



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #168

Farmer Mental Health Assistance (Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection -- Agricultural Assistance)

[LFB 2021-23 Budget Summary: Page 61, #5]

CURRENT LAW

The Wisconsin Farm Center, housed in DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development, offers services supporting farmers and their families, including: (a) a hotline that farmers may call for information, referrals, and crisis support; (b) mental health assistance, including a 24-hour counseling hotline, in-person and virtual counseling sessions, and workshops for farmers on mental health issues; (c) technical assistance related to production, processing, and marketing; (d) financial consultations and farm succession planning; (e) minority and veteran farmer outreach; and (f) mediation and arbitration assistance.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Research¹ published in January, 2020, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that the suicide rate for men in the "Farming, Fishing, and Forestry" category was 31.4 per 100,000 civilian non-institutionalized working persons in 2016. Further, it estimated the suicide rate for men in the "Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Agriculture Managers" subcategory was 43.2 per 100,000 civilian non-institutionalized working persons in 2016. For comparison, across all industries in the dataset, the suicide rate for working men was estimated at 27.4 per 100,000 in 2016, and the suicide rate among all working-age adults (age 16 to 64) was estimated at 18.0 per 100,000 in 2017. Thus, data suggest that men working in the farming, fishing, and forestry industries face suicide rates 15% higher than other working men and 75% higher than the national average. Similarly, men working as farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers face suicide

¹ Peterson C, Sussell A, Li J, Schumacher PK, Yeoman K, Stone DM. Suicide Rates by Industry and Occupation — National Violent Death Reporting System, 32 States, 2016. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6903a1>

rates 58% higher than other working men and 140% higher than the national average. Researchers report insufficient data was available for women in these categories to develop statistical estimates with sufficient confidence. Further, a separate 2017 report² 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).

2. 2019 Wisconsin Act 9 set aside \$100,000 GPR each year during the 2019-21 biennium in one-time funding for farmer mental health assistance activities, subject to approval by the Joint Committee on Finance. The Committee approved allocation of that funding in September, 2019, providing funding on a one-time basis during the 2019-21 biennium. Prior to funding under Act 9, DATCP operated a counseling voucher program supported by grant funding received primarily from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services between 2000 and 2010.

3. During the 2019-21 biennium, farmer mental health assistance funding has supported: (a) a 24-hour Wisconsin Farmer Wellness hotline and telephone counseling service for distressed farmers; (b) vouchers covering the cost of counseling sessions for farmers; (c) training and outreach to agriculture and health care professionals to help identify and address farm-related mental health challenges; (d) in-person and virtual support groups, meetings, and trainings to support farmers and their families addressing mental health challenges; (e) a podcast addressing challenges facing Wisconsin farmers; and (f) limited-term staff costs supporting these initiatives. Table 1 shows anticipated allocations amongst these activities based on 2019-20 and 2020-21 year-to-date expenditures, and DATCP estimated allocations for the remainder of the biennium.

TABLE 1

2019-21 Farmer Mental Health Funding Allocation

<u>Expenditure Category</u>	<u>Amount</u>
24/7 Hotline and Counseling Services	\$66,400
Limited-Term Staff	57,200
Training, Outreach, and Education	32,300
Counseling Vouchers	21,800
Farmer Support Groups	15,800
Rural Realities Podcast	5,000
Job Hunting Support Resources	<u>1,500</u>
Total	\$200,000

4. Farmers calling DATCP's Farm Center hotline or the Wisconsin Farmer Wellness counseling hotline are screened regarding their current mental health and need for counseling. Staff are trained to identify signs of high stress and suicidal ideation, talk with farmers to reduce their feeling of isolation, and refer them to professional help. Callers are offered an initial allocation of three vouchers that may be used to receive counseling sessions from providers recruited by DATCP.

² Ivey-Stephenson AZ, Crosby AE, Jack SP, Haileyesus T, Kresnow-Sedacca M. Suicide Trends Among and Within Urbanization Levels, 2001–2015. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6618a1>

Currently, DATCP reports approximately 210 providers in 60 of 72 Wisconsin counties accept its counseling vouchers. Table 2 shows counseling voucher allocations since 2011. DATCP currently reimburses providers \$100 per counseling session, and in certain circumstances up to \$140 to cover travel costs for counselors traveling to counties without an existing provider.

TABLE 2

Counseling Voucher Allocations

<u>Calendar Year</u>	<u>Issued</u>	<u>Redeemed</u>	<u>Percent Redeemed</u>	<u>Cost</u>
2011	49	36	73%	\$2,700
2012	38	14	37	1,050
2013	48	40	83	3,000
2014	26	13	50	975
2015	76	34	45	2,550
2016	31	2	6	150
2017	29	11	38	1,100
2018	89	22	25	2,200
2019	181	74	41	7,400
2020	<u>255</u>	<u>142</u>	56	<u>14,200</u>
Total	822	388	47%	\$35,325

5. Assembly Bill 68/Senate Bill 111 would provide DATCP \$100,000 GPR each year on an ongoing basis to continue DATCP farmer mental health assistance programming. DATCP reports funding would continue to support: (a) the Farmer Wellness hotline and tele-counseling services; (b) counseling vouchers; (c) twice monthly virtual support group meetings for farmers and farm couples; (d) 8 to 10 podcast episodes per year on farm-related challenges; and (e) limited-term staff to support mental health programming. DATCP also intends to increase its outreach and education related to Farm Center services and mental health assistance, and increase its efforts to provide support to farmers seeking retraining and employment as they transition out of farming or add off-farm income. Table 3 shows DATCP's proposed allocation of funding amongst these categories.

