



## COVID-19 RESPONSE



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

# Health & Well-Being

The Health & Well-Being Institute works to catalyze positive change in Wisconsin families through evidence-based programs focused on nutrition, food security, food safety, chronic disease prevention, mental health, and substance misuse. Rooted in both urban and rural communities, we're working together to help solve the state's most pressing well-being needs and to ensure that all Wisconsinites live stronger, healthier lives.

Extension faculty, researchers, staff, and educators with a Health and Well-Being focus responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways to address issues around food security and physical and mental health.

## Efforts to increase resilience and ability to cope with challenges created by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn are negatively impacting mental health. While orders such as Wisconsin's "Safer-at-Home" have been important for "flattening the curve," sheltering in place may negatively impact mental health due to social isolation and loneliness. Uncertainty over the repercussions of the pandemic and fear of illness for self or family can contribute to increased anxiety. Others are facing increased stress resulting from job and income losses. Not only are individuals reporting that their mental health has been negatively impacted by stress and worry, they are also facing increased barriers to accessing resources for mental health and substance use disorders.

### How Extension responded

Extension's Health and Well-Being Institute created resources and online programming to address self-care, coping, and dealing with stress and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also created spaces for social connection, support and resource sharing. We helped coordinate local responses by linking individuals and community partners to Extension resources, websites, and email communications.

Examples of this include:

- An online wellness program for county employees and residents in which participants were provided with resources and built skills to cope with stress and enhance emotional well-being.

### IN-DEPTH

## Helping youth deal with change and loss

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures have been challenging for youth, particularly older high school students experiencing grief due to the loss of social connections, sports, and important milestones such as prom and graduation. Extension developed resource such as "Stay at Home Tips - How to Help Youth Deal with Change and Loss." This resource provided guidance on helping youth through the stages of grief and information about where to access additional supports. A statewide social media post related to the resource received nearly 1,800 views.

- A collection of resources for families to access mindfulness recordings, videos and readings to build mindfulness and resiliency skills during the COVID-19 shelter in place order.
- An online workshop for older adults in La Crosse in which individuals socially connected and learned skills and tools to improve social and emotional well-being to improve overall health and connection.

- Media outreach aimed at farmers, producers, and agribusinesses with stress management resources to help farmers cope with new stress.
- A campaign for Lincoln County residents encouraging connections between younger and older residents to decrease the sense of isolation during the pandemic.
- A fact sheet for parents, caregivers, and adults of youth outlining grief and providing tips for helping youth deal with change and loss during challenging times.
- Coordinated efforts with local health departments to provide virtual spaces and support resources for individuals in recovery to allow them to continue attending meetings or support groups and maintain social connectedness critical to their recovery while physical distancing.
- Daily resource posts for the Sawyer County Emergency Operations Center that were disseminated to youth, families, schools, and the general public to support them in addressing well-being and resilience of all residents during the pandemic.

## Increased concerns for ensured food access and availability

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an urgent food security challenge for households and communities. Even before the pandemic, one in eleven households in Wisconsin were food insecure, meaning they didn't have assured access to the food they needed. Food insecurity rates have increased dramatically since April, a result of spikes in unemployment and under-employment, disrupted food and nutrition programs, and a stressed emergency food system. Wisconsin's unemployment rate reached 14.1% in April 2020, a level not seen since the Great Depression, and shelter-in-place orders have disrupted school and senior meal programs. Food pantries and other emergency food providers are consequently experiencing a significant increase in demand but are also facing challenges due to new safety concerns and volunteer shortages.

### How Extension responded

Extension provided Wisconsin residents and community partners with information on where and how to procure food safely during this crisis and how to stretch food dollars.

Examples of this include:

#### IN-DEPTH

### Linking families to available food resources

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for federal food and nutrition programs as well as charitable food programs. Food pantries and meal programs in communities across the state have responded by increasing services and options for accessing meals, but information about these programs had often been scattered and hard to locate. FoodWise, an Extension program, compiled a community resource list for Crawford County detailing school breakfast and lunch program options. In Racine and Kenosha Counties, FoodWise educators posted multilingual lists of all emergency food services. Extension FoodWise staff also partnered with mapping technicians in Waukesha County to create a food pantry locator map/app.

- A collection of resources for clients of food pantries in Rock County, including information about food safety and tips to stretch food dollars.
- A multilingual food resource document created for county residents that provides information about accessing emergency food resources during the pandemic.
- Outreach to Spanish-speaking low-income families in Door and Kewaunee Counties to increase awareness of food pantry COVID-19 safety protocols and provide information on personal prevention practices when leaving home to access food.
- Media engagement aimed at informing the public on emerging food security needs and highlighting local needs and responses.
- A series of Facebook posts for families with information on food budgeting, meal planning and grocery shopping while maintaining physical distancing.

