



In less than two years, the Wisconsin CARES project has begun to transform how counties operate in terms of protecting and promoting the wellbeing of children.

Wisconsin CARES Project: Promoting child wellbeing

Statistics show there is a compelling need to reduce child maltreatment in Wisconsin. Equally compelling is the task of providing children with opportunities and support to ensure they grow up to become healthy, contributing adults.

In 2011, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families reported 5,210 substantiated cases of child maltreatment and 32 child deaths. While many county organizations work tirelessly to foster child wellbeing and reduce maltreatment, their efforts may be hampered by:

1. The view that child wellbeing and safety is the responsibility of one or two individual agencies, rather than a community-wide effort.
2. The practice of organizations working in isolation and competing for limited resources.
3. A failure to understand that complex social problems require long-term solutions and system-wide change that can only arise through the interaction of many organizations working together.

Providing the framework for action

Addressing child maltreatment and wellbeing can be overwhelming for counties and communities, especially in times of shrinking resources. Positive change depends on harnessing the shared resources, commitment and experience of a range of stakeholders working together toward the same goal.

The Wisconsin CARES initiative (Creating a Responsive and Effective System for Protecting and Promoting our Children's Wellbeing), a partnership between the University of Wisconsin-Extension, the

University of Wisconsin-Madison, county child and family-serving agencies and community leaders, sets the stage for such collaborative work.

New model guides efforts

Collective Impact, an innovative new model, guides the Wisconsin CARES project by coordinating county-wide efforts to reach their shared goal.

Supported by a three-year grant from the Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment, Wisconsin CARES incorporates the core elements of a *Collective Impact* approach including:

- A common agenda and shared vision for change
- One organization serving as the essential backbone
- Unique, mutually reinforcing activities that follow an agreed-upon plan of action
- Regular communication among partners to enhance coordination, provide progress updates, revise plans and actions, and renew commitment to common goals
- Development of a shared measurement system to align efforts and assess impact

Developing a shared agenda

To develop a shared agenda and build public support, county-wide summits were held at each Wisconsin CARES site in spring 2012. The summits provided education for community professionals and leaders regarding approaches to promote and protect child wellbeing and identify new ways for local organizations to work together. A local advisory team coordinated planning with leadership from UW-Extension educators and support from the state leadership team.

Family Living Programs Impact Report

The summits served as a rallying point to connect and mobilize local stakeholders and begin developing a common vision. More than 200 Wisconsin educators, service providers and child advocates attended the 2012 summits offered in Columbia, Door, or jointly in Pierce and St. Croix Counties. Participants represented education, county government, law enforcement, criminal justice, child and family service agencies, health care, childcare providers, human services, parents and faith communities.

Following the summits, each CARES site established a formal CARES organization. While all three county initiatives share the purpose of improving child wellbeing, each has developed its own specific goals and approach.

Common vision informs actions

A common vision and mission has guided development of an action plan that draws on existing programs and services and facilitates new ones. Partners within each of the three county CARES sites contribute their own resources and coordinate aspects of the overall effort.

For example:

- The CARES Council of *Columbia County* hosts a quarterly Columbia County Service Providers Forum coordinated by UW-Extension, with topics and speakers identified by Council members. The Council also publishes and distributes the *Columbia County Resource Directory*, with Health and Human Services taking the lead.
- The early childhood workgroup of the *Pierce–St. Croix* CARES Coalition sponsors “Positive Solutions for Families” that targets social-emotional development of preschool children. This combined effort involves UW-Extension, CESA #11 Head Start, area school districts and public health. A workgroup focused on the social-

emotional health of adolescents is focusing on the 211 referral system for families and service providers alike.

- The *Door County* Cares coalition is implementing a mentoring program in collaboration with the United Way, Help of Door County (Domestic Violence Prevention), teen centers, Boys and Girls Club and the YMCA. This program supports area school districts’ need to address youth relationship violence, peer monitoring and positive youth-adult relationships.

UW-Extension is the backbone

UW-Extension educators, located in each Wisconsin county, are well-suited to serve this pivotal role. Widely known and respected, they have many relationships with stakeholders and organizations; and are skilled organizers able to provide flexible leadership without imposing their own agendas. They also have unique access to the expertise and resources of the University of Wisconsin System.

UW-Extension has coordinated the initial planning for the county CARES efforts, assembling key players and facilitating the agenda. It has also obtained the initial seed funding for the project and helped leverage additional funding through partners’ contributions, grants and in-kind services.

While UW-Extension coordinates the overall effort, collaborative partners take active leadership roles. As project coordinators, UW-Extension county educators are also responsible for facilitating communication between partners to maintain transparency and trust and to build public interest and support.

Measuring results

In the *Collective Impact* approach, collaborating partners develop common measures to evaluate the impact of their efforts. Because the CARES projects are still in the early stages, impact evaluation has not yet begun. However, each CARES partnership is identifying common indicators to evaluate in the future. Implementation and process evaluation have been ongoing to gain feedback and a better understanding of the process.

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The Wisconsin CARES project embraces a central tenet of the *Collective Impact* approach: *Social change comes from gradual improvement of an entire system over time.* Local partners within the participating counties have demonstrated their commitment to this idea by responding to the call to action with enthusiasm and drive. In less than two years, the Wisconsin CARES project has begun to transform how counties operate in terms of protecting and promoting child wellbeing.

The CARES initiative underscores the importance of UW-Extension as a crucial backbone for counties that provides skilled leadership, coordination, guidance and access to the University of Wisconsin system. This service fills a unique niche that is critical to the wellbeing of Wisconsin’s children and communities and one that can serve as model for other Extension efforts aimed at addressing complex community-wide social issues.

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