

Extension Impact: Education Makes a Difference

Spring 2026

Welcome to our new Area Extension Director, Jen McNelly!



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
WAUPACA COUNTY

Amy Ebert

Community
Development

Christi Gabrilka

Health & Well-Being

Alicia Utke

Human
Development &
Relationships

Penny Tank

4-H Youth
Development

Jen McNelly

Area Extension
Director

Support Staff

Haley Nelson

Hello, my name is Jen McNelly and I am the new Area Extension Director for Area 7 which includes Wood, Portage, Marathon and Waupaca County's. I have been incredibly lucky to spend the past two years with UW-Madison Division of Extension serving as the Natural Resources Educator in Wood County and broader central Wisconsin.

I am thrilled to be able to step into this new role with Extension and to continue to work with my amazing colleagues throughout central Wisconsin. Prior to joining Extension, I served as a Water Resource Specialist in Portage County, WI. I bring a unique blend of experience and understanding both Extension and the incredible programming that they can provide local communities as well as an in-depth understanding of local government. My recent work with Extension has focused on providing local decision makers with decision support tools to help them make informed management decisions regarding water resources.

As I transition into this new role it is my hope that I can help share the information, resources and programming Extension is able to provide to County leadership and in turn have County supervisors share community needs and concerns with our Extension professionals, ultimately building a relationship that meets everyone's goals. Over the next few months, I will be working to have our educators share and highlight some of the programming that is occurring throughout the County. Extension's monthly update and our website are also great resources to learn about what is happening and see impacts.

If County Board Supervisors have questions about Extension or the work we do or even know of a specific community need that Extension might be able to address, I would encourage them to reach out so that we can discuss and learn together. Currently, I strive to have a physical presence in each of the County offices at least once a week but have a home base in the Portage County Extension Office. You can reach me via email at Jennifer.mcnelly@wisc.edu or via my work cell phone at 715-214-8913. I look forward to the opportunity to continue to work with each of you in Waupaca County!



New Research Will Help Waupaca County Nonprofits Do More with Less

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

Waupaca County nonprofits and community organizations are being asked to do more with less. As funding tightens across the state and nation, local organizations are leaning harder than ever on volunteers to deliver important services like food assistance, transportation programs, and more. Yet many report they don't have enough volunteers, and struggle to find and keep the ones they do have.

The **Volunteer Waupaca Taskforce** is stepping forward to meet this challenge. Formed in late 2025, it brings together the Waupaca Area Chamber of Commerce, Waupaca Parks & Recreation, Waupaca Area Public Library, Waupaca Rotary Club, Volunteer Fox Cities, and UW–Extension to strengthen volunteerism in the City of Waupaca and surrounding areas.

A new volunteer matchmaking platform hosted by Volunteer Fox Cities will make it easier for residents to discover opportunities that fit their interests and schedules. A community day of service in May will raise awareness and inspire more people to get involved.



Community members attend the Volunteer Waupaca kickoff event in February.

UW-Extension's Amy Ebert is leading the research side of this effort. An initial scan found that around **88%** of Waupaca County nonprofits are likely to use volunteers, representing a rough estimate of nearly **7,000** volunteers across the county. While the Taskforce is focused on the City of Waupaca, Amy's role led her to expand the research countywide. Findings will give community leaders insight into who volunteers, what motivates them, and who is not yet engaged, and will be turned into practical tools like workshops, recruitment guides, and a county volunteer profile.

The survey launches in late April, wraps up in May, and results will be available in August.

Introducing Christi Gabrilka, Health and Well-Being Educator

For more than a decade, nutrition education and food security programming in Waupaca County was anchored by FoodWise, a federally funded SNAP-Ed initiative that gave community members practical skills for healthy eating and active living, and provided schools and food pantries a consistent educational resource. When federal funding for SNAP-Ed was eliminated in 2025, that infrastructure disappeared, but the need it served did not. A Health and Well-Being Educator position was established to fill that gap. Christi Gabrilka, who served as FoodWise Coordinator from 2014 to 2025, was hired as a Health and Well-Being Educator with an emphasis on nutrition and food security, at 50% capacity in Waupaca County. Christi’s position is being generously supported for 3 years by a private philanthropic organization that is provided through the UW Foundation to benefit Waupaca County.



