



## Office of Children's Mental Health Social Connectedness of Youth Wisconsin Visits

The Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health is taking its Social Connectedness of Youth focus across the state and visiting with communities that are engaged in supporting essential connections for youth. The visits started in July and will continue through the fall.

July visits were in the Western and Northwestern part of the state and included:

- **Mental Health Matters** – Eau Claire and Chippewa Valley Counties (Eau Claire, WI)
- **Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley** (Baldwin, WI)
- **Washburn County Mental Health Task Force** (Spooner, WI)
- **In a New Light Galley** – Northwest Passage (Webster, WI)

**Social Connectedness of Youth**  
Youth are socially connected when they are actively engaged in positive relationships where they feel they belong, are safe, cared for, valued, and supported.

Each visit told different stories of great programming all supporting the social connectedness and mental health of Wisconsin's young people. Local community leaders and people with lived experience shared their work and stories with visiting Wisconsin state representations from the Office of Children's Mental Health, Department of Health Services, Department of Children and Families, and the Department of Public Instruction. Below is a recap of these rich discussions.

### **Mental Health Matters – Eau Claire and Chippewa Counties**

#### ***What the initiative does***

Mental Health Matters is an Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin project working to build a community culture to support youth resilience and decrease depression among middle and high school age youth by increasing protective factors that build youth resilience. The project is in year seven of an eight-year grant and planning for sustainability.

#### ***What we learned***

The grant focuses on three areas:

- **Education and Awareness** – An educational presentation on ACEs and resiliency was developed and presented to over 2,000 groups/people. Many organizations have embraced the concept. As an example, a Blue Dot exercise was implemented in one school. Here student's names and their strengths were posted on a wall. Teachers/staff then put a blue dot by student's names who they had a relationship with. For those students that did not have a dot, an effort was put around matching someone who would connect with them.
- **Mindfulness** – Strategies promoting mindfulness were implemented in schools to improve focus and memory, decrease depression and anxiety, help people cope with stress, and improve the school environment in middle and high school staff and students. The work started with staff. The results have been impressive:
  - 85% of staff who went through the training felt it was making their work with students better.
  - 86% of teachers see kids able to self-calm as a result of mindfulness activities.
  - Examples of how teachers were reacting differently included they were taking a pause in stressful situations and shifting their language.

- **Data** – A Youth Mental Health Scorecard was developed with the goal of aiding community decision-makers and youth-serving professionals in identifying opportunities for policy and practice changes that support mental well-being.

The grant has brought together over 20 partnering organizations to support actions that will improve youth mental health. One attendee noted a lot of organizations were working independently, doing their own thing. The initiative caused the groups to “row their boats” in one direction.

***Where help is needed***

- Funding to look at all county Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIPs) from a mental health perspective. Mental health is most likely a priority in all.
- Increased mental health supports for crisis in communities which currently are inadequate.
- Rural communities need support in eliminating stigma.
- A cost/benefit analysis to demonstrate that prevention produces a return on investment – necessary because there has been a decades-long shift away from funding primary prevention.

For more information on [Mental Health Matters](#).

**Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley (Baldwin, WI)**

***What the organization does***

The Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley provides education, resources, and support to families with children prenatal to kindergarten entry in Pierce, Polk, and St. Croix Counties.

***What we learned***

The Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley is creating social connections through a number of their programs:

- Welcome Baby – visits every family with newborns in hospitals
- Baby & Me – a no cost, virtual observation and discussion hour for parents and caregivers with infants, providing space for parents to ask questions, discuss concerns, and build a support network
- Play & Learn – toddlers and preschoolers interact with their parents and other children their age
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) Families and Schools Together (FAST) – a group connection program facilitated by a parent educator to increase children’s social/emotional well-being and learning readiness
- FastWorks – families that graduate from ECE FAST continue to meet on a monthly basis for two years
- Parent Cafes – safe place to share stories, experiences, worries, wisdom, etc.
- Special events
- Triple P – focus on increasing families’ confidence in parenting
- Young parents’ program – people 21 or younger who are pregnant or parenting benefit from home visits and group classes

The Family Resource Center prioritizes making their programs accessible and then taking them out to their three-county region.

***Where help is needed***

- Need Spanish-speaking educator

- Barriers include transportation, available childcare, and affordable housing

For more information on the [Family Resource Center St. Croix Valley](#).

### **Washburn County Mental Health Task Force**

#### ***What the taskforce focuses on***

The Washburn County Mental Health Taskforce works to identify youth with unmet needs and connect them with appropriate services. The taskforce was created in 2018 when the Children's Coordinated Service Team (CCST) crisis response team identified an increase in calls from youth with mental health concerns and that intentional and coordinated actions were needed to prevent youth suicides.

#### ***What we learned***

The taskforce developed a youth-wellness screen assessment in 2018 that was available to high school freshmen. Utilization grew from 63% of students taking it in the first year to 74% the second year. COVID decreased participation with only 42% taking it the following year. With schools back in person, participation is growing. The youth screen is a universal level instrument with agencies, rather than schools, doing the screening.

Since implementing the screen, the taskforce has built a spectrum of services and started a resiliency group for kids who need support but didn't reach the screen's clinical threshold. Some of the initiatives discussed included:

- Youth Diversion Program – works with youth demonstrating concerning behaviors, a formal referral is not required
- Healthy Minds – youth-led program that builds on an evidence-informed curriculum for high school students
- Mental Health First Aid – for teens in all four school districts
- Youth Leadership Academy – seeks out students who are not identified as leaders and offers training on self-esteem and confidence (A youth coalition was formed from this that looked at how to deal with substance abuse issues.)

For more information on the [Washburn County Mental Health Task Force](#).

### **In a New Light – Northwest Passage (Webster, WI)**

#### ***What the program does***

In a New Light is a powerful therapeutic nature photography program for all students at Northwest Passage Residential Treatment Center. The In a New Light Gallery displays the student's work which is available for sale.

#### ***What we learned***

The program emphasizes skilled expressive arts training and nature immersion that empowers youth who are struggling with mental health issues to find beauty in the world that surrounds them, as well as in themselves. Students are encouraged to see themselves through a lens of strengths and accomplishments. Student photographers from the program shared their experience in the photography program.

For more information on [In a New Light](#). For more information on [Northwest Passage](#).