



# ***Farm Well Wisconsin*** **Mid-Project Brief**

For the Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program

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**Center for Community  
and Nonprofit Studies**  
SCHOOL OF HUMAN ECOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

## The Community

People critical to our Southwest Wisconsin food system and economy include farmers, farm families, farm workers, health providers and students, rural businesses, and project partners. In Iowa, Lafayette, Grant, Green, and Richland counties, some have farmed in the region for generations and grow crops like corn and soy or raise cattle or other animals. Some are new farmers, including increasing numbers of women and younger farmers. Organic operations and interest in regenerative farming are on the rise. Farmworkers from Mexico and Central American countries are an essential component of the farming workforce and establishing roots in Southwestern Wisconsin communities.

The Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action Program (SWCAP) works to address the causes and conditions of poverty in the five-county region and promote community thriving. SWCAP includes various efforts and programs that support the resiliency and self-sufficiency of the farming community.

## The Need

Agriculture is hard work, both physically and mentally. Farming involves long days and weeks, demanding physical labor, business management, and responding to conditions that are beyond farmers' control, including increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and market conditions. Many suggest that farming is harder today than in previous generations. Some of the stressors of modern life that affect all communities, such as increasing time spent online and widening economic gaps, strain farming communities as well.

Farmers, farmworkers, their families, and other rural community members experience high need for mental health and behavioral health services but face challenges in accessing care. These challenges include provider shortages, distance to providers, cost of services and lack of insurance coverage, as well as cultural stigma. In the 2022 Community Needs Assessment for SWCAP, a top need identified by participating community



Members of SWCAP and the Farmer Wellness Advisory Coalition with representatives of Governor Evers' Cabinet.

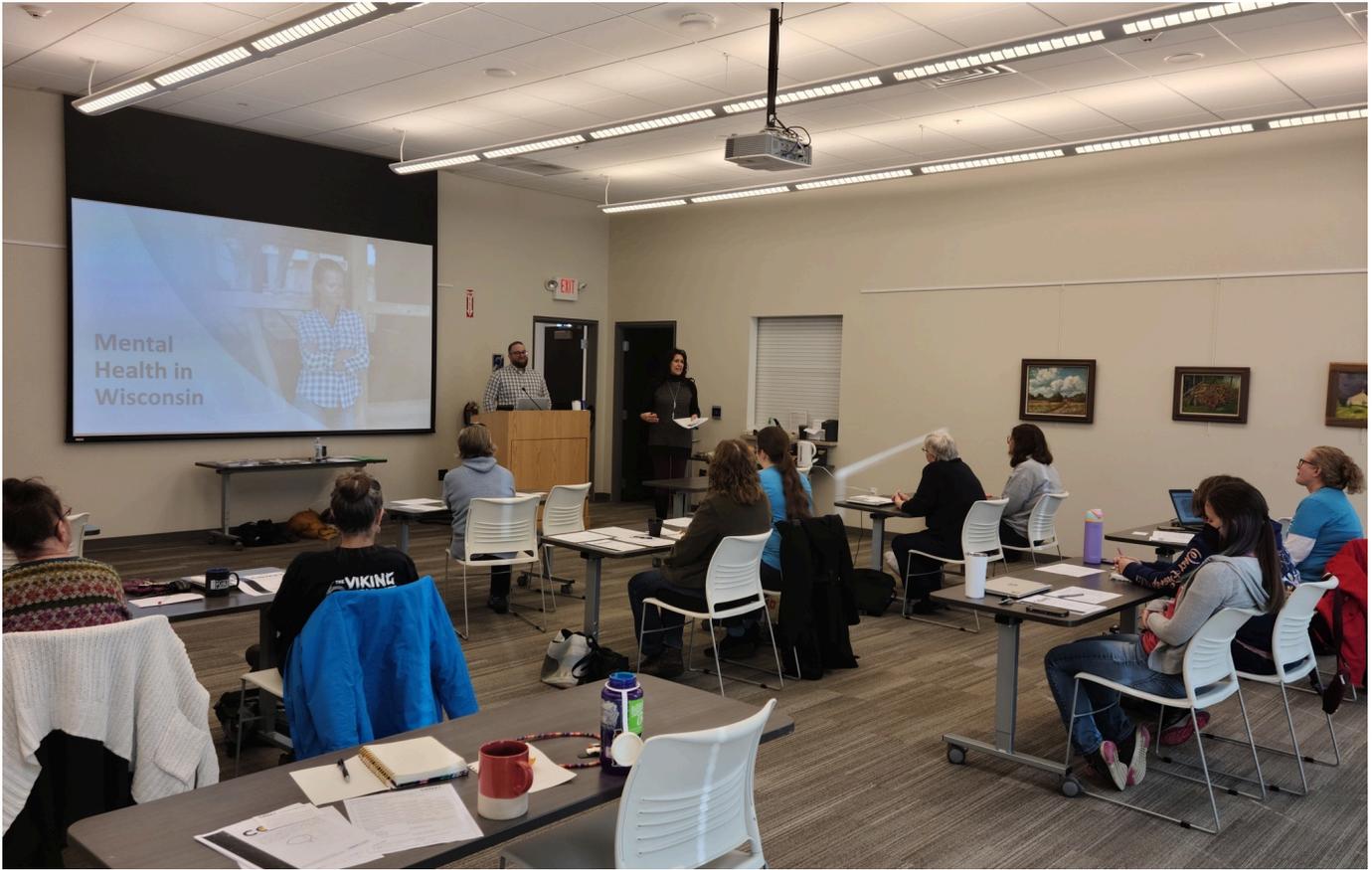
members, stakeholders, staff, and board members was for mental and behavioral health services. Respondents pointed to high levels of stress that community members were experiencing related to the COVID-19 pandemic, political tensions, rising inflation, and opioid abuse.

