

2025

Impact Report

LA CROSSE COUNTY
UW-EXTENSION OFFICE



**Sarah Torbert,
Area Extension Director**

The Wisconsin Idea in Action

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



In 2025, La Crosse County Extension exemplified the Wisconsin Idea by ensuring that university research, educational resources, and community partnerships directly supported the needs of local residents. With active programming in Community Development, Human Development & Relationships, Agriculture, and FoodWise, the La Crosse County team maintained a strong presence throughout the community. These program areas collectively advanced local leadership, strengthened families, supported farm businesses, and promoted nutrition security through education grounded in current research.

A hallmark of Extension's impact in La Crosse County is the strength of its volunteer network. In 2025, 119 volunteers contributed 6,081 hours of service, representing an estimated \$200,673 in contributed value to the community. These volunteers extended the reach of Extension across youth programming, community initiatives, educational events, and local partnerships; demonstrating how deeply embedded Extension is in the fabric of La Crosse County.

Extension programming reached 7,710 educational contacts in 2025, reflecting a high level of community engagement and the ongoing demand for accessible, research-informed education. From workshops and community meetings to school partnerships and one-on-one support, these contacts highlight the breadth of learning opportunities provided throughout the year.

La Crosse County also benefited from Extension's statewide network of specialists and program teams. This system enables local staff to collaborate with subject-matter experts across campus and around the state, ensuring that residents have access to the most current knowledge in areas such as agriculture, family well-being, youth development, organizational leadership, and community planning. Leveraging these statewide resources strengthened local programming and supported the county in addressing emerging issues and community priorities.

As the incoming Area Extension Director beginning January of 2026, I am stepping into a county with a deeply engaged team, strong volunteer partnerships, and a clear commitment to serving its residents. The accomplishments of 2025 reflect the ongoing impact of the Wisconsin Idea in La Crosse County and underscore Extension's vital role in connecting people, communities, and institutions through education that improves lives.

Sincerely,

Sarah Torbert, Area Extension Director

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119

Volunteers contributed 6,081 hours of service to support our programming in 2025.

569

Youth enrolled in 4-H programming, a 5% increase from 2024.

4-H Positive Youth Development



Emily Crook, Positive Youth Development Educator

What We Do: Provide meaningful opportunities for all youth and adults to work together to create sustainable community change. This is accomplished within three primary content areas, or mission areas – civic engagement and leadership, healthy living, and science. This includes volunteer management and training, hosting 8-10 county-wide events annually, providing educational resources for clubs and groups, and providing outreach educational resources whenever applicable to our local and state-wide need.

2025 Program Highlights: Increasing our membership and opportunities. We had 569 youth enroll – a 5% increase in membership from the year prior, with an 80% retention rate of current members, and a slight increase in new members. This year we focused on making slight changes to events to better serve the needs of our families. We saw a dramatic increase in Foods Revue participation in 2025 from (11 participants to 25), along with a very positive growth in food stand

participation. Our other annual events: Clover College, Expressive Arts, Craft Fair, and Achievement Celebration are holding steady, and the 4-H Leaders Board is working on boosting the foundations of their mission to connect more with volunteer leaders.

We filled Upham Woods to capacity with all the campers in Area 13 (La Crosse, Monroe, Vernon, Crawford and Richland Counties) – 25 campers, 3 counselors and 2 chaperones attended from La Crosse. The theme for 2025 was Agent 4-H (spies!)

The 4-H Ambassador program has more membership in 2025-2026 and they will host their first overnight travel experience in February 2026, as well as host a new event for youth grades 6+ in 2026 – a skate night in March and a Fair Workshop in May.

Outreach in 2025: has been a continuation of the 2nd graders in the Northside Stars 4-H with 32 members. The first semester focused on wildlife in Wisconsin curricula, and the second semester, chosen by the youth members, will be focused on Engineering.

Highlights to look for in 2026: More updates to the food stand logistics, more support for youth officers and adult volunteers, and the addition of an AmeriCorps volunteer to assist with outreach efforts more centrally based in La Crosse, where membership could improve.



Human Development and Relationships



Heather Quackenboss,
Human Development
Educator

What We Do: The Extension Institute for Human Development & Relationships supports families and communities through programming that encourages growth and understanding. As a source of well-researched information on topics related, family relationships, child development, aging, financial security, food and nutrition security, chronic disease prevention, and mental health promotion. We provide positive and powerful training that works to catalyze positive change in Wisconsin families and communities using research, evidence-based programs, and equitable facilitation skills and tools to meet the county needs.

2025 Program Highlights: In 2025, HDR staff delivered a broad portfolio of community education, facilitation, and strategic support initiatives focused on belonging, equity, compassion resilience, safety, and systems improvement across La Crosse County and partner communities. Programming reached

county employees, community members, older adults, families, caregivers, educators, justice system leaders, nonprofit organizations, tribal nations, and statewide professional networks.

Activities included ongoing communities of practice, multi-session learning series, strategic planning and facilitation processes, one-time trainings and community-wide cultural and educational events.

