



### **Culturally Rooted Empowerment: Navigating End-of-Life Planning for the Hmong Community**

*Ka Zoua Thao, Bilingual (HMong) Community Health Worker*

The Hmong Planning AHEAD program in Wood County is a culturally adapted end-of-life planning curriculum designed to meet the unique needs of the Hmong community. Recognizing that discussions about death are considered taboo in Hmong culture, the program was carefully tailored to honor cultural practices while providing essential tools for financial planning, advance directives, and grief processing. Developed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, the curriculum involved collaboration with Hmong students and experts to ensure accurate translations and cultural sensitivity. This initiative empowers Hmong individuals and families to navigate end-of-life decisions with confidence and respect for their traditions, fostering a sense of preparedness and community support.

Ka Zoua Thao has played a pivotal role in teaching the Hmong Planning AHEAD program in Wood County. As a Bilingual Community Health Worker, she has leveraged her cultural expertise and language skills to guide Hmong families through the sensitive topic of end-of-life planning. Her approach emphasizes respect for cultural traditions while providing practical tools for financial planning, advance directives, and grief processing. By fostering trust and understanding, Ka Zoua has empowered the Hmong community to navigate these important decisions with confidence, ensuring that their values and needs are honored.



# Highlighting Innovative Solutions and Community Collaboration in Wood County

by Kayla Rombalski, Community Development Educator



As a Community Development Extension Educator in Wood County, the most rewarding aspect of my role is collaborating with an incredible group of community partners who are true "changemakers" in their communities and across Central Wisconsin. Recently, we've had numerous reasons to celebrate within the realm of economic development. Read on to discover the exciting details about just a few notable programs.

- **Ribbon Cutting at Villas of Vesper:** On Tuesday, March 25 a ribbon cutting ceremony was held for the Villas of Vesper housing project. The ribbon cutting drew a crowd of more than 50 people, including representatives of the Wisconsin Rapids and Marshfield Chambers of Commerce, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the Mayor of Marshfield, several County Board Members and others.
  - Local developer and project owner, Sherri Stempa, was available to give tours and expressed her gratitude to project partners. Formerly the Vesper Elementary School, the property has been beautifully transformed into modern one, two, and three-bedroom apartments, complete with a community fitness center and event venue.
  - This innovative project is part of a growing trend in Wisconsin, where developers are repurposing closed schools into residential spaces to address the state's housing shortages. The Villas of Vesper exemplify this creative solution right here in Wood County. WSAW Newschannel 7 covered the story and a Facebook post from the Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce received quite a bit of attention as well.
- **CranCity Corner, Pittsville:** Plans are progressing for a new development in Pittsville called CranCity Corner. This project is a comprehensive economic development initiative featuring housing, local business incubation, a community bank, meeting space, and more. It will serve as not only a much-needed physical gathering space in the community but will house a community-focused nonprofit organization as well.
  - Extension's involvement in the project began with a strategic planning process in which community partners identified an initial need. We were thrilled to see the project further develop when Pittsville was selected by the Office of Rural Prosperity at the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's Thrive Rural Wisconsin program. We are excited about the economic impact this project will have on the City of Pittsville and Wood County. Stay tuned for additional information about this project!

# Highlighting Innovative Solutions and Community Collaboration in Wood County - *continued*

- **Child Care Capacity Grants:** The Wood County Child Care Task Force was fortunate to receive an allocation of Wood County ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds to address the pressing child care needs in our communities. One of the key strategies for utilizing these funds is to support startup or capacity-building grants for local child care centers. Childcaring, Inc. administered a competitive grant application process, and we were thrilled to see eight licensed group child care centers in Wood County participate in the first round of applications. Each center presented innovative strategies to increase available child care slots, thereby serving Wood County families more effectively in this crucial area. Information about the selected grant recipient will be announced soon.



*Kelly Borchardt, Executive Director of Childcaring, Inc. attends a Wood County Child Care Directors Cohort meeting to share details about the capacity building grant opportunities*

- **2025 Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference- Building Bridges, Empowering Entrepreneurs:** Planning continues for the 2025 Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference. The conference will be held in Wisconsin Rapids on June 16-18. A local team of partners is diligently working to bring this conference to life, and we are thrilled to be hosting it here in Wisconsin Rapids. This conference features programming about entrepreneurship in smaller communities, featuring the local leaders, local businesses, and local cultures of a Wisconsin town. Hosting in Wisconsin Rapids allows us to showcase the community's vibrancy and transformation. Save the date and register to join us at the conference! Details can be found at: <https://go.wisc.edu/cec>.

A registration banner for the 2025 Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference. The banner features a background image of Wisconsin Rapids, WI, with a water tower. The text includes "REGISTER NOW" in large blue letters, "CONNECTING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE" in white, "June 16-18, 2025" in a green box, and a list of topics: "Entrepreneurial Ecosystems", "Planning and Infrastructure", "Placemaking", and "Agritourism and MORE!". It also states "WISCONSIN RAPIDS, WI" and "EVENT PAGE: GO.WISC.EDU/CEC". A QR code is located in the bottom left corner, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison logo is in the bottom right corner.

These recent developments in Wood County highlight the power of collaboration and innovation in driving economic growth and community well-being. These initiatives demonstrate a commitment to addressing local needs and fostering a vibrant community.

## *Upcoming Events:*

- **Wednesday, May 28, 2025, 8:30-9:30 AM:** Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce's Coffee with the Chamber Event featuring Wood County Economic Development Updates
- **Saturday, May 31, 2025, 8 AM – Noon:** Wood County Clean Sweep at Marshfield Agricultural Research Station (South Campus)
- **Monday-Wednesday, June 16-18:** 2025 Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference in downtown Wisconsin Rapids