Additionally, the Community Needs Assessment detailed the shortage of mental health care providers in the region, with the ratios of providers to the population in some counties 2-3 times less than the national average. The consequences of high and unmet need for mental and behavioral health services can be dire. In Wisconsin, the suicide rate is 14.3 per every 100,000 farmers or farmworkers<sup>1</sup>, a rate much higher than the population average.

## The Approach

Despite these challenges, farming communities in Southwestern Wisconsin are rich with assets. The Farm Well Wisconsin project was developed in

<sup>1</sup>Weichelt, B., Burke, R., Redmond, E., & Shutske, J. (2021). Farm suicides in Wisconsin, 2017–2018: Preliminary findings and a call for future research. *Safety*, 7(3), 51. <https://doi.org/10.3390/safety7030051>



A COMET training in Platteville, WI.

2020 with funding from the Wisconsin Partnership Program and is designed to support the social determinants of mental and physical health, especially social cohesion, economic stability, access to health care, and health literacy. Farm Well addresses the urgent mental health needs of farmers by strengthening social connection within rural communities, increasing community knowledge and acceptability surrounding mental health, and by partnering with health providers and others to ensure that mental health services are widely available, accessible, and acceptable to farmers and their families.

In collaboration with partners from the University of Wisconsin - Madison (Division of Extension and the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies) and the input of regional and statewide partners, SWCAP designed Farm Well as an asset-based, multi-path initiative. The three pathways developed to support mental health and well-being in farming communities are: (1) *Community Capacity - Building, Empowerment and Support,*

(2) *Shifting Narratives and Outcomes through Education and Outreach,* and (3) *Health Equity Capacity-Building for Providers.*

*The Community Capacity-Building, Empowerment and Support* pathway includes mental health training, suicide awareness and intervention training, peer support for program facilitators, and the Farmer Wellness Advisory Coalition. The Farm Well team offers the COMET (Changing our Mental and Emotional Trajectory), and safeTALK programs to community members and service providers, and convenes the Facilitators' Community of Practice. These efforts are intended to build community members' knowledge of farmer mental health issues, skills in everyday interventions, and confidence in providing peer support. Additionally, the Farmer Wellness Advisory Coalition promotes the effective local adaptation of programs and builds local leadership related to mental health and well-being.

Do you know what to do when concerned about someone's mental or emotional well-being?

# COMET

CHANGING OUR MENTAL & EMOTIONAL TRAJECTORY

COMET™ Community Training In the training, you

- Learn a natural way to talk with a friend, a neighbor, or an acquaintance about difficult topics.
- Learn a conversational guide and the importance of being "the other person."
- Practice the COMET intervening questions and plan how you will use COMET to have conversations about another's well-being.

Please join us for this FREE In-Person training:  
Thursday, April 13th, from 6:30pm to 8:30pm

Visit the SWCAP Calendar page or contact the Schreiner Memorial Library to register. (608) 723-7304



## Participant Confidence Before and After COMET

	Before	After
How likely are you to ask someone how they're doing...really doing?	68% likely or very likely	88% likely or very likely
How likely are you to tell someone that you've noticed a change in their mood or behavior?	42% likely or very likely	76% likely or very likely
How likely are you to invite family or friends to tell you more about a potentially emotional situation?	62% likely or very likely	83% likely or very likely
How likely are you to invite an acquaintance or co-worker to tell you more about a potentially emotional situation?	44% likely or very likely	76% likely or very likely

The Shifting Narratives and Outcomes through Education and Outreach pathway involves varied communication activities, including the [FarmWellWI.org](http://FarmWellWI.org) website, *The Water We Swim In* virtual storytelling series, an active newsletter and social media presence, media engagements, and resource sharing. These activities seek to reach the broader public and promote increased understanding of mental health, awareness of available resources, and cultural acceptance of mental health challenges and help-seeking.

