



# Belonging

2025 Annual Report



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF  
**Children's**  
Mental Health

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## WISCONSIN OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH (OCMH)



### Vision

Wisconsin's children are safe, nurtured, and supported to achieve their optimal mental health and well-being. Systems are family-friendly, easy to navigate, equitable, and inclusive of all people.

### Values

- Collaborative across systems
- Data driven
- Family and youth guided
- Promote inclusivity and equity among all stakeholders

### OCMH Staff

- Linda Hall, Director
- Karen Katz, Operations Lead
- Amy Marsman, Senior Research Analyst
- Andrea Turtenwald, Family Relations Coordinator

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Belonging is the key to wellness, unlocking solutions to mitigate the youth mental health crisis.**

Every day at OCMH we ask **what will make a difference for youth as they navigate a digital and divisive world?** What does the research say? What do youth say? What can we do today?

Numerous analyses tell us that young people are sleeping less, engaging in less exercise and outdoor play, and spending less time socializing with friends in person. Meanwhile, time spent online continues to climb as do rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. This is because, for most kids, screens displace the healthy activities known to protect mental health.

A sense of belonging, especially at school and at home, is particularly powerful. Belonging is the feeling of being welcomed, accepted, respected, and valued within your environment. When a child feels isolated, lonely, or forgotten, they may turn to (potentially dangerous) online relationships to meet the **need to belong**. Because interpersonal relationships are central to belonging, we pay close attention to investments in Wisconsin schools and families. These investments were mixed this year.

The 2025-27 state budget allocated funding for Child Care Counts, stabilizing Wisconsin's child care landscape and providing important relief to families of young children. However, reduced state funding for school mental health and federal cuts to Medicaid – the source of care for 540,000 Wisconsin children – will surely have an impact.

During the year there was state-level progress in a few areas. 2025 Wisconsin Act 42, which prohibits cell phone use during instructional time at school, is an important step to increasing learning, attendance, and in-person connections while simultaneously reducing kids' screen time, cyberbullying, and anxiety. Also, significant progress was made in identifying lead poisoning in children and planning for a psychiatric residential treatment facility that will fill a long-standing gap in the children's mental health continuum of care.



In addition to monitoring research and policy trends, OCMH prioritizes listening to youth. The events that most energize us are our convening of student leaders of peer-led mental wellness programs. Our summits connected more than 300 high school students who increased their mental health literacy, gathered inspiration on how to support their peers, and **provided feedback on belonging**.

The learning from these summits was integral to the launching of our Wisconsin Youth Mental Wellness Champions program. A 15-member cohort of student leaders from across the state will meet monthly to expand their knowledge and share their insights with OCMH. These student leaders are impressive advocates dedicated to helping others. We can't wait to see their mental health leadership grow and **hear what they have to say**.

As you will see in this report, OCMH consistently delivers timely information, local success stories, actionable next steps, strategies and resources to address youth mental health – all with an emphasis on **what we can do today**.

**While the obstacles to youth well-being are serious, knowing that data-based solutions, actionable resources, and youth leaders abound, continues to fuel our hope for the future.**



**LINDA A. HALL**  
Director, Wisconsin Office  
of Children's Mental Health

# YOUTH BELONGING

Belonging is the feeling of being welcomed, accepted, respected, and valued within one's social environment, including family, friends, school, and community.



## Belonging Increases When Youth:

- ▶ Are actively engaged in positive relationships.
- ▶ Feel welcome, safe, cared for, and supported.
- ▶ Feel they matter and their voice is heard.

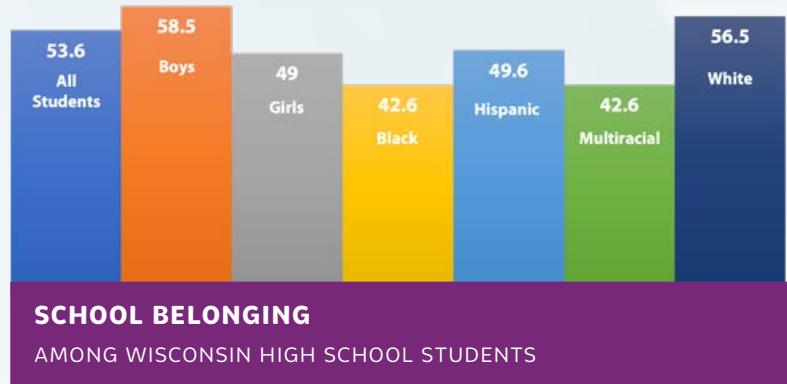
**“Giving students a voice in what they believe is important in belonging.”**

