

# **Investing in Healthy Children, Strong Families, and Caring Communities**

## **Family Living Programs, 2008**

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In 2007, county government in Wisconsin invested about \$4.6 million in Family Living Programs faculty and staff. What did counties in Wisconsin get for that investment?

Through the efforts of Family Living Programs, Wisconsin obtained:

- More than \$6 million in state and federal funds.
- More than \$11 million in outside grants and contracts.
- More than \$3.8 million contributed as cost share by partners.
- Cost savings benefits that impact communities throughout the state.

Today almost 1.4 million families live in Wisconsin. Nearly one-third have children younger than 18. Family Living Programs operate on the principle that many of the challenges facing the state's families and communities are far less expensive to prevent than to fix. Well-designed educational programs help families better manage their financial resources, improve their skills as parents, maintain healthier lifestyles, acquire safe and affordable housing, and contribute to their communities. By improving people's lives, Family Living Programs reduce the economic and social service costs to local governments and make Wisconsin communities stronger.

Here are examples of Family Living Programs' investments in educational programs that result in stronger families and communities.

### **Strengthening Families, Building Statewide Capacity**

Research shows that protective parenting and strong relationships between parents and children can steer young people away from dangerous behaviors such as underage alcohol or drug use.

Over the past five years, Family Living Programs has provided leadership in building strong parent-child relationships by training facilitators for the Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14. More than 80 Extension county educators and 220 local partners have been trained to teach this program that has demonstrated positive results in communities across the state.

*Every dollar spent implementing the Strengthening Families program saves at least \$9.60 in alcohol-related treatment costs. Results of the program show that participating youth were less likely to use alcohol and other drugs, display aggression and exhibit behavior problems. The program not only avoids negative outcomes for individuals and families, but also achieves substantial economic savings in funds that would otherwise have been spent on treatment costs.*

## Parent Education—What Parents Need to Know

Parent education and support programs that begin in pregnancy or soon after the birth of a child can help reduce child abuse and neglect.

Family Living Programs provides three educational newsletters for parents—*Preparing to Parent*, *Parenting the First Year* and *Parenting the Second and Third Years*.

The newsletters guide parents through different stages of their child's development with information on what to expect as their child develops and how to handle age-related concerns. Each newsletter suggests activities and offers tips for parents to bolster their child's health, safety and well-being and enhance parent-child interactions.

Approximately 29,000 families--more than 40% of all new parents in Wisconsin--received *Parenting the First Year* newsletters last year. Approximately 550,000 families have received *Parenting the First Year* since the project began 19 years ago. This means that approximately one in every 12 Wisconsin residents, and half of all Wisconsin children, have been raised by a parent who received this parenting education information.

An additional 16,000 Wisconsin families received *Parenting the Second and Third Years* last year. About 1,700 of these received the Spanish language version of the newsletter. About 60 people read the newsletters online each day (about 21,000 per year). And parents in 11 other states, as well as Canada and England, also receive this valuable resource.

A particular advantage of the *Parenting* newsletters is that they often reach parents most in need of parenting education but who may be the least likely to attend a class. UW-Extension offices in 66 counties coordinate distribution of the newsletters, along with partners that include more than 100 Kiwanis Clubs, 90 hospitals and health departments, and dozens of other businesses and service clubs.

*Preparing to Parent* is a new series for expectant mothers and fathers that became available in 2006. It includes three issues for early, mid and late pregnancy, and one issue on preparing for birth and immediately afterward. A Spanish version is also available. Twenty-six Wisconsin counties are planning to distribute *Preparing to Parent* newsletters this year through a collaboration between county Extension offices and local health clinics.

Outcomes reported from those using Family Living Programs' parenting information are significant. For example, parents cite the *Parenting the First Year* newsletter series as a "very useful" source of child rearing advice more often than any other source of information. Parents change both their beliefs and actions in raising their children as a result of reading the newsletters. *Parents who receive Parenting the First Year, compared to those who don't, have beliefs significantly less like those of child-abusing parents. Parents who receive Parenting the First Year report spanking or slapping their babies significantly less often than comparable parents who did not receive the newsletters.*

These outcomes are making a difference for Wisconsin's future. The benefits of good parenting skills flow to both families and communities in the form of less child maltreatment, increased immunization rates, increased frequency of breast-feeding and the increased school readiness of young children. *Conservative estimates indicate that for every dollar spent on Extension's Parenting newsletters, nearly \$7 in benefits are realized.* For more details, see <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/parenting/economicvalue0701.doc>

## Family Caregiving

One in three adults will care for a family member at some time in their lives. Seventy-five percent of these caregivers are women, and about two-thirds of them juggle work, family and caregiving responsibilities. Although caring for a family member can be personally satisfying, many caregivers feel burdened. As many as 70% of employers surveyed report an increase in staffing problems associated with family caregiving responsibilities. National annual costs to employers related to caregivers in the workplace are more than \$11 billion.

Currently, a two-year pilot project is underway to educate employers and employees about the impact of caregiving on people's work and lives. Partners in this project are reaching small business employers and their staffs through the workplace via educational materials and activities.