The Health Equity Capacity-Building for Providers pathway includes health provider workshops, medical student education, and related activities that ensure good mental health care for the farming community. With these efforts, providers will gain increased knowledge of farmer mental health issues and skills for identifying and responding to them. In the longer term, these efforts support high quality health care for rural communities that includes attention to mental health and well-being alongside physical health.

### The Impact

Since 2020, the Farm Well project has had 2581 engagements with community members, healthcare providers, agribusiness professionals, and others in the region with workshops, outreach events, and communications. Participants have gained awareness of the mental health issues of farming communities, developed skills in recognizing and responding to the mental health needs of others, and strengthened access to local mental health care. Below are some of the results of Farm Well initiatives to date:

## COMET

The COMET program seeks to support community members in intervening in emotional and mental health concerns well before a crisis occurs. Developed by and for use in rural agricultural communities, COMET involves seven simple questions that community members can use to start conversations with others when they have concerns about their well-being and to offer their emotional support.

Delivered as a two-hour in-person or virtual workshop, the 443 participants in COMET to date have included farmers, teachers, Extension Educators, healthcare workers, and others. To better reach women farmers – who can face additional stress from expectations for them to bear the bulk of care work for children and other family as they also farm – Farm Well collaborated with Wisconsin Women in Conservation to provide six COMET trainings for 101 participants. After the training, participants can join follow-up sessions with COMET Catch Up and Connect or participate in a COMET train-the-trainers workshop.

In pre- and post-workshop surveys, participants in COMET report increased capacity to engage with others in intervention conversations:

- 88% of participants said they were *likely* (46%) or *very likely* (42%) to “ask someone how they are really doing” after the training, compared to 68% before the training
- 76% of participants said they were *likely* (48%) or *very likely* (28%) to “tell someone that you've noticed a change in their mood or behavior” after, compared to 42% before
- 83% of participants said they were *likely* (39%) or *very likely* (44%) to “invite family or friends to tell you more about a potentially emotional situation” after, compared to 62% before
- 76% of participants said they were *likely* (46%) or *very likely* (30%) to “invite an acquaintance or co-worker to tell you more about a potentially emotional situation” after, compared to 44% before

These impacts continue after the training as well. In the Farm Well Participant Follow-Up survey



The flyer is for a safeTALK workshop. It features the safeTALK logo at the top right, which includes a warning icon and the text "safeTALK suicide alertness for everyone". The main title "safeTALK" is in large, bold, black letters. Below the title, a paragraph describes the workshop's goal: "At a safeTALK workshop, you'll learn how to prevent suicide by recognizing the signs of someone struggling with thoughts of suicide, learn to engage them so they tell their story, and identify resources to connect them to for further support." To the right of this text is a photograph of a large, modern building with a gabled roof, identified as the Dodgeville Grace Lutheran Church. Below the photo, a text box states: "This workshop is appropriate for any community member 15 years of age or older no matter their level of prior familiarity or training in community-based mental health support." The date and time are listed as "MARCH 28TH 8:45-12:15PM". The location is "DODGEVILLE GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH, 1105 N BEQUETTE ST., DODGEVILLE, WI 53533". At the bottom, it says "Brought to you by: farmwell wisconsin" and "A program of: SWCAP SOUTHWESTERN WISCONSIN COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM". The flyer has a brown and green color scheme with decorative geometric shapes.

conducted in fall 2022, all responding COMET past participants (n=17) said they had used the conversation strategies with at least one person since the training. One respondent wrote, “The session made me realize the importance of taking action if I think someone needs support.”

## safeTALK

safeTALK is an evidence-based suicide prevention curriculum that seeks to provide a framework for community members to build skills and confidence in recognizing when they are engaging with someone who is struggling with thoughts of suicide. The safeTALK workshop teaches community members how to ask about thoughts of suicide and how to refer people struggling with those thoughts to intervention providers. safeTALK is delivered as a four-hour, in-person workshop, including presentation and skills practice.

190 community members have participated in a safeTALK workshop through 2023. At the end of the training, participants reported:

- That they felt *mostly prepared* (42%) or *well prepared* (36%) to “to talk directly and openly to a person about their thoughts of suicide”
- That “I intend to tell others that they will benefit from this training” (100% *strongly agreed*)

After safeTALK, 78% of participants reported feeling prepared to talk to directly to a person about their thoughts of suicide

The influence of the safeTALK training persists for participants as well. While past participants in safeTALK (n=10) did not often report having had a conversation with someone about their thoughts of suicide, the majority (56%) said they had told people about the benefits of the training. One past participant said that safeTALK made them “aware of how to talk to a person who may be considering suicide and how to get them professional help.”