ADVISOR OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-LED MENTAL WELLNESS PROGRAM,  
OCMH MENTAL WELLNESS STUDENT LEADERSHIP SUMMIT 2025

## Decline in School Belonging

In the last 10 years there has been a 37% drop in Wisconsin youth feeling like they belong at their school (from 73.7% of students feeling they belong in 2013 to 53.6% in 2023).

And the numbers are worse for marginalized groups – less than half of girls (49%), Hispanic students (49%), Black students (43%), multiracial students (43%), and LGB students (39%) feel they belong at their school.<sup>1</sup>



## Belonging Bright Spots

**Favorite strategies to build belonging for students** as shared by student advisors of high school student-led mental wellness programs attending our Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2025.

- **Encouraging students to try new things** and to become involved in co-curriculars to foster relationship building among individuals and adults.
- Providing a **safe place for students** to express their wants and needs. Let them know they are supported.
- Holding positive **all-school fun activities**.
- Checking that **every student has an adult connection**.
- **Welcoming students** as they walk through the doors.
- **Creating a school-wide mural** in the cafeteria that all students are a part of.
- **Engaging activities that pair students** with other students they normally wouldn't team up with.

# WHY BELONGING MATTERS

Having a sense of belonging and being socially connected is critical to both physical and mental health and foundational to child well-being.

## Belonging is a Protective Factor

**When youth feel they belong in their school community they:**

- Have better mental and physical health.
- Are less likely to report emotional distress and suicidality.
- Are less likely to engage in substance misuse.
- Develop trusting relationships which are essential to learning.
- Have improved academic outcomes, school attendance, graduation rates, and continued enrollment in higher education.
- Have higher income after graduation.

**“Sometimes it seems like it'll never get better, but people that were there for me have made it more bearable.”**

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT



## Loneliness

**When youth don't experience a sense of belonging, they are at a higher risk of feeling lonely. Loneliness can lead to:<sup>2</sup>**

- Lack of concentration at school.
- Poorer academic performance.
- Increase in depression and anxiety.
- Weakened immune system.



# WELL-BEING and BELONGING DATA HIGHLIGHTS

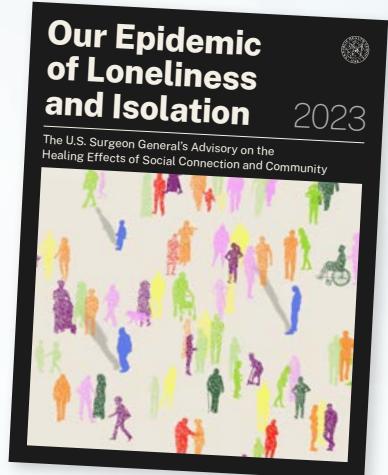
## Belonging Trends

Recent trends and discourse – local, national, and international alike – have highlighted the risks of increasing loneliness and decreasing belonging.

**A lack of belonging and social connectedness jeopardizes individual physical and mental health as well as societal health.**

A survey of adults in the Loneliness in America study shows the stark association between loneliness and mental health. A quarter (24%) of young adults (ages 18-29) are lonely, which is nearly two and half times higher than seniors. Boys and young men report especially high levels of loneliness and social isolation, along with feelings of being excluded from economic life, higher education, and dwindling social/romantic spheres.

*In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an [advisory](#) (right) on the devastating impact increasing loneliness and decreasing belonging can have on our mental, physical, and societal health.*



## LONELINESS

### ADULT LONELINESS IN THE U.S. YOUNG ADULTS VS SENIORS



*Loneliness and a lack of belonging impacts not just an individual's mental health but also their educational attainment, their physical health, and the economic vitality of the nation.*

### LONELINESS AND MENTAL HEALTH IN THE U.S.



*Two thirds of U.S. adults with anxiety or depression also report loneliness. Those with anxiety and depression are far more likely than not to say they also feel lonely.*

## Young Adult Workers

- Recent national surveys conducted by Gallup on employee engagement find that engagement is at its lowest level in a decade, and the largest declines come from the youngest workers. Among the engagement measures with the largest declines was **feeling someone at work cares about them as a person and someone is encouraging their development**.