Initial programming efforts of this position include identifying local data and resources addressing comprehensive aspects of nutrition and food security, engaging community partners, agencies, and individuals to build collaborative relationships, delivering nutrition education programming in settings such as food pantries, schools, and farmers’ markets, and engaging with local coalitions.

Christi is excited to continue her work in food security and nutrition with Extension in Waupaca in County. Please reach out and welcome Christi christi.gabrilka@wisc.edu in her new role.

Be Well Food Access Network Kick Off

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

Christi is collaborating with the Be Well Waupaca County Coalition to establish a new subcommittee that will support food pantries and other agencies across the county that support increased access to food.

March 24th marked the kickoff of the first official Be Well Food Access Network meeting, where 20 organizations from across the county attended. Agencies in attendance included Food Pantries from across the county, backpack programs, senior meal sites, little free food pantries, Economic Support, CAP Services, WIC, and school districts.

The mission of the Food Access Network is to *unite local food resources, strengthen networking among community partners, and increase access to nutritious food for vulnerable populations in Waupaca County.*

Christi invited Hunger Relief Federation, Feeding America Eastern WI and the WI Food Hub Cooperative to present at the meeting in March to speak to accessing nutrition foods,



changes in the FoodShare program, and supporting community members with barriers around food access. The goal is to continue meeting on a bi-monthly basis at varying locations around the county.

Common themes that arose from roundtable discussions at the event included more networking opportunities among agencies, more conversations to support the barriers families face around accessing nutritious food and reducing stigma around utilizing food pantries and other food access resources. There was a lot of excitement around the establishment of this network, and positive feedback from the participants indicating they already felt more connected.

Early Care and Education in Waupaca County

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

A 2025 statewide study by the University of Wisconsin Division of Extension found that providers want to be recognized and supported as professionals and need practical, ongoing training to remain in the field. The most requested areas were understanding child development and behavior, strengthening relationships with families, and better support for new professionals. Barriers such as time, cost, lack of substitutes, and rural access make locally delivered, relationship-based learning critical. County board members and community partners can read the full report on Extension's early care and education page: parenting.extension.wisc.edu/early-care-and-education/.

In response, UW Extension Waupaca County is strengthening the local child care system through coordinated workforce development, family education, and community collaboration. Through a three year Baldwin Grant, Extension and Child Care Resource and Referral are delivering annual in person professional development workshops at six regional sites statewide. Waupaca County is one of the host sites, with the local workshop at Fox Valley Technical College in Waupaca, offering Wisconsin Registry credit and a focus on social emotional learning and practical classroom strategies.

Educator Alicia Utke also provides onsite professional development and coaching in child care centers, including classroom observation, strategy modeling, and staff meeting training. In partnership with Waupaca County Head Start, Educator Utke delivered family education events in Clintonville and New London and a virtual session for Waupaca families, and collaborated with Home and Community Educators to place early literacy books in Head Start home libraries.

Together, these efforts build workforce capacity, support families, and strengthen early childhood systems that contribute to Waupaca County's economic stability and community well-being.

Exploring Sparks in 4-H

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

A spark is another word for interest, hobby, talent, or curiosity— it’s the thing you can’t wait to learn more about. Research in positive youth development shows that when young people discover their spark, they become more confident, more motivated, and more connected to their communities. In 4-H, we see this every day.

For some youth, a spark might be caring for a project animal, practicing photography, or exploring the outdoors. For others, it could be cooking, drawing, or taking the lead on a community service project. Sparks don’t have to be big; they simply need to be meaningful to that young person. And the thing to remember is that many youth don’t know what their spark is until they try something new—something 4-H offers all year long.

One recent opportunity to discover sparks was 4-H Super Saturday Project Day, held at Manawa High School. Both youth and adult volunteers taught over 30 classes and close to 170 youth participated. Tank and a committee of youth and adults work together to plan and coordinate the whole event. Some classes from this year included sourdough recipes, Lego challenge, woodworking, rabbit showmanship, crafts, model farm displays, terrariums, and more.

Evaluations are being collected through a google form. Of those completed so far, when asked what they found most valuable about Super Saturday, responses included “Getting the kids to try out a few different things that they don't normally do,” “Letting kids explore creativity and new projects and interests,” and “Exposure and education in current projects and new ones.”



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