

NEWS FROM EXTENSION

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Collaboration in Action:

Advancing Housing and Entrepreneurship in Central Wisconsin

by Kayla Rombalski, Community Development Educator



Wood County Extension Community Development recently co-facilitated two impactful initiatives, the **Central Wisconsin Housing Summit** and the **Small Business Academy**, demonstrating its leadership in advancing economic vitality across the region.

Central Wisconsin Housing Summit

On April 15, more than 100 developers, policymakers, lenders, real estate professionals, and community leaders gathered at UW-Stevens Point to address one of the Centergy region's most pressing challenges: housing availability. Participants represented Adams, Portage, Wood, Marathon, and Lincoln counties.

Planned over several months by a regional team of economic development partners, led by Community Development Educators Kayla Rombalski (Wood County) and Katie Livernash (Portage County), the summit offered a structured, data-driven space for collaboration.

Keynote speaker Kurt Paulsen, a UW–Madison researcher, outlined critical trends, including demographic shifts, affordability gaps, and the growing need for diverse housing options. His presentation informed panel discussions on financing tools, workforce constraints, and innovative housing models already succeeding in Wisconsin communities.

The summit produced meaningful outcomes, including stronger regional alignment, new cross-sector partnerships, and clear next steps to advance housing projects. It also reinforced Extension’s role as a neutral convener, bringing together stakeholders who may not typically collaborate to support locally driven, regionally coordinated solutions.

“We intentionally brought together leaders, builders, and risk takers because solving housing challenges requires all perspectives,” said Kayla Rombalski. “The conversations and connections made today are just the beginning of meaningful, lasting change in Central Wisconsin.”

Small Business Academy

Building on this collaborative approach, Extension partnered with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to host the Lieutenant Governor’s Small Business Academy in Marshfield on May 8. The hands-on program connected entrepreneurs with the tools, knowledge, and networks needed to start and grow successful businesses.

Sessions covered essential topics such as business planning, financial management, marketing strategies, artificial intelligence for productivity, and hiring employees. Participants also heard directly from experienced business owners, gaining practical insights and lessons learned.

Extension emphasized applied learning and resource connection, linking attendees with key partners including WEDC, the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), SCORE, local financial institutions, and the Marshfield Chamber. These relationships ensured participants left with both actionable knowledge and ongoing support.

Outcomes included increased confidence among participants, clearer business goals, and stronger ties within the regional small business ecosystem—key drivers of sustained economic growth.

Looking Ahead

Together, these initiatives highlight Wood County Extension’s critical role in convening partners, delivering research-based education, and turning collaboration into action. By addressing both housing and small business development, Extension is helping ensure the region remains competitive, resilient, and responsive to emerging needs.



Voices to Action:

Wood County Food Insecurity Listening Sessions

by Hannah Wendels Scott, Health & Wellbeing Educator

In collaboration with the Wood County Health Department and community partners, Extension Wood County recently completed a series of three community listening sessions focused on food insecurity. These sessions were made possible through a \$10,000 grant from the Marshfield Clinic region of Sanford Health and Security Health Plan, with funding intentionally split between community engagement and implementation of solutions informed by resident feedback.

These sessions were held across three locations to ensure all areas of Wood County are being represented. These include Wisconsin Rapids at FOCUS Food Pantry, Pittsville Community Library in partnership with the Pittsville Area Neighbors Shelf, and the Marshfield Community Center in partnership with the ADRC of Central Wisconsin. Each session brought together a diverse group of participants, including families, individuals living alone, and older adults - many with lived experience navigating food access challenges in Wood County.



These sessions were designed to do more than gather input - they created a space for residents to share real-life experiences, identify barriers to food access, and propose community-driven ideas for solutions. By prioritizing voices of those directly impacted by food insecurity, this effort ensures that future strategies are grounded in lived experience rather than assumptions.

Each community brought unique perspectives, however, several themes emerged across all three sessions:

- **Barriers to access** include transportation challenges, limited grocery shopping options - particularly in more rural areas of the county - as well as pantry hours that do not always align with the needs of working families, and the high cost of nutritious foods.
- Participants shared that while resources exist, they are not always well-known or easy to navigate, stating many online resources are **inaccessible** for many individuals in our community.
- Many participants emphasized the importance of reducing **stigma** associated with seeking assistance and creating more **welcoming environments** in the community when it comes to accessing services.

Hearing from participants the barriers and challenges that exist in our County is incredibly important to moving forward. Just as important to sharing the barriers, they also shared thoughtful, actionable solutions including expanding mobile or community-based food distributions, enhancing communication and outreach about available resources, increasing collaboration among local organizations, creating more flexible and accessible program hours, and hosting community listening sessions similar to these with community leadership to ensure decision makers are aware of the challenges that exist here. These ideas reflect a strong desire within the community to be part of the solution.

Food insecurity is not only a matter of nutrition - it directly impacts health outcomes, educational success, workforce participation, and overall quality of life. By engaging residents in meaningful conversations, Wood County is taking a proactive and strategic approach to addressing these broader community impacts. These listening sessions build trust, bring real barriers to light, and ensure that future investments are targeted and effective.

While the first half of our project is almost complete, we plan to host a few one-on-one sessions with parents and our Hmong and Hispanic communities. Once these conversations are complete, we will enter the second half of our project: implementation. Approximately half of the grant funding has been reserved to pilot solutions identified through these sessions. This ensures that community input directly informs action and impact.

These listening sessions represent an important investment in understanding and addressing food insecurity in Wood County. By centering community voices and leveraging strong partnerships, this work creates sustainable, locally-driven solutions that can improve health and well-being across the county.