## Boosting Belonging

**The antidote to loneliness is connection and belonging.** Belonging and connectedness can be improved and they do not require a mental health professional to help. Daily practices at home, in schools, and in communities that intentionally build interpersonal connections for young people help to create a sense of belonging.

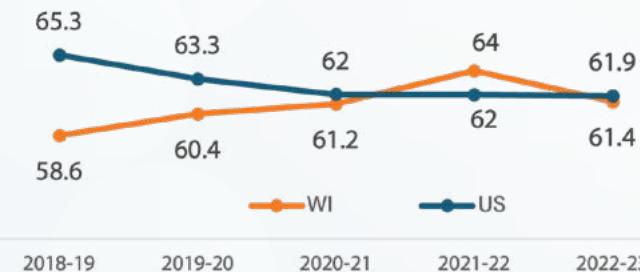
### FAMILY



#### Youth Belonging increases when kids:

- Feel their family **supports** them, **discusses ideas** that really matter to them, and **listens** to their ideas.

#### FAMILY COMMUNICATES VERY WELL



*In Wisconsin, there has been a slight improvement in families who say they communicate "very well" by listening to, discussing and supporting their child's ideas.*

**“Sometimes I don’t want a solution, just someone to listen.”**

### PEERS / FRIENDS

#### Youth Belonging increases when kids:

- Feel connected to their friends and peers at school, have **healthy friendships** and **positive relationships with peers**, and can turn to their **friends as a source of support**.

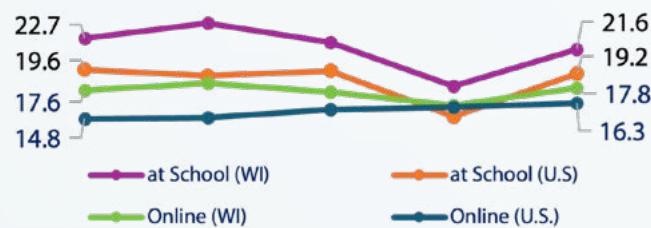


#### BELONGING TRENDS DIFFICULTY WITH FRIENDSHIPS (AGES 6-17)



*In recent years, there has been a slight improvement in the number of Wisconsin children who have difficulty making and keeping friends, but the long-term trend shows not enough progress has been made. Currently, a quarter (25.9%) of Wisconsin kids struggle with friendships.*

#### BELONGING TRENDS HIGH SCHOOL BULLYING



*A similar trend has occurred with bullying. While there was a decline in both offline and online bullying during the pandemic, bullying has increased since 2021. Wisconsin rates of in-school and online bullying remain higher than the national average, as they have been for 10 years.*

## SCHOOL / COMMUNITY

### Youth Belonging increases when kids:

- Feel connected to their school and participate in extracurricular activities in their community or school.
- Feel they have autonomy as well as having trusting and supportive relationships with adults who take their perspective seriously.



### SCHOOL BELONGING AMONG WISCONSIN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



### BELONGING TRENDS EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (AGES 6-17)



*There's been a significant decline in school belonging over the last 10 years. Extracurricular participation rates were also declining but there are signs of recent improvement. Children with disabilities, who face higher mental health challenges, also face the most barriers to participation and belonging.*

## YOUTH VOICE

### Youth Belonging increases when kids:

- Feel a sense of agency. When youth have opportunities to influence decision-making within their families, schools, and communities, their well-being, school performance, and life skills improve, leading to better outcomes. Youth voice strengthens the relationships between kids and adults and helps kids develop communication and decision-making skills.



Practice decision making



Kids who feel they have a sense of control over their life, and have a say in matters affecting their lives, have better life outcomes ►



Mental health



School performance



Stress management

# CHILD WELL-BEING INDICATORS DASHBOARD

The following indicators provide insight into the well-being of Wisconsin's youth from multiple domains.