Program Areas:

Compassion Resilience, Mental Wellness, and Caregiving

- Wise Wednesdays – Ongoing social-emotional learning group for older adults meeting 2–3 times per month (24+ sessions annually).
- Compassionate County – Monthly community of practice for La Crosse County employees focused on belonging, inclusion, equity, and self-reflection related to behaviors, attitudes, and actions.
- Safe Zone Trainings – Multiple three-hour trainings increasing understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, gender, sexuality, expression, and the impact of assumptions, prejudice, and privilege.
- Compassion Resilience & Boundaries – One-time presentation for future educators.

Safety, Prevention, and Personal Empowerment

- Staying Safe Workshops – Multiple workshops focused on community safety, and self-resilience.
- Rent Smart – Two presentations for first-time college-aged renters.

Strategic Facilitation and Systems Improvement

- Criminal Justice Management Council – Five sessions of strategic facilitation and goal setting.
- Intake Court Process Facilitation – Multi-department process (10 departments) including multiple meetings, resulting in recommendations to improve Intake Court procedures.
- Community Development Authority of the City of Onalaska – Three Authority sessions and five planning sessions with the City Administrator to support strategic planning.
- FLIC (Family Law Information Center) – Three facilitated meetings with La Crosse County and statewide FLIC partners for alternative exploration and discussion.

Tribal Partnership and Indigenous Community Engagement

- Get Real: Social-Emotional Brain Development Series – 24-sessions delivered in partnership with the Ho-Chunk Nation in La Crosse.
- Ho-Chunk Nation Food Sovereignty & Cultural Learning – 12 monthly sessions across multiple Ho-Chunk Nation Centers focused on traditional culture, skills, tools, and community belonging.
- Ho-Chunk Nation Division of Youth Services Strategic Facilitation – 3 meetings with all directors and staff and 10 center-based meetings
- Family Nights – La Crosse Ho-Chunk Nation Center – 12 multigenerational education events.

Agriculture and Horticulture



Sam Bibby
Crops Educator



Beth McIlquham
Livestock Educator

What We Do: The Extension Institute for Agriculture addresses emerging issues related to Wisconsin's agriculture and horticulture systems with research-based outreach to advance economically sustainable, socially responsible, and environmentally sound practices. Within La Crosse County, Sam Bibby, Regional Crops & Soils Educator, provides Wisconsin farmers with research-backed resources, educational events, and decision-making tools to optimize crop yield, farm profitability, diversification, and sustainability.

Beth McIlquham, Regional Livestock Educator, provides timely resources and information to help farmers, consumers, and allied industry partners to make informed decisions about beef cattle, poultry, sheep, goats, equine, swine, and meat science.

Program Highlights:

- Sam and Beth create an ag newsletter that reaches over 150 constituents on a monthly basis. The newsletter provides updates on work being done in the area, timely recommendations/resources, and provides upcoming event details.
 - Sam and Beth partnered with local stewardship, grazing, and watershed groups to put on a workshop that discussed various aspects of grazing cover crops. Topics discussed included cover crop grazing strategies, on-farm research update on interseeding cover crops, and an opportunity to ask questions to a panel of producers who graze cover crops.
 - Beth and Sam implemented Cow-Calf workshops with various timely topics as beef producers headed into the fall season. These workshops discussed fall weed control, selecting replacement heifers, reminders when transporting animals, cornstalk residue grazing, and winter-feeding considerations.
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- Beth was invited to speak at the Western Wisconsin Beef Producers annual meeting. She discussed management practices that can be incorporated to increase the value of calves at the sale barn. Additionally, Beth provided an update on results from research completed at Oklahoma State University about the impact of seller's reputation on calf value.
 - Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) trainings were completed across the state. At these trainings, beef producers can be certified and be eligible for large buyers who require producer certification to bid on their animals at the sale barn. The BQA training teaches best management practices on handling, nutrition, vaccination, biosecurity, recordkeeping, transportation, emergency planning, worker safety, and environmental stewardship.
 - Producing Quality Beef workshops were held at sale barns across Wisconsin in partnership with Wisconsin Beef Council and Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP). These workshops discussed live cattle evaluation from a buyer's perspective, live impacts on value, meat quality defects, quality and yield grade, pre-harvest factors that impact meat quality, and feeding and management practices.
 - Direct Marketing Beef workshops were held at local meat processing facilities across Wisconsin in partnership with Wisconsin Beef Council, DATCP, and Wisconsin Association of Meat Processors (WAMP). These workshops discussed rules and regulations when selling meat products, marketing your products, meeting consumer expectations, and a live demonstration of breaking down half a beef carcass.
 - Sam was invited by the Bad Axe Watershed group to give the soil pit presentation during their soil pit field day. He explained the different soil types, soil structures, and the effect of soil life on the health of the soil.
 - The 2025 Wisconsin Weed Workshop was hosted in Arlington, Wisconsin. This event brought in farmers, agronomists, researchers, and students from the Midwest. The day was spent learning about new sprayer technology, weed identification, and research updates for Wisconsin farms.