TABLE 3

Proposed 2021-23 Farmer Mental Health Funding Allocation

	<u>2021-22</u>	<u>2022-23</u>	<u>Biennium</u>
24/7 Hotline and Counseling Services	\$25,000	\$40,000	\$65,000
Limited-Term Staff	24,545	24,545	49,090
Counseling Vouchers	24,000	25,000	49,000
Farmer Support Groups	7,000	7,000	14,000
Outreach and Education	11,355	1,755	13,110
Job Hunting Support Resources	6,400	0	6,400
Rural Realities Podcast	<u>1,700</u>	<u>1,700</u>	<u>3,400</u>
Total	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$200,000

6. The federal Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 (CAA), signed into law on December 27, 2020, provided \$28 million in funding for state departments of agriculture, up to \$500,000 per state, to expand or sustain their farmer stress assistance programs. The CAA required the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to disburse funding to states no later than 60 days after enactment of the bill. However, the allocation process is ongoing. In early May, 2021, DATCP received guidance from USDA regarding allocation of CAA state farmer stress assistance funding. Under that guidance, DATCP must submit an application for use of funding by June 15, 2021.

7. USDA guidance specifies allowable costs under the federal grant include: (a) telephone helplines and websites; (b) training and workshops for farmers, or other agriculture-adjacent individuals that work with farmers facing stress or mental health issues; (c) support groups; and (d) outreach and educational activities. Additionally, guidance specifies that funding may support existing state farmer stress assistance initiatives, and does not require a state match to federal funding. The CAA requires DATCP to report to USDA on use of funding within 180 days of the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency, as declared by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. DATCP anticipates the CAA grant period would begin September 1, 2021, and last one year. However, it is unclear at this time if a declared end to the federal public health emergency would prohibit continued use of CAA funding.

8. The federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) provides \$2.5 billion in direct payments to Wisconsin. On May 10, 2021, the U.S. Department of Treasury indicated that funds may be used for COVID-19 response activities, including mental health treatment and other behavioral health services. It is possible certain DATCP farmer mental health assistance activities could be supported by ARPA funding under this mental health treatment criteria, although it is not certain all such activities would be allowable.

9. In 2020, the University of Illinois and Illinois Extension received a \$7.2 million Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network grant from USDA. Under the grant, Illinois will lead a regional network of state and local partner agencies to coordinate programming that seeks to reduce farm stress, improve financial planning and decision making in farm settings, and increase access to mental health resources for farmers. As part of this project, DATCP will receive \$85,300 through August, 2023, to organize focus groups studying farmer mental health, host trainings for and conduct outreach to health care professionals on farm-specific mental health treatment, and develop a best practices guide for providing farmer mental health assistance vouchers. DATCP indicates Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network grant funding would not be available to offset state farmer mental health assistance support activities, but would still support development of practices that would benefit the state program.

10. Given mental health challenges experienced by farmers, the higher risk of suicide for persons with occupations related to farming and for those in rural areas, and ongoing DATCP efforts related to farmer mental health assistance, the Committee could consider providing \$100,000 GPR each year on an ongoing basis for farmer mental health assistance activities [Alternative 1]. The Committee could also provide funding on a one-time basis during the 2021-23 biennium [Alternative 3], and consider continued funding during subsequent budget deliberations.

11. Considering the anticipated allocation of CAA funding that would support continuation

of existing DATCP farmer mental health assistance activities, the Committee could take no action [Alternative 4]. However, given delays in allocation of funding, it is likely DATCP would have to temporarily cease mental health assistance operations while waiting for receipt of federal funds. Further, the allowable timeline for use of funding is currently unclear, and CAA funding may be required to be spent prior to the end of the 2021-23 biennium. Thus, the Committee could consider providing \$50,000 GPR each year of the biennium, and requiring DATCP to expend federal funding provided under the CAA for farmer mental health assistance activities before using GPR [Alternative 2]. State funding would allow the Department to continue mental health assistance program operations while receipt of CAA funding is pending, but priority would be given to use of federal funding when available.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Provide \$100,000 GPR each year to support farmer mental health assistance programming at DATCP.

ALT 1	Change to Base
GPR	\$200,000

2. Provide \$50,000 GPR each year of the biennium to DATCP for farmer mental health assistance activities. Further, require DATCP to expend federal funding provided under the CAA for farmer mental health assistance activities before using GPR.

ALT 2	Change to Base
GPR	\$100,000

3. Specify that funding be provided on a one-time basis during the 2021-23 biennium. (This alternative could be selected in addition to Alternatives 1 or 2).

4. Take no action.

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