- Each stoplight indicates whether the current Wisconsin data is an improvement or not, when compared to the baseline data, and color is based on statistical significance, when available in source data.
- The most recent available data at the time of print are used for "current" statistics. Data from approximately five years prior are used for "baseline" statistics.
- For data details, please see the indicator description document [here](#).

-  Wisconsin is going in the wrong direction.
-  Wisconsin seems to be headed in the wrong direction.
-  This indicator did not meaningfully change.
-  Wisconsin seems to be headed in the right direction.
-  Wisconsin is going in the right direction.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

INDICATOR	US CURRENT	WI BASELINE	WI CURRENT
Two or more ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences)	18%	17%	17% 
Children who have emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions (ages 3-17)	26%	25%	27% 
Youth experiencing a major depressive episode (ages 12-17)	19%	16%	18% 
LGBTQ youth seriously considering suicide	39%	42%	39% 
High school students with anxiety	NA	49%	52% 
High school students feeling sad or hopeless	40%	29%	35% 
Teens seriously considering suicide	20%	16%	19% 
Suicide attempts	10%	7%	9% 
Young adults experiencing any mental illness (ages 18-25)	35%	29%	41% 

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

INDICATOR	US CURRENT	WI BASELINE	WI CURRENT	
Low-income youth	35%	33%	31%	
Severe housing problems	17%	14%	12%	
Mothers with higher education degrees	44%	47%	49%	
Four-year-old kindergarten enrollment	37%	72%	63%	
Foster care placements per 1,000	2.4	4.0	2.8	
Difficulty with friendships (social skills)	25%	25%	26%	
Parents who often attend child's activities	78%	91%	82%	
Family communicates very well	62%	60%	61%	
School belonging	NA	61%	54%	
Trusted adult at high school	NA	72%	70%	
Seclusion and restraint incidents	NA	18,523	13,661	
School suspensions	3%	4%	1%	
High school graduation	87%	90%	91%	
Employment (ages 16-24)	53%	62%	69%	
Adults 25+ with bachelor's degree	37%	31%	35%	

Preschool has a particularly positive impact on children's well-being. This is the time of rapid brain development, making the early years critical for mental health.

There's been a 30% decline in out of home care in Wisconsin. Foster care placements continue to decline thanks to kinship care and family preservation efforts.

There has been a large drop in the rate of Wisconsin parents who often attend their child's extracurricular activities, which foster belonging and provide important protection to youth mental health.

Kids who feel they can talk to their family about feelings is a positive childhood experience, which can mitigate negative effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Schools must report the number of times they seclude or physically restrain a child. These practices run counter to student belonging. The vast majority (75%-80%) of students who are subject to these practices are students with a disability.

Higher educational attainment, on average, is linked with lower levels of mental distress.



## CLINICAL CARE

INDICATOR	US CURRENT	WI BASELINE	WI CURRENT	
Early prenatal care (first trimester)	74%	80%	81%	
Difficulty receiving treatment for child with mental conditions (ages 3-17)	56%	45%	60%	
Doctors who did not ask about parental concerns with learning, development, or behavioral problems (ages 0-5)	67%	63%	65%	
Early developmental screen given to parent to complete	36%	43%	43%	
Psychiatrists (statewide count)	NA	360	490	
School Nurses	66%	76%	79%	
School Social Workers (statewide count)	NA	673	812	
School Counselors (statewide count)	NA	2,122	2,229	
School Psychologists (statewide count)	NA	957	1,094	

The majority of Wisconsin children with a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, or behavioral problems had difficulty getting necessary treatment.

Most parents report their pediatrician did not ask if there were concerns of their 0-5 year old's learning, development, or behavior. Because 90% of brain growth is during these years, mental and behavioral health care and screening should be embedded early into routine pediatric care.

Wisconsin requires every school to have a school nurse. Though the counts are slowly increasing, 25% of districts have no school nurse at all, and most school nurses are at each school part-time.

Federal funding cuts threaten recent progress in increasing the number of school-based mental health professionals. Wisconsin's rates are below recommended levels and services are not reimbursed at sustainable levels.