#### *The Water We Swim In*

The Water We Swim In is an innovative program developed by Farm Well to bring together community members in the region to share and learn from each others’ stories. The Water We Swim In is designed to operate far upstream of mental health crises by helping illuminate aspects of local culture that potentially contribute to trauma, mental health issues, and stigma, and then shifting them. Through storytelling and facilitated discussion, participants can better interrupt unhelpful patterns and build more accepting and supportive communities. To date, 21 sessions of The Water We Swim In have been presented virtually, including a special four-session series for the Soil Sisters group for women farmers.

In the 2022 Participant Follow-Up Survey attendees to the sessions (n=7) reported:

- That all found it *useful* (14%) or *very useful* (86%) to their “understanding of local culture as it influences mental health.”
- And nearly all found it *useful* (14%) or *very useful* (72%) to their “capacity to interrupt harmful aspects of local culture or build a more supportive culture.”

An attendee commented, “I am more aware of when cultural norms/expectations affect me emotionally and I'm more aware of when I'm imposing them on others.”

To further build skills in telling stories related to mental health and culture and create a pipeline of storytellers for the series, Farm Well has also developed The Water We Swim In Lab. The Lab is an intensive eight-week workshop that draws upon evidence-based practices of peer support and storytelling to increase help-seeking behaviors and break down mental health stigmas. Participants in the Lab have identified a number of positive impacts:

- More frequent and higher quality conversations with their family and friends about emotions and trauma
- More empathy in their everyday interactions
- Greater capacity to see the “roots of things” behind behaviors and community issues
- Confidence in storytelling and “speaking up”

#### *Farm Well Communications and Social Media*

Farm Well has featured a strong communications effort and social media engagement. In addition to the [FarmWellWI.org](https://www.farmwellwi.org) website, which has been visited by more than 2000 individuals so far in 2023, Farm Well sends out a regular newsletter and posts regularly to Facebook and Instagram. The team has established a regular cadence for posting – Mondays for events and upcoming trainings, Wednesdays for self-care tips, and Fridays featuring an inspirational quote – and partners with other organizations and community groups to share content. Currently, 258 individuals follow the Facebook page and 157 follow the

Instagram profile. These communications are valued by followers and shared in their networks.

### *WARM, WeCOPE, and Other Healthcare Provider Activities*

In addition to bringing the COMET and safeTALK programs to health providers through workshops at area hospitals and medical centers, the Farm Well project has collaborated with the Wisconsin Academy of Rural Medicine (WARM) program to present to medical students and health professionals on mental health, stress, and suicide prevention for farming communities. These presentations have engaged 135 students and practicing health professionals.

The Farm Well project has also contributed to the adaptation of the WeCOPE (Connecting with Our Positive Emotions) program materials for farming audiences. Health care providers and others can access these materials and tools to use to better support their farming patients. Additionally, the Farm Well team has been working to increase access and awareness of the AgriSafe program to support use of their farmer-specific mental health screening tool.

### *Farmer Wellness Advisory Coalition*

The Farmer Wellness Advisory Coalition serves to enhance the overall work of the project by engaging community members directly in guidance, decision-making, and reviews of progress. The coalition has included 12 members since first convened in 2020, including farmers, local health professionals, and people with lived experiences of mental health issues or the consequences of suicide.

In quarterly meetings, the coalition has engaged with the project team to examine the upstream drivers of mental health issues in Southwestern Wisconsin farming communities. In particular, the coalition has identified two factors as contributing to mental health issues locally: 1) communication challenges within families and communities, especially across generations, and 2) a culture of stoicism that discourages people from talking about the hard things they experience.



A safeTALK training in Plain, WI.

To examine these further, the coalition engaged in a Photovoice project in 2023 to photograph and critique examples of “thriving” and “not thriving” in their farming lives. These photographs will be shared through Farm Well’s website and social media to spur further community conversation.

### **Going Forward**

Farm Well will continue these educational offerings, facilitator support, communication activities, and health provider engagements to support the mental health and well-being of the farming community. Additionally, Farm Well will begin to offer the CALM (Conversations on Access to Lethal Means) training, which will educate community members in responding to situations of potential self-harm and access to firearms. Farm Well is also continuing outreach to farmworkers, many of whom are Spanish-speaking, to provide access to culturally-relevant mental health care and address social determinants of health, like housing.

By 2025, Farm Well Wisconsin will have trained community members and health providers throughout the region, normalizing mental health conversations and help-seeking, strengthening bonds, and increasing access to care.