Agriculture and Horticulture

- Two small grains workshops were hosted in 2025 to educate farmers and agronomists about the newest UW research and recommendations. UW-Madison specialists spent the day in La Crosse and Crawford Counties engaging with farmers from the area.
- An organic crop production workshop was hosted in April of 2025. Erin Silva and the rest of the OGRAIN team from UW-Madison traveled to the driftless to share the latest research from their team with local organic crop growers.
- A camelina workshop was hosted in St. Josephs Ridge with presenters from industry and UW highlighting the new cover crop that is rapidly growing in popularity. Basic agronomic information was shared along with market updates for farmers interested in growing and harvesting camelina as an oilseed.

Community Development



Charlotte Peters,
Community
Development Educator

What We Do: The Extension Institute of Community Development helps leaders, communities, and organizations reach their potential through education in leadership, organizational growth, food systems, economic development, and local government. Our work strengthens community vitality, enriches residents' lives, and plants the seeds for thriving communities.

Year in Review:

Housing & Community Planning

- Helped with planning of Housing Week, bringing partners together for zoning discussions, rental issues, and community conversations.
- Planned the 7 County Housing Summit
- Participated in regular housing advocacy meetings and ongoing housing task force work with state partners.

Broadband & Digital Equity

- Took part in statewide meetings focused on rural equity and digital access.
- Worked with county and municipal partners to improve broadband planning and grant readiness.
- Supported digital navigator and digital inclusion efforts.

Economic & Organizational Development

- Attended CDI monthly meetings to stay aligned with statewide community development work.
- Provided assistance with strategic planning and organizational coordination to multiple organizations including The Ho-Chunk Youth Services Division, the Community Development Authority of the City of Onalaska, Habitat for Humanity and New Horizons.

Collaboration and Professional Development

- Participated in routine staff meetings, planning sessions, and county committees.
- Offered support for grants, surveys, and other community engagement tools as needed.
- Continued learning through statewide trainings, webinars, and conferences related to housing, broadband, and community development.

Overall Impact

- Stayed deeply engaged with partners across the county throughout the year.
- Strengthened relationships with municipalities, nonprofits, and the Ho-Chunk Nation.
- Supported key long-term efforts in housing, broadband, and community wellbeing.

FoodWise Program



Karie Johnson,
FoodWise Coordinator



Mary Hoeft-Leithold,
FoodWise Nutrition
Educator



Emily Yang,
FoodWise Bilingual
Nutrition Educator

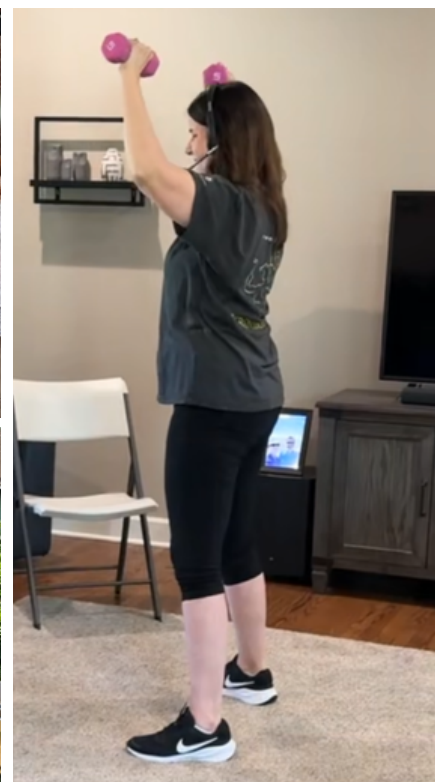
What We Do: For more than 30 years, UW–Madison Extension has provided local nutrition education across Wisconsin through the federal SNAP-Ed grant program. The congressional budget reconciliation bill signed into law on July 4, 2025, ended federal SNAP-Ed funding, effective September 30, 2025.

Working with schools, food pantries, farmers markets, and community centers, FoodWise has taught practical, evidence-based skills in meal planning, food safety, and food resource management, helping people stretch food dollars and make healthier choices. We are grateful for our partners and participants and the opportunity to advance healthier communities in La Crosse County.

UW-Madison Division of Extension works alongside the people of Wisconsin throughout urban and rural communities to deliver practical educational programs where people live and work. In La Crosse County, FoodWise partnered with schools, Head Start programs, farmers markets, and food pantries to help make the healthy choice the easy choice in our communities.

2025 Highlights:

- Engaged with 1,589 learners around nutrition education topics in a variety of settings, including early care and education centers, K-12 school settings, food pantries.
- Partnered with 5 schools to expand the Harvest of the Month campaign, reaching students, parents & caregivers with messages in English to promote eating Wisconsin-grown fruits & vegetables.
- In collaboration with the Coulee Region Farm2School program, FoodWise worked to give students access to fresh, locally grown foods and meaningful food education experiences. Through these activities, students learn where their food comes from and how their choices affect their health, community, and environment. Featuring a local Harvest of the Month item each month encourages students to try new foods and enjoy healthy fruits and vegetables.





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