## HEALTH BEHAVIORS

INDICATOR	US CURRENT	WI BASELINE	WI CURRENT	
Participation in activities (ages 6-17)	74%	81%	79%	
Electronically bullied (cyberbullying)	16%	17%	18%	
Bullied on school property	19%	22%	22%	
Students who use electronics 3+ hours on average school days (not for schoolwork)	NA	75%	79%	
Students who sleep 8 hours on average school night	23%	27%	26%	
Teen birth rate per 1,000 (ages 15-19)	13.1	12.5	9.9	
Students who currently use any vape product (on at least one day in last 30 days)	5%	12%	16%	
Students who drink alcohol (at least one drink, at least one day in prior month)	22%	30%	26%	
Students who experienced sexual dating violence	10%	13%	13%	

Extracurricular activities are linked with less depression and anxiety. These activities provide kids with a fundamental sense of belonging, which is necessary for learning and child well-being.

74% of Wisconsin teens are not getting sufficient sleep, a crucial component of mental health.

A third of high school students have tried vaping. The percent who have recently vaped has increased.

While there was little change between 2019 and 2023, sexual dating violence has increased over the the last 10 years. Wisconsin girls are 2.5 times more likely to experience sexual dating violence than boys.

# OCMH 2025 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

2025 was declared the “Year of the Kid” by Governor Evers in his February budget message which provided a strong foundation for our work. We’d like to highlight some of our key accomplishments.

## Trusted Information Source

NEWSLETTERS | PUBLICATIONS | REPORTS | EVENTS

Wisconsin's people, organizations, and media are consistently turning to OCMH as a trusted source for children's mental health information.

**Newsletters** – Sent electronically, our three newsletters have more than 10,000 subscribers.



**Fact Sheets** – 2025 topics included: [Attendance, Absenteeism, and Mental Health](#); [Extracurriculars and Youth Mental Health](#); [Understanding Boys' Mental Health](#); and [Enhancing College Students' Mental Health](#).



**Data Bites** – 2025 topics included: [Safe Gun Storage](#), [Seasonal Spikes in Youth Suicide](#), [How Sleep Impacts Mental Wellness](#), [Autism](#), [Youth Voice](#), and [Hunger and Youth Mental Health](#).



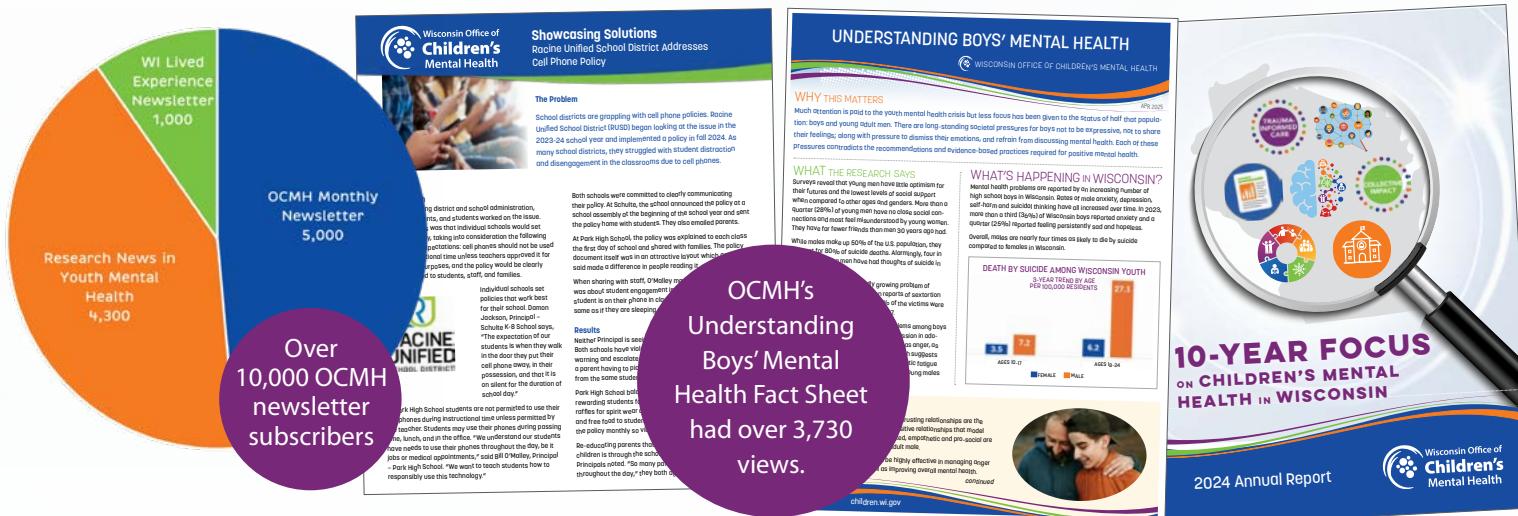
**Showcasing Solutions** – OCMH published 11 Showcasing Solutions in 2025, each spotlighting an innovative community-based program addressing children's mental health and well-being.

