

NEWS FROM EXTENSION

Wood County | March 2026



Welcome to our new Area Extension Director, Jen McNelly!

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. Most of you will most likely recognize my name, as I have spent the past two years 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 in Wood County. 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 are able to provide to 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 Wood County!

Helping Justice-Impacted Individuals Build Skills for Successful Reentry

by Ben Eberlein, Human Development and Relationships Educator

In collaboration with the Wood County Sheriff's Department and the STRONG Program, Extension Educator Ben Eberlein began a new programming series in the Wood County Jail. The program, **Reentry Ready: Focus on Finances**, is designed to help participants build a foundation of financial knowledge and skills, specifically tailored to the unique challenges incarcerated individuals face upon reentry.

People with criminal records face many barriers as they transition back into their communities; from finding and securing employment, to something as simple as opening an account at a bank or credit union. Even seemingly small barriers can quickly compound, as it's very common to lose possession of things like identification cards and housing during incarceration. Additionally, while incarcerated, existing debts continue to accrue, while new criminal justice debts are typically incurred. Unlike regular consumer debt, criminal justice debt doesn't always fall under the protection of the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, and failure to pay these debts can result in serious consequences such as returning to prison or jail.

Through this 8-module series, participants learn about basic financial products and services, how and when to utilize different financial products, tracking income and benefits, strategies for paying bills and saving money, prioritizing and dealing with debt, and best practices for protecting both personal and financial information.

The first Reentry Ready series in the Wood County Jail began in January, with five participants who successfully completed the course. The next series is scheduled to begin on *March 17th*, with 13 applicants hoping to participate.

We teach, learn, lead and serve, connecting people with the University of Wisconsin, and engaging with them in transforming lives and communities.



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