The Wisconsin Alliance for Family Caregiving, with leadership from Family Living Programs and AARP, provides education to family caregivers and the professionals who work with them. Many caregivers provide up to 80% of the care needed by someone who is older or chronically ill.

As growing numbers take on new unpaid duties, many find themselves lacking caregiving knowledge and skills, emotionally drained, and not knowing where to turn for help. Almost 500 class leaders--educators, social workers, health-care providers and aging-network professionals--teach a six-week curriculum that reaches more than 7,000 caregivers. Taking Care of You: Powerful Tools for Caregiving *helps caregivers build effective communication skills, reduce personal stress, and set important and realistic goals.* Employers are benefiting and communities are rethinking their responses to long term care as a result of the information presented in this curriculum.

## Access to Health Insurance for Children and Families

According to the Family Health Survey conducted annually by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, 79,000 children in Wisconsin were without health insurance for at least part of 2007. This number is unexpectedly high given the availability of BadgerCare and Medicaid--Wisconsin's health insurance programs for low-income families.

Family Living Programs supports the efforts of Covering Kids and Families--a coalition of more than 65 organizations that regularly offers policy advice and information about public health programs serving people in need. *Family Living has participated in outreach efforts that have increased the number of children enrolled in BadgerCare by promoting it in conjunction with the Free and Reduced Price Lunch Program.*

Wisconsin's public health insurance programs, with their focus on preventive health screenings, help identify problems and provide solutions before either a child's health or school progress is compromised.

In 2005, more than 130 outreach efforts ranging from adding flyers to backpacks to working with partners who help eligible families apply for insurance online were conducted by Family Living staff in 60 counties.

Adopting the theme "A good school start should be a healthy school start," Family Living educators work with schools to help them ensure that students are ready to learn. Evidence shows that healthy students have a better chance of performing well in school. This means that

families and communities must consider students' health when determining their readiness for the school year.

## **Family Economic Security--Build Wealth, Not Debt**

The financial situation of families has changed notably in recent years due to a general downturn in the economy and higher prices for food, fuel and housing. Many Wisconsin families struggle to make ends meet. As debt loads grow and savings decrease, families may jeopardize their financial security and become vulnerable to unexpected financial emergencies.

Wisconsin families manage almost \$88 billion dollars in annual family income. Community-based, audience-targeted education can help family members obtain the skills to manage cash and credit, avoid abusive lending practices, build additional assets, protect financial resources, and take a long-term view of their financial futures. More than 11,500 adults participated in Extension financial education programs in 2007. *Participants gained the knowledge, skills, motivation and confidence to make their own financial decisions.*

Family Living Programs has recently been certified to offer education and credit counseling for the increasing number of individuals facing bankruptcy. It is also part of a national effort reaching more than a half-million youth annually with financial education. In addition, Family Living educators promote awareness of tax credits, especially for low-income workers, provide volunteer programs that offer financial counseling and tax preparation (for both older and low income workers), and develop financial knowledge and skills so that individuals understand the value of using banking services.

Housing is another area in which Family Living educators have developed programs to assist Wisconsin renters and homeowners. Across the nation, the cost of housing has outpaced inflation. Median-priced home prices have increased more than 70% in ten years and family income has not kept pace. Lack of adequate housing affects communities negatively by hindering economic development and reducing the number of new jobs to attract workers.

*Cooperative Extension is building the capacity of citizens and communities to help them obtain, sustain and create affordable housing. People who participate in Family Living educational programs report that they are better prepared as consumers and more satisfied renters and homeowners.*

## **Healthy, Well-Nourished Families**

### ***Raising Healthy Eaters***

In Wisconsin, 25% of 2- to 5-year-old children are either overweight or at risk of being overweight. Seventy-six percent of children between 2 and 5 years have poor diets. Providing parents with knowledge about food and nutrition can promote healthy feeding and eating behaviors. Family Living educators with experience in the areas of both parenting and nutrition are in the ideal position to conduct this type of education in their counties.

Parents participating in *Raising Healthy Eaters*, a series of eight user-friendly classes, increased their knowledge of age-appropriate feeding practices, reduced television-watching during mealtime, and increased confidence in their ability to get their children to try new foods and drink water instead of sweetened beverages. *These changes indicate an improvement in feeding practices that will lead to healthier children and lower rates of overweight in children, in addition to reduced health care costs.*

## **School Breakfast**

Research shows that children who eat breakfast demonstrate an increased ability to learn and improve their academic performance. Studies have also shown that eating breakfast improves behavior, decreases the risk of being overweight and improves the quality of children's diets.

Both low-income and moderate-income children are less likely to skip breakfast if their school participates in a School Breakfast Program.

*Through the collaboration of Family Living Programs and the Department of Public Instruction, school breakfast participation in Wisconsin has increased in the past two years.*

The Food Research and Action Center's annual score card indicates that *Wisconsin had the largest increase in breakfast participation in the nation for 2005-2006--an increase of 24%*. A total of 433 new schools offered breakfast and 373 schools improved their existing breakfast programs. Family Living Programs' role has been to provide research-based information, education, outreach and support to county-based efforts to expand the breakfast program.