**Media Advisories** – OCMH issued four media advisories announcing each of its 2025 Fact Sheets. News outlets across the state regularly reprint or cover the advisories and conduct interviews with OCMH.

**Annual Report and Briefing Event** – [OCMH's 2024 Annual Report](#) celebrated OCMH's 10th anniversary and offered a 10-year review of children's mental health in Wisconsin. The January 10, 2025 briefing event was attended by hundreds virtually and in-person at the State Capitol, and the report has been viewed over 3,860 times.

**Children's Mental Health in the 2025-27 State Budget** – OCMH summarized the key investments in children's mental health in Gov. Evers' proposed 2025-27 state budget. OCMH's budget piece was viewed nearly 1,000 times.

**Wisconsin Legislative Children's Caucus** – OCMH presented on youth belonging at the September meeting of the Children's Caucus.



## Advancing Children's Mental Health

### Children's Mental Health Awareness Week

May 4-10, 2025 – OCMH highlighted the importance of listening to youth and incorporating youth voice in organizations, providing a variety of youth voice flyers, mental health coping strategies, social media posts, and more on a special webpage dedicated to activities for the week.



### **Pediatric Mental Health Care Access (PMHCA) Grant**



OCMH awarded [mini-grants](#) to seven Wisconsin high schools to promote school belonging. Other projects included training for school mental health professionals and a podcast for pediatricians on children's mental health.

### **Children's Mental Health Initiatives in Wisconsin**

OCMH updated its list of large collaborative and stand-alone agency initiatives focused on children's mental health in Wisconsin.

## Youth Voice

### **Wisconsin Youth Mental Wellness Champions**

OCMH launched an inaugural cohort of Youth Mental Wellness Champions in September. The 15-member cohort brings high school youth from across the state together over nine months to expand their mental wellness knowledge and share their insights with OCMH.



### **New Youth Voice Resources**

OCMH developed five new mental health resources based on youth voice: [Top Stressors](#), [Building Mental Wellness](#), [Increasing Youth Belonging](#), [Starting Mental Health Education Early](#), and [What Youth Want Physicians to Know When Treating Them](#).



Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2025

## Convening

### **Children's Mental Health Network**

OCMH offers four learning meetings each year focusing on important and timely children's mental health topics. 2025 topics included: social connections and belonging, social media, the family's role in their child's mental health, and early childhood mental health.

### **Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2025**

OCMH held its second statewide convening of high school student-led mental wellness programs in April in Madison. Students and advisors from 47 high schools, reaching 40,000 students across the state, participated in a day of learning, sharing, and networking.

### **Lived Experience Academy 2025 Summit**

OCMH partnered with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) to offer the third Lived Experience Academy Summit, held in Wausau, in May. Nearly 50 parents, caregivers, and youth leaders involved in DCF and OCMH's lived experience programs convened to learn and connect.

## Suicide Prevention

### **Addressing Asian American Youth Suicide in Wisconsin**

OCMH partnered with the Medical College of Wisconsin's Division of Suicide Research and Healing to promote suicide awareness and prevention among Asian American youth to schools and organizations throughout the state.

### **Wisconsin Suicide Prevention Plan**

OCMH participated in the development of the Wisconsin Suicide Prevention Plan: Strategies for Action and Hope.

# STATE DEPARTMENTS' MENTAL HEALTH HIGHLIGHTS

## Department of Children and Families (DCF)



**Strategic engagement with lived experience stakeholders** continued in 2025. DCF worked to **create alignment across its programs** to engage lived experts as advisory partners to help shape DCF policies and programs. As part of this work, a website was created to **share resources** and **elevate the voices of lived experts**. DCF worked closely with OCMH to develop and host the **2025 Lived Experience Academy**.

