

COMMUNITY NEEDS REPORT



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Positive Youth Development Programming for Manitowoc County, UW-Madison Division of Extension

Community Forum: Identified Community Needs & Gaps

Top Challenges



Youth Voice Missing

Decision made
without youth input



Housing Instability

Economic stress, lack of
affordable housing.



Childcare Shortages

Stressing families, impacting
youth and workforce



Transportation Barriers

Impacts school attendance, access
to services, & family stability



Mental Health

Long waits, lack of
prevention



Communication Silos

Outdated, inconsistent info
sharing across agencies

Community Strengths



Youth Development Collaborations

Led by United Way



Youth and Family Partnerships

Serving agencies supporting
whole families



Caring and Committed Adults

Volunteers & Mentors
Making a difference



Strong Program Infrastructure

4-H & Positive Youth
Development Programs

Moving Forward Together



**Give Youth a Seat at
the Table**



**Support Holistic Approach
to Family Success**



**Centralize Youth Events &
Opportunities**

On January 13, 2026, Manitowoc County hosted a Community Needs Forum with participation from representatives and partners across local community organizations. Attendees engaged in facilitated discussions around strengths and assets of our community, emerging priorities needing to address, audiences struggling to reach, and opportunities for collaboration. The purpose of this report is to highlight community-identified needs relevant to the Positive Youth Development (PYD) Institute, and to demonstrate how programming from Manitowoc County Extension addresses these gaps.

Forum Discussion Summary

The Forum discussion at the PYD table focused on strengthening youth development and well-being in Manitowoc County through **mental health support, school attendance**, and deeper **community partnerships**, and improved **access to essential services**. There's a strong drive to enhance services and to build sustainable systems that address workforce burnout, housing, transportation, and resource navigation. Many partners at the table were family serving agencies, so a focus was on the whole family thriving.

Identified Community Needs & Gaps

Analysis of the forum data revealed several key needs:

1. Transportation is a foundational barrier.

It affects school attendance, access to services, youth engagement, and family stability.

2. Childcare shortages are impacting families, youth, and the workforce.

3. Mental health needs and service waitlists are overwhelming systems.

4. Families need earlier, deeper, and more holistic support.

5. Collaboration is a strength – but information sharing systems are outdated or inconsistent.

6. Youth voice is missing and needs to be intentionally included.

7. Housing instability and economic stress are underlying drivers of many challenges.

One main discussion was around the appreciation of the collaboration within the county through the Youth Development Collaborative led by United Way. One need from the group is to look at a way to centralize all the ongoing youth focused events and opportunities throughout the county.

Extension Alignment

4-H programs have engaged young people in learning and growing for over a century, but our work is about much more than a club, a camp or after school program. It's about helping young people succeed now and in the future. The science behind the success of 4-H is Positive Youth Development, a comprehensive approach to promoting learning and development. Its goal is to help young people feel empowered and develop critical life skills that allow them to reach their fullest potential. Our programs have positive, measurable impacts on not only social and emotional growth, but the behavioral and cognitive development of our youth.

Needs Assessment with Youth

Positive Youth Educator builds into needs assessment work on how to get young people more involved from the beginning. Ask the young people where they are at, demonstrating youth have a voice in determining solutions.

Youth Empowerment

Positive Youth Educator work will focus on youth empowerment and youth voice. Positive Youth Development Institute Youth Empowerment programs empower young people to use their voice while working in partnership with adults to positively impact their communities. Why?

When young people are connected to their communities through service, they are more likely to be invested as leaders who contribute to their community's success both now and in the future. Youth and adults working together create stronger and more well-connected communities that better serve their residents.

Intended Outcomes: Youth Empowerment is where youth practice leadership skills while exploring important issues in their communities and making informed decisions with adults. The 4-H Program Educator plays a vital role in fostering an inclusive and empowering environment throughout the Manitowoc County 4-H program. This work involves close collaboration with 4-H clubs and groups to support and develop 4-H Club Officers and Youth Leaders. The goal is to ensure that these young leaders are equipped to create a welcoming, respectful, and engaging atmosphere for all 4-H members and participants. In addition, the 4-H Program Educator also provides targeted support to adult 4-H volunteers. This includes facilitating group training sessions and offering individualized coaching to help 4-H volunteers create youth-centered environments that actively encourage youth voice, leadership, and participation. Through these efforts, the 4-H Educator ensures that both youth and adults are prepared to lead, listen, and learn together in a vibrant and supportive 4-H community.

Experiential Learning

The 4-H program educator's focus is on Experiential Learning, which uses the interests and curiosities of today's youth (Sparks) to foster and support educational opportunities for youth. All youth have the potential to identify their Spark—the inner flame within that excites them and taps into their passion. Youth who connect with and are supported in exploring their Sparks are more likely to thrive. The learning journey that begins with their Spark may lead to a career, lifelong passions, interests, or hobbies, as well as life and leadership skills they can use throughout life. The 4-H program educator recognizes and supports bringing experiential learning to where the youth are already meeting avoids transportation barriers and parent involvement.

Intended Outcomes: Experiential Learning is where youth find and explore their Sparks. Older youth leaders and adults encourage them to learn and grow in their interests, learning resilience as they build life and leadership skills. A resource for engaging hands-on activities can be found at this link <https://4-h.org/clover/about/>

Career and College Readiness

The PYD Institute's Career and College Readiness programs assist youth in transitioning from adolescence to adulthood with the necessary abilities, skills, and mindsets to navigate life's opportunities and challenges. More capacity would be needed locally in PYD to create capacity for the work.

Mental Health

Potential Area of Growth

UW Extension offers several programs to teach skills to help individuals manage stress, practice mindfulness and access mental health resources. Mental Well-Being – Health & Well-Being <https://health.extension.wisc.edu/mental-well-being/>

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