## **Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP)**

WNEP, a \$7-million, federally funded program led by Family Living Programs, provides community-based nutrition education programs in 60 counties. WNEP helps ensure that low-income families and youth have the information they need to make healthy eating choices.

*Community-based nutrition education programs made almost 318,000 educational contacts in 2007.* Almost one-quarter of these learners were people of color. The program targets food stamp-eligible pregnant women, families with children, youth, adults and the elderly. More than 750 community-based partnerships supported the program. These included public sector agencies such as public health, WIC and county municipal governments, as well as private non-profits and schools.

Six Wisconsin counties (Milwaukee, Rock, Dane, Racine, Kenosha, and Waukesha) participate in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). EFNEP reached 1,506 youth and 2,041 adults with educational programs in 2004.

Multiple cost-benefit analyses in several states have highlighted the value of nutrition education. *EFNEP saves states and families money: for every dollar invested in EFNEP, health care costs were reduced by \$10.64 in Virginia; \$8.82 in a group of Midwestern states; and \$8.03 in Iowa.*

Wisconsin has documented the impacts of EFNEP, as well. At least 78% of the state's program participants improved in one or more nutrition practices, such as considering healthful choices when selecting food, reading nutrition labels, planning meals, and feeding children breakfast. Seventy-one percent improved in one or more food resource management practices, such as planning meals, comparing prices, and using grocery lists; and 63% improved in one or more safe food handling practices, such as thawing or storing food safely.

The program encourages individuals and families to improve their diets, and increase physical activity. Studies show that people who run out of food or miss meals because they cannot afford them are among the most obese. Reducing obesity also saves on health care costs.

Nutrition education programs resulted in the following impacts:

- *Youth learned to make healthful food choices.*
- *Parents reported that their children were eating more fruits and vegetables.*
- *Adults learned to eat healthy and be more physically active.*
- *Adults learned new skills and discovered resources to help them feed their families.*
- *Youth and adults learned to handle food safely.*

### ***Communities Document Food Insecurity and Hunger***

Food security—the assured access to enough food for a healthy, active life—is vital to the wellbeing of children. Yet, 12% of households with elementary school age children in Wisconsin experience food insecurity—around twice the rate found among childless households.

Food insecurity puts children at risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes. Compared to their peers in food-secure households, children in food-insecure households have worse math and reading scores, demonstrate poorer social skills, have more behavior problems, and experience worse health outcomes.

To help schools and communities get a better picture of hunger and food insecurity, Family Living Programs developed a survey for elementary school children to bring home to their parents. Since 2003, 70 elementary schools serving children in 23 Wisconsin counties in all parts of the state have participated in the Wisconsin Schools Food Security Survey. These schools have learned new, often surprising, information about the prevalence of food insecurity in their community. Seventy-seven percent of food-insecure households have one or more fulltime worker.

The school surveys are providing new information about community characteristics that help lessen the risk of food insecurity and hunger. Lower housing costs, proximity to supermarkets, and access to public transportation appear to help families maintain food security.

*Findings from the survey have stimulated a variety of local initiatives and the creation of food pantries. Some schools have begun outreach efforts to ensure that families know about available food assistance programs and explored ways to enhance the nutritional quality of meals served at school.*

Nutrition programming improves access to sufficient, safe, affordable, healthful food. Family Living faculty and staff assess local levels of food insecurity, raise public awareness, and work collaboratively to make more families food secure. They also work to help limited-resource families achieve food security by teaching the skills to track spending, manage food dollars and plan nutritious meals.

## **Family Living Educators Provide Community Leadership and Planning that Supports Children and Families**

Family Living faculty and staff often serve in leadership roles where they can engage people and support changes that benefit families. They lead and participate in strategic planning efforts, organize educational programs and help communities achieve goals based on local needs.

Through their efforts, Family Living educators strengthen the community's capacity to meet pressing needs, with the end result being a better environment for children and families.

Family Living programs:

- Help create strong families that serve as the foundation for community life by enhancing family relationships, parenting, child development and the community institutions that promote family well-being.
- Promote healthy, well-nourished families as they learn to manage food dollars, plan nutritious meals, and purchase, prepare and serve food that is safe to eat.
- Help families meet future needs while keeping pace with day-to-day expenses and addressing the basics of earning, spending, saving, investing, health care, and housing issues.

When local institutions, agencies and groups work more closely with each other to coordinate services and programs and share resources and expertise, they are not only more cost-efficient but more effective. County-based Family Living Programs is an excellent investment in initiatives that are important to local communities and that can best be advanced by research-driven, community-based education.

*Educational planning, evaluation, and research skills save local agencies and departments thousands of dollars and help improve their capacity to meet the needs of children and families.*

Family Living Programs promotes family strengths and helps communities become more positive environments for family life. Community-based education provides direct teaching to individuals, better equips staff from public and private partners, and informs decision-makers.

More than ever, local, state and national leaders understand that people who lack the the benefits of a healthy home and community environment are not as productive and satisfied as people who live in strong communities supported by strong educational programs.

### **For More Information**

To see additional examples of Family Living Programs that support Wisconsin's families, visit <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/impact/index.cfm> or contact:

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