**Kinship care and family preservation efforts** led to improvement in children's mental health through a reduction in out-of-home foster care placements. DCF successfully advocated for **critical State budget investments** in child care, including significant **direct payments to child care providers** that kept many child care programs open. In addition, funding was secured to launch "**Get Kids Ready**," a 2026-27 program that supports child care providers preparing kids for elementary school.

## Department of Public Instruction (DPI)



**DPI continues to expand its support of building Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems across the state.** The 2023-28 Project AWARE federal grant provided **funding for the 12 regional Cooperative Educational Services Agencies to deliver** trainings in mental health literacy and other school mental health topics to 1,162 participants from 124 school districts. The grant also supported targeted technical assistance to 25 school teams and hosted a statewide Network Improvement Community focused on **improving organizational well-being in schools**. Also expanded this year was **support for universal mental health promotion strategies**, such as **mental health literacy** and **suicide prevention**.

DPI released the [Mental Health Literacy Online Professional Development System](#) and expanded **support for suicide prevention with new, free online resources**, including [Re-entry with Care: A Guide for Supporting Students During and After Hospitalization for Suicide Risk or a Mental Health Crisis](#) and the [Suicide Prevention Programming Module](#).

## Department of Corrections' Division of Juvenile Corrections (DJC)



**All areas of the DJC continue to move toward a treatment-based model of care**, focusing on the mental health of youth, and using a foundation of treatment to **teach youth new skills and hold them accountable**. DJC has created consistency in this focus between services at the facility and in the field, for **continuity in youth support**.

DJC continues to plan for a fall 2026 **opening of its new Type I facility in Milwaukee**. Many efforts are underway focusing on the facility, staffing, programming, and community partnerships.

The Department of Corrections has created a partnership with **Custom Canines Service Dog Academy** — a non-profit organization dedicated to raising, training, and eventually gifting service dogs to military veterans and first responders living with disabilities. DJC field and facility youth and staff have benefited from service dog visits on a number of occasions, **underscoring the known mental health benefits that pets provide**. Puppy visits provide much needed comfort and support and are always a highlight for both youth and staff.

## Department of Health Services (DHS)



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT  
of HEALTH SERVICES

**Ensuring the health, well-being, and safety of our kids** continues to be a top priority. Gov. Evers approved the DHS emergency rule strengthening standards to **protect more kids from further lead exposure**. The rule allows

more children to be eligible for services to identify sources of lead hazards, allowing an estimated 1,400 additional kids to **receive critical services**.

DHS is lifting up **substance use prevention efforts** across the state through a new program funding services **preventing the non-medical use of opioids**. Four organizations each received one-time grants of \$250,000 to improve the health and safety of their communities, with **two projects focused specifically on youth**.

DHS oversaw the development and release of **Wisconsin's Suicide Prevention Plan**, which included a focus on youth suicide. **Preventive steps and recommended actions for youth mental health** are infused throughout the 5-year plan. This work was done in collaboration with multiple statewide partners, including OCMH.



## YOUTH VOICE ON BELONGING

“It's **VERY** important that everyone knows they matter and that they truly belong in their school. And it's **VERY** important that everyone has a trusted adult in their school that they can bring concerns to and have conversations with about anything!”



WISCONSIN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> [Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health 2024 Annual Report](#).  
<sup>2</sup> The Kids Mental Health Foundation – [Belonging Boosts Kids' Mental Health](#).

Pages 4-5:

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- The Kids Mental Health Foundation – [Belonging Boosts Kids' Mental Health](#).

Pages 6-8:

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- Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. [National Survey of Children's Health](#), 2023.
- Centers for Disease Control. [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), 2023.
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- Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health. [Youth Voice](#), 2024.

Pages 9-11:

- See OCMH's detailed sources document, [Child Well-Being Indicator Descriptions and Sources](#), 2025.

# YOUTH VOICE BUILDS BELONGING

"I want to share strategies that actually help young people feel less alone."

"I aim to help create a world where people feel safe in their identity."

"I want to help make it easier for teens to get help."

"We can all succeed by building each other up."



Quotes from Wisconsin High School Students.



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[children.wi.gov](http://children.wi.gov)