

NEWS FROM EXTENSION

Wood County | April 2024



Rent Smart

by Jackie Carattini, Human Development & Relationships Educator

Rent Smart is a six-module course that helps participants with negative or limited rental records gain the skills to find and keep safe and affordable housing. We also train service providers to use the Rent Smart program with their clients. Rent Smart strives to guide and inform participants so they may:

- Learn new skills to build positive relationships with landlords and neighbors
- Gain confidence in their ability to find and maintain affordable housing.
- Understand the application and screening processes used by landlords.
- Learn the responsibilities and rights of tenants and landlords.



Jackie Carattini, Human Development and Relationships Educator, teaches Rent Smart monthly both virtually and in-person in Wisconsin Rapids and Marshfield in order to best meet client's needs. Carattini also teaches monthly in a statewide virtual program for participants throughout Wisconsin. She is also on the team that teaches a "train-the-trainer" Rent Smart program for community partners throughout the United States twice a year.

Since the fall of 2022, Carattini has partnered with the Wood County Sheriff's Department to offer the series every month in the jail. This allows participants to have a better plan for obtaining housing when they are released. It also helps them create a budget, get copies of their credit reports and learn landlord/tenant rights and laws in Wisconsin. This is done in conjunction with the Wood County Rent Ready program. Rent Ready has landlords that have agreed to rent to tenants with criminal backgrounds or poor rental history, if they complete the program requirements with attending Rent Smart as one component.

Recent participants have stated *"I wish I would have taken this years ago. There are so many laws that I didn't know existed. I could have saved a lot of money", "I plan to do my budget first before looking for a place so I know what I can REALLY afford", "This is the second time I have taken this class and I still learned something new. I learned that verbal rental agreements are legal in WI. Thank you so much for offering."*

In addition, 100% of participants stated that the course will or might help them find housing in the future. 9/10 participants who have moved since the completion of the course say their new housing is safer, more affordable and better quality.

In April of 2024, Carattini was informed that a team she is part of were awarded a Wisconsin Idea Collaboration grant to evaluate and do revisions to the Rent Smart curriculum. The goal is to develop trauma-informed Rent Smart programming for domestic violence survivors. The research will begin in June of 2024.

A place to call home.

Wood County's first-ever Housing Summit shares solutions to housing challenges.

by Kayla Rombalski,, Community Development Educator



More than 100 people gathered on March 7, 2024, for Wood County's first Housing Summit held at Mid-State Technical College in Wisconsin Rapids. The Summit, planned by members of the Wood County Housing Task Force, was a direct response to the calls for action and conversation surrounding affordable and accessible housing throughout the County and Central Wisconsin.

The day featured a packed agenda with best practices from other communities, a legislative panel, and an action planning session to generate key takeaways. The Summit program may be viewed here: [Housing Summit Program](#).

Extension Wood County Community Development Educator Kayla Rombalski co-led the event with Kayleigh Mengel of the Wood County Health Department and the support of the entire Wood County Housing Task Force. Summit attendees were supportive of the event, offering many positive comments and feedback.

As the Wood County Housing Task Force compiles the Summit evaluations and the responses from the action planning session we are working through the next steps and know that our housing conversation will not stop after one event. We've heard that attendees want a more focused programs specific to affordable/income-eligible housing, increased access to housing for marginalized populations, more developers and builders at the table, and more opportunities to learn about successful housing strategies other communities have deployed such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs) or land trusts.

It is clear from the summit and feedback we've received that housing is an important topic, not only in Wood County, but across the state and the nation.

Special thanks go to the Wood County Housing Summit's emcees and all presenters and to the sponsors of the summit; *Wood County, Healthy People Wood County, Extension Wood County, The Mission Coffee, LLC., Centergy, and Mid-State Technical College.*

We welcome additional involvement on the Wood County Housing Task Force. If you are interested in joining, please contact Kayla Rombalski (krombalski@wisc.edu, 715-421-8445) or Kayleigh Mengel (kayleigh.mengel@woodcountywi.gov, 715-421-8926).