- An interactive map for residents that provides local food pantry information in order to connect individuals in need to food resources.
- The co-creation of operations guidance for farmers markets with state agencies to ensure the safety of customers and vendors and accessibility by consumers utilizing FoodShare benefits during COVID-19.
- Development of a food resource hub for the Fond du Lac Food Providers Group for coordination between local agencies working to increase access to local and state food resources.
- A long-term partnership with Second Harvest out of Superior that has worked to enhance the lives of Iron County residents who find themselves in need of additional food.

## Limited access to physical activity opportunities and information about healthy eating and staying healthy during COVID-19

COVID-19 has created new challenges to health and well-being. Extension's in-person, group-based educational programs were restricted at schools, food pantries, and other community settings. Meanwhile, the importance of healthy eating on a budget and staying active has never been more

important; a healthy diet and regular exercise contribute positively to both physical and mental health. Additionally, COVID-19 created a need for accessible information about steps individuals can take to protect the health of their families.

### How Extension responded

Extension organized online physical activity and nutrition education classes and collected, curated, and disseminated credible information on healthy eating, active living, and COVID-19.

Examples of this include:

- A weekly online meeting for current StrongBodies participants in which leaders and participants can interact to keep participants motivated to stay physically active and eat healthy and to reduce social isolation among participants who live alone.
- A series of virtual lessons for Girls on the Run participants to keep families moving, thinking, and expressing creativity.
- A series of virtual classes for youth in which participants learned to safely make healthy recipes at home during pandemic restrictions.
- A coordinated social media calendar for residents with relevant information on healthy eating and active living to provide educational resources to people throughout Wisconsin to help them make healthy choices.

#### IN-DEPTH

### Keeping older adults healthy through virtual strength training classes



Extension's StrongBodies program is an evidence-based strength training program designed to improve the health and well-being of middle-aged and older adults. In 2019, Extension's StrongBodies program reached 5,500 participants. When Wisconsin's "Safer-at-Home" order was implemented in late March, the more than 1,500 active participants enrolled in StrongBodies programs around the state lost access to the program. To ensure that these participants could continue to strength train

while at home, Extension adapted the StrongBodies program for virtual delivery. Virtual StrongBodies classes offered in English and Spanish served more than 500 participants. Beyond physical fitness, the classes offered critical opportunities for social connection to participants and were even offered on Wisconsin Public Television for greater reach.

- An activity for parents of young children to engage with a healthy food calendar to learn about healthy food options during the “Safer at Home” order.
- A series of fun and instructional videos for families with young children demonstrating healthy snack preparation in celebration of the national event Every Kid Healthy Week.
- A resource hub for Spanish language-dominant audiences with health education and COVID-19 resources for easy access to reliable information.
- A webpage for Kewaunee County households that compiled local resources on nutrition, health, and other issues impacted by COVID-19 so that residents can access them in a one-stop location.
- A series of social media posts for residents where they were reminded about food safety and hand washing to remain healthy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## IN-DEPTH

# Navigating new challenges for farmers markets and food benefits

Farmers markets play an essential role in providing healthy food and supporting local economies. Over the last several years, farmers markets across Wisconsin have worked to increase access for SNAP-eligible populations by putting in place programs that allow recipients to use their SNAP food benefits to purchase fresh produce at markets. Through FoodWise Milwaukee County, Extension worked with local markets to maintain operations as essential businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work included acting as a connector between local organizations and state agencies to interpret new policies and guidelines in response to COVID-19. Guidance for safe operations and SNAP/EBT programs led to market adaptations and continued service for residents in need.

## More ways we're helping businesses, communities, youth, and families

Keeping a focus on our values to transform lives and communities, UW-Madison Extension is leading businesses, communities, youth, and families in the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. We are uniquely positioned across the state to link university research to those in need of guidance and practical resources. Extension staff in counties and tribal nations are making connections to financial aid and instruction, providing best practices for emerging needs, and reinforcing connections for healthy communities. To see how Extension responded to COVID-19 across the state and across program areas, visit [fyi.extension.wisc.edu/covid19/impacts](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/covid19/impacts).

in **72** COUNTY OFFICES  
on **5** CAMPUSES  
and within **5** TRIBAL NATIONS

### Health & Well-Being Program Areas and Topics

- Behavioral Health
- FoodWise
- Healthy Eating and Active Living