Understanding Statewide Needs in Wisconsin

Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON

In 2018, Extension embarked on a statewide analysis to gain an updated understanding on existing and emerging issues and opportunities in the state that Extension programming could address.

Extension formed 22 work groups across the state, organized by different geographic areas, and identified, collected, analyzed and reported local data that described community needs and opportunities.

Extension then analyzed the data (collected from 500+ sources) and developed a framework of issues that reflects the circumstances across the state, along with narratives describing each topic. A succinct version of this framework and issue descriptions are presented here.

The descriptions of the issues synthesize findings from local reports all across the state and therefore do not use the exact language from any individual locality.

The issues here are mainly framed from a deficit, rather than asset, perspective due to the way that the work groups reported data and findings.

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Workforce & Workplace Development

Work and working are not viable enough.

Workforce Shortage: There are not enough people to fill jobs. The workforce is growing limited due to an aging population, in connection with a trend of young people leaving rural areas. Employers report a lack of necessary skills or qualifications.

Insufficient Wages/Low Income Rate: Jobs do not pay enough to make them financially feasible. Many of those who work earn too little to lead healthy and financially sustainable lives.

Farm Viability and Sustainability: Tight profit margins and a changing operational environment limit farms' fiscal viability. Producers face pressures to reduce operating costs, while climate change counters these cost saving efforts. Fewer people will be employed by fewer yet bigger farms.

Population Health

Our residents experience significant mental and physical health challenges related to access, trauma, behaviors, and exposures.*

Limited Access to Health Necessities: Residents have limited access to health necessities, including healthcare and healthy food. Aging populations are increasing, and so is the need for health-related services for those populations.

Chronic and Ongoing Health Issues: Many residents do not have appropriate resources to prevent, manage, and heal chronic and ongoing health issues, which include cancer, diabetes and obesity, as well as aging-related health issues, such as dementia.

Trauma: Many residents suffer from the effects of traumatic experiences. Trauma was specifically discussed in the context of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Untreated trauma limits one's life options and is highly connected to violence, risky/destructive health behaviors, difficulties in academic achievement, and many other areas of one's life.

Alcohol & Drug Abuse (AODA) and Mental Health: Residents suffer from high rates of alcohol and drug use/abuse (opioids or opiates, alcohol, meth and heroin) and mental health conditions. Almost all parts of the state discussed AODA and mental health as linked. Suicide ideation and/or completion is significant and increasing. AODA and mental health can impact school success, jobs, relationships, financial management, neglect/abuse, and more.

Environmental Health: Residents are exposed to dangerous environmental toxins via homes, water, and air. These hazards can be infrastructural (e.g. lead in water and homes, polluted air due to heavy traffic and urban sprawl) and can disproportionally affect health.

* Residents who are poor, have been incarcerated, and residents in native communities are disproportionately affected by many of these issues.

Infrastructure

Our infrastructure does not serve Wisconsin residents enough.

Transportation: Transportation is too expensive, failing or unavailable. Public transportation can be sparse and unreliable; this includes local and long-distance options. A lack of public transportation can mean that families cannot connect to health services, government services, and employment. Beyond this, the physical infrastructure (roads, bridges etc.) requires upkeep. There can also be a lack of infrastructure for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Housing: The housing market does not serve all of the working population enough. Expensive housing can lead to eviction and homelessness. High housing prices also diminish chances of residents to work themselves out of poverty; there is an increase of households that pay more than 30% of monthly income in housing costs.

Internet: Limited access to high-speed internet creates issues for economic development, tourism.

Environment and Stewardship

Our environment needs protective management balanced with economic productivity.

Natural Resource Economies: Communities primarily supported with natural resource economies need to protect resources while providing for sustainable livelihoods. Extractive natural resource industries (i.e. an economy where natural resources are taken but no value is added locally) results in lower incomes for owners and workers. Renewable energy is an under-developed opportunity for Wisconsin.

Poor Water Quality: Significant surface and ground water quality issues exist in numerous areas around the state and are exacerbated by agriculture and other land uses. Impaired drinking water is an issue for both rural and urban counties. The cost to 'fix' the issues are high for municipalities (point sources) and farmers (non-point sources), especially during a time of limited financial resources.

Land Stewardship: Intentional land management can protect natural resources while ensuring productivity and health of working lands. Forested, agricultural, and mined lands currently would benefit from greater attention to management and conservation practices that also work in service of sustainable livelihoods and healthy communities. The potential impacts of non-metallic industrial sand mining continue to be a concern to local policymakers and citizens.

Social Infrastructure and Systems

Our current social systems are not equitable to all residents, which can disadvantage individuals' and groups' abilities to lead full, productive lives.

Life Skills: Life skills include understanding and managing financial resources, tools, and systems; literacy in English; and knowledge of post-secondary educational opportunities. Learners are more likely to be from marginalized groups that do not have equitable access to these skills and content from a formal education system.

Violence and Aggression: Violence and the threat of violence sometimes causes and sometimes stems from distress in communities; this distress has or can become intergenerational and/or historical trauma. Violence comes in several forms, from violent crimes against persons (e.g. homicide, sexual assault, human trafficking) to less criminal but still potentially damaging maltreatment of others (e.g. bullying).

Limited Capacity of Organizations: Organizations, including public schools, government agencies, non-profits, and foundations lack the resources (time, funding, relevant support) they need to provide adequate services to their community. This also includes lacking sufficient participation and/or volunteers, particularly in leadership positions. Due to this lack of capacity, residents are not equitably receiving needed services.

Ways to Interact, Cope, Adapt: People must individually navigate, interact with, cope with, and/or adapt to inequitable or otherwise difficult social systems and situations, and many require support in doing so. This category includes the building of interpersonal skills for any community members who wish or need to build healthier relationships. Additionally, people face social isolation, sometimes due to aging, disability, geography, & incarceration.

Social Cohesion: Misperceptions and misunderstandings between groups can hinder efforts to collectively solve shared problems. The affected communities (largely groups based on race and/or socioeconomic status) are marginalized through multiple means and in ways that affect many aspects of their lives. Relatedly, there are gaps in many residents' participation in and understanding of civic participation.