

Extension Impact: Education Makes a Difference

Winter 2026

Community Development

By Amy Ebert: UW- Madison Extension Community Development Educator for Waupaca County

Understanding the Economic Impact of a Community Event

The Shamrock Club of New London asked for an **economic impact report** to understand and share the value of its St. Patrick's Day week of events. In 2025, the events brought in about **19,000 visitors** and generated an estimated **\$1.7 million in local spending**. The club needed clear information to show how the celebration benefits local businesses, residents, sponsors, and funders. This data also helps raise awareness, gather feedback, and support fundraising so the event can continue benefiting the community.

To help, Amy partnered with Mia Ljung, a Community Development Educator from Extension Outagamie County, and worked with Extension professors and specialists to find practical ways to measure impact. The team used existing Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) and Waupaca County Economic Development (WCEDC) tools whenever possible to keep costs low. These tools included:

- **Event evaluation resources**
- **Geofencing data** (anonymous cell phone signals that show where visitors go)

Club leaders were involved early to decide what information mattered most. They chose a **general estimate of economic impact for 2025** as a starting point.

While not scientific, this estimate shows attendance, visitor reach, and community impact, creating a baseline for future comparisons.

In June, Amy shared two options for measuring future impact with 26 board and club members:

- **Simple option:** Use the same tools and geofencing data
- **Detailed option:** Collect more data, which takes more time and effort



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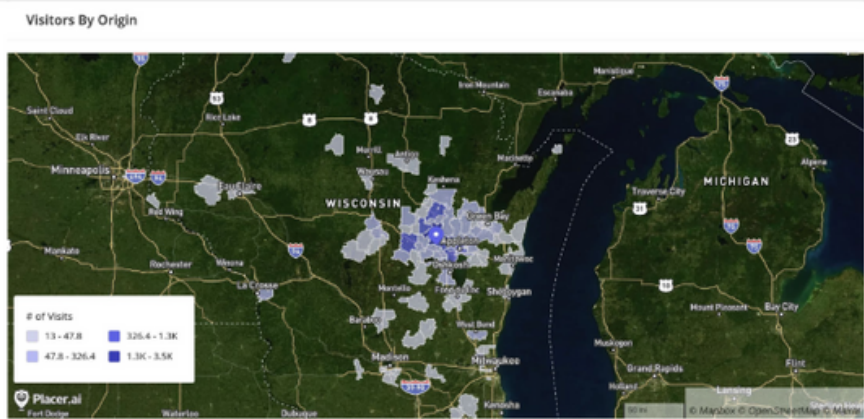
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Geofencing data from the WCEDC showing visitor origins by zip code.

The club chose the simpler option for now but kept the detailed option in mind for later.

Amy and the other Extension staff combined data from geofencing, hotel bookings, tourism spending averages, and attendance estimates into a report. In December, they shared the results with the club.

This report strengthened the club's ability to show its community impact and plan ahead. One member noted that the information filled a long-standing gap and will help support future community events.

Health & Well-Being

By Christi Gabrilka, UW- Madison Extension Health and Well-Being Educator -Winnebago & Waupaca Counties

Collaborative Efforts between Be Well Waupaca County and the WI Food Hub lead to 155 Holiday Food Boxes Distributed to Families in Need

Extension colleagues Amy Ebert and Christi Gabrilka are members of the Be Well Waupaca County Coalition, an organization that focuses on three main priorities: Access, Connectedness and Community Engagement. The coalition has supported a Holiday Food Distribution for the last four years. This year with the support of Extension staff the coalition was able to distribute 155 Holiday Food Boxes to families across Waupaca County. This project began with the intention of reaching families and individuals who fall between the cracks. In Waupaca County there are nearly 5000 people who participate in the FoodShare program, and 5000 more who are just one financial crisis away from falling below the poverty level. A family can receive a Holiday Food Box on a first come first serve basis when they have been nominated by another individual. There is no eligibility criteria for a family to receive a food box.

This year, the coalition teamed with the WI Food Hub Cooperative's Tend & Table program to raise money to purchase fresh local ingredients for the boxes. Boxes included: 5lbs of potatoes, mixed greens, a diced onion, carrot and celery mix, sliced apples, two acorn squash, fresh herbs, stuffing, gravy packet, pumpkin dessert and a turkey. Additionally, each box came with three aluminum baking pans, recipes and community resources. The items in the boxes have shifted slightly over the years, but the intention is to allow families to have ingredients to make Thanksgiving a little extra special. Some families have commented that they've never been able to contribute to their families Thanksgiving and this box of food allowed them to have something to offer.



Human Development and Relationships

By Alicia Utke: UW- Madison Extension Human Development and Relationships Educator for Waupaca County

Planning AHEAD; Helping Waupaca County Residents Prepare for the Future

Planning for end-of-life decisions can feel overwhelming, yet having a plan in place can greatly reduce stress for individuals and their families. UW Extension Waupaca County is proud to offer Planning AHEAD, a research-based, seven-session educational program that helps adults make informed decisions about health care, finances, legal planning, and final wishes.

Planning AHEAD emphasizes practical guidance, values-based decision-making, and open conversation. Programs were recently offered across Waupaca County, including the Waupaca Senior Center, New London Senior Center, Fremont Legion Hall, and Manawa City Hall.

Participants reported increased understanding of end-of-life planning topics and greater confidence taking next steps. One participant shared, *“Excellent coverage of all topics. Makes you realize no matter how prepared you think you are, there is more out there to learn.”*

In addition to several community offerings, Extension partnered with the Waupaca County Veterans Service Office to deliver a Planning AHEAD series tailored specifically for veterans and their families. This collaboration integrated veteran-specific benefits and trusted local partners to ensure the content was relevant and accessible.

By delivering research-based Planning AHEAD programming across multiple communities, UW Extension helped Waupaca County residents prepare for the future, strengthen family communication, and reduce stress during difficult times.

Interested in learning more about Planning AHEAD? Visit the program website at <https://aging.extension.wisc.edu/programs/planning-ahead/> or contact Educator Alicia Utke at alicia.utkebecher@wisc.edu. Alicia looks forward to continuing Planning AHEAD programming throughout 2026 and expanding offerings to additional areas of Waupaca County where the training has not yet been available.

4-H Youth Development

By Penny Tank: UW- Madison Extension 4-H Educator for Waupaca County

Celebrate the Spark: Why Recognition Matters in 4-H

Recognition in 4-H is an important part of positive youth development, providing encouragement and affirming the value of each member's contributions. The National 4-H Recognition Model highlights 5 different forms of recognition including:

1. Participation in educational experiences
2. Making progress toward personal goals
3. Achieving standards of excellence
4. Excelling in peer competition
5. Demonstrating excellence in cooperation

These varied approaches ensure that every young person feels seen and appreciated—not just for outcomes, but for effort, growth, and impact. Meaningful recognition builds confidence, fosters a sense of belonging, and motivates youth to stay engaged, take on new challenges, and develop skills that last a lifetime.

Recognition can be formal or informal, within the individual or provided by others. Some examples include handwritten notes, news articles, t-shirts, certificates, facebook posts, participation cards, ribbons, 4-H memorabilia, project supplies, plaques, scholarships, and so much more. As you can see from the photos, 4-H Awards Night and the Leaders Banquet are the more formal opportunities for recognition each year. Please join us in celebrating 4-H achievements all year round.



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