



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #138

Farmer Mental Health (Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection)

[LFB 2019-21 Budget Summary: Page 42, #11]

CURRENT LAW

The Wisconsin Farm Center, housed within the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) Division of Agricultural Development, provides information, referrals, and crisis response to farmers and their families. Farm Center services include technical assistance related to production, processing and marketing, as well as financial consultations, farm succession planning, minority and veterans outreach, and mediation and arbitration.

GOVERNOR

Create an annual appropriation with \$100,000 in general purpose revenue (GPR) each year of the biennium within the Department's Division of Agricultural Development to provide mental health assistance to farmers and farm families. Further, expand the Department's powers to include the provision of mental health assistance to farmers and farm families.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. The Wisconsin Farm Center operates a hotline that farmers may call for assistance on a variety of issues. DATCP reports Farm Center staff screen callers regarding their current mental health and need for counseling. Staff are trained to identify signs of high stress and suicidal ideation, and talk with farmers to reduce their feeling of isolation and refer them to professional help. Further, DATCP reports that staff follow-up with farmers in order to monitor their general well-being.

2. Currently, DATCP staff exercise discretion in their suggestion of counseling and may

offer vouchers that cover the cost of counseling sessions. Farmers are eligible for vouchers if they have at least \$10,000 in gross farm sales and have financial limitations to accessing counseling services. These financial limitations may include lack of health insurance, or a co-pay or deductible related to counseling that is prohibitively expensive. If a caller accepts an offer for counseling vouchers, DATCP sends a letter to the farmer with information about the program, which includes three vouchers. If the three vouchers are eventually used, DATCP reports it may send an additional two to three vouchers to the farmer. If a voucher is eventually used, DATCP reimburses the service provider \$100.

3. DATCP reports: (a) in calendar year 2017 it issued 19 vouchers and 11 were redeemed; (b) in 2018 it issued 89 vouchers and 11 were redeemed; and (c) in 2019 through May, it has issued 38 and 15 have been redeemed. DATCP suggests that farmers may not use vouchers they receive due to the stigma associated with addressing mental health issues. DATCP argues that reassurance from family and friends is necessary to reduce this stigma, and it intends to allocate some of the proposed funding to increase community involvement in addressing mental health issues.

4. DATCP reports that due to limited available funding, it does not advertise its counseling vouchers. Instead, it conserves vouchers for the highest need callers. DATCP estimates it has approximately \$5,000 in funding remaining for vouchers. DATCP reports it previously funded counseling vouchers with grant awards, primarily from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Between 2000 and 2010, DATCP received grants totaling \$184,600, which supported training, retreats, and counseling vouchers. The Department has not received grant funding since that time, and it reports no federal funding is currently available.

5. DATCP intends to use proposed funding to: (a) increase training of Farm Center staff and counselors to who provide services to farm families; (b) establish workshops for farm families on topics such as stress management, family communication, and coping with grief and change; and (c) coordinate with workforce development organizations to help displaced farmers acclimate to new employment and improve their job-seeking skills. In addition to core mental health services it would provide, DATCP contends that increased expenditure on other Farm Center activities would allow it to proactively address stressors that cause mental health difficulties in farmers. Thus, DATCP reports it also intends to expand its provision of succession planning, business diversification assistance, and farmer transition resources. DATCP reports that currently its case load is dedicated primarily to financial viability, and argues that additional resources would allow it to expand its services related to preparing farmers for future challenges.

6. The 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture reports that net cash farm income in Wisconsin declined 22% from the 2012 Census of Agriculture. The National Agricultural Statistics Service also reports the monthly all-milk price for Wisconsin, after peaking in September, 2014, at \$26.60 per hundredweight (100 pounds), has averaged approximately \$16.60 from January, 2018, through April, 2019. Data released in November, 2018, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that the suicide rate for males in the "Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Occupational Managers" category was 44.9 per 100,000 civilian noninstitutionalized working persons in 2012, and 32.2 in 2015. Further, data indicate that the suicide rate for males in the "Agricultural Workers" category was 20.4 per 100,000 civilian noninstitutionalized working persons in 2012, and 17.3 in 2015. Data

previously provided related to these categories had attracted significant nationwide attention, as CDC had reported a substantially higher suicide rate of 84.5 per 100,000; however, subsequent analysis revealed incorrect coding of data, and CDC retracted the report. For comparison, the suicide rate among working-age adults was 17.3 per 100,000 in 2016. Thus, data suggests that farmers are disproportionately affected by suicide, as compared to the national average. Further, a separate 2017 report from CDC showed that suicide rates are higher in nonmetropolitan/rural areas (19.74 per 100,000 in 2013-2015), as opposed to medium/small metropolitan (16.77) and large metropolitan areas (12.72).

7. Considering mental issues that some farmers are experiencing, the higher risk of suicide for persons with occupations related to farming and for those in rural areas, and currently limited availability of DATCP funding for mental health assistance to farmers, the Committee could consider adopting the Governor's proposal (Alternative 1). The Committee could also consider providing \$50,000 GPR each year (Alternative 2) or taking no action (Alternative 3).

ALTERNATIVES

1. Adopt the Governor's proposal to create an annual appropriation with \$100,000 GPR each year of the biennium within DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development to provide mental health assistance to farmers and farm families. Additionally, expand the Department's powers to include the provision of mental health assistance to farmers and farm families.

ALT 1	Change to	
	Base	Bill
GPR	\$200,000	\$0

2. Modify the Governor's proposal to provide \$50,000 GPR each year of the biennium.

ALT 2	Change to	
	Base	Bill
GPR	\$100,000	- \$100,000

3. Take no action.

ALT 3	Change to	
	Base	Bill
GPR	\$0	- \$200,000

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