address social isolation and loneliness. One of their project goals was to improve leadership skills and encourage volunteerism among older adults in Kewaunee County. To do this, the coalition developed a series of videos highlighting 14 **Mastery Makers** and their efforts to increase social connection in the community. The Mastery Makers are a group of volunteers aged 60 and older that are dedicated to making a difference in their community.



  
**10,000+**

To date, the Mastery Maker videos have had **10,000+** social media likes, comments, shares, and saves.

  
**45%**

Twenty of the 22 organizations that took part reported a **45% increase** in the number of volunteer hours provided.

  
**65%**

65% of Mastery Makers reported confidence/motivation to take a **leadership role** in other community organizations.

The coalition led by the Extension educator also hosted 22 community presentations on a variety of topics related to aging. More than 200 older community members attended.

### Evaluation of the workshops facilitated by UW-Madison Extension show that:

  
**92%**

of respondents increased awareness of the impact of isolation/loneliness on health

  
**88%**

increase in participants' feelings of connection/belonging in the county

  
**88%**

felt that they learned the skills or knowledge to connect more with others



# We Support Family Stability

To help families thrive, we must address the unfair systems shaping people's lives. The Human Development & Relationships Institute works to improve conditions where people live, work, and play. Communities that strive for justice tend to build stronger, more resilient families and long-term stability.



## Financial Coaching Helps Families Find and Keep Their Footing

Financial uncertainty can make it hard for families if they're worried about affording housing, food, and other necessities. Through the HDRI **Financial Coaching** program, Wisconsin residents can get one-on-one counseling to help them make a personalized plan to manage their money based on their goals. Financial Coaching has helped hundreds of Wisconsinites improve their lives by teaching them how to set and meet their money goals.



### In 2024-25:



**269 clients** took part in financial coaching with Extension educators



**94%** identified specific and measurable goals



**134 clients** increased their employment status



**73%** developed a spending plan



**62%** reported decreased stress



**81%** felt they could tackle financial challenges independently



**Saved \$111,340**



**Paid off \$101,645** in debt



**24 clients** qualified for Work 'n Wheels auto loans and purchased vehicles



Clients reported that a total of **769 family members benefited** from the positive changes that came from financial coaching

One Financial Coaching client gained custody of their children by showing the financial stability they gained through coaching.

One Financial Coaching client refinanced their car loan to a lower interest rate so they can pay it off faster.

Another client saved enough to help pay for their son's wedding.





# Helping Children and Parents Stay Connected During Incarceration

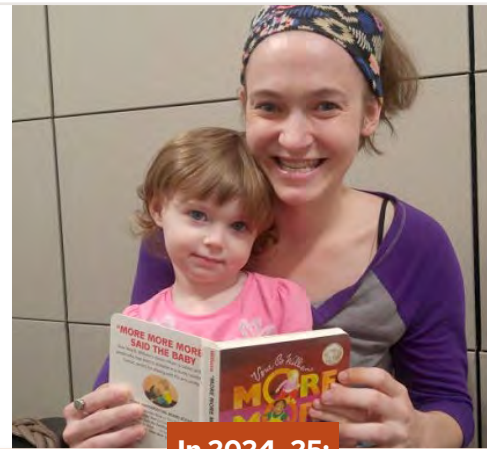
In Wisconsin, one in 14 children have had a parent who lives with them go to jail or prison. But even during stressful times when a parent is incarcerated, families can stay connected. **The Literacy Link** gives families the opportunity to maintain and strengthen connection through literacy-based experiences.



Parents who are incarcerated can take part in a workshop that shows them how reading to their younger children helps them connect. For 75 percent of parents, this was the first time they had taken a parenting class.

After the workshop, parents receive one-on-one coaching from an Extension educator and are recorded reading a children's book using the strategies they learned earlier. The children are given the book and the video so they can connect with their parent and stay in each others' lives. Their caregivers get information on how to encourage reading at home and support parent-child connection during incarceration.

The Literacy Link works together with jails, criminal justice organizations, and libraries to help families while children grow their language and reading skills.



In 2024-25:

Extension educators in **11 counties** supported



### After the Class

- 91%** felt closer to their children
- 89%** felt more confident reading to their children after release
- 62%** planned to call, write, or visit more often with their children



*“Recording the video helped me show my girls that I still care about them and think about them.”*  
– Participant in The Literacy Link Program

*“I felt I was able to express to [my children] that even though I’m not there, I still love and care for them.”*  
– Participant in The Literacy Link Program



## Connecting Family Caregivers

There are more than 700,000 people living in Wisconsin who see themselves as a family caregiver of an adult they're related to. This important role can be lonely and hard, but also joyful and rewarding. In the often "invisible role" of a caregiver, so much hard work can go unnoticed. Caregivers themselves may struggle to cope with and manage stress and health issues while they take care of another adult who has their own unique needs and challenges.

In a special project co-led by HDRI Specialist Dr. Kristin Litzelman called *In Care Of: Postcard-Sized Portrayals of Caregiving in Wisconsin*, caregivers shared their experiences by mailing in postcards. The postcards were collected in a physical and online exhibition that tells the story of the many emotions that come along with caregiving.

*In Care Of* encourages conversations about caregiving while spreading the word about help for caregivers at the local and state levels. The exhibition is divided into three themes: Joys and Challenges, Caregiving Shapes Us, and Liminal Spaces. Some postcards talk about healing relationships with parents, learning self care practices, and redefining their idea of success.

To date, there have been nearly 1,000 views of the website, eight formal tours of the exhibit on display in the School of Human Ecology to 99 visitors, and 19 presentations on the project reaching 350 participants. Fifty-eight viewers left "reflection cards" after seeing the exhibit to share their thoughts. Many wrote their own stories of caregiving. Some said they were inspired or noted something they learned.

*In Care Of* was led by HDRI Specialist Dr. Kristin Litzelman and caregiving advocate Kristin Voss, founder of the Center for Caregiver Serenity, a Madison-area nonprofit, in collaboration with Extension and the Center for Design and Material Culture, and was funded by the Reilly-Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment.



View the *In Care Of* exhibit online:  
[in-care-of.humanecology.wisc.edu](https://in-care-of.humanecology.wisc.edu)





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