



## Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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September 4, 2019

TO: Members  
Joint Committee on Finance

FROM: Bob Lang, Director

SUBJECT: Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection: Section 13.10 Request for Farmer Mental Health Assistance -- Agenda Item V

### REQUEST

Transfer \$100,000 GPR each year of the 2019-21 biennium from the Joint Committee on Finance's supplemental funding appropriation to the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) appropriation for farmer mental health assistance. (Although the request as submitted did not specify the years in which the transfer was requested to occur, DATCP subsequently indicated that it intended to request funding in both years of the biennium.)

### BACKGROUND

The Governor's 2019-21 biennial budget proposal would have created an appropriation with \$100,000 GPR annually to provide mental health assistance to farmers and farm families. Subsequent action by the Joint Committee on Finance approved the creation of the appropriation but placed the proposed \$100,000 GPR annually in the Committee's supplemental funding appropriation. This change was approved by the Legislature and enacted under 2019 Wisconsin Act 9.

The Wisconsin Farm Center, housed in DATCP's Division of Agricultural Development, operates a hotline that farmers may call for information, referrals, and support responding to crises. Farm Center services include technical assistance related to production, processing and marketing, as well as financial consultations, farm succession planning, mental health screenings and referrals, minority and veterans outreach, and mediation and arbitration.

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.

*Voucher Allocation.* Currently, DATCP staff exercise discretion in their suggestion of counseling and may offer vouchers that cover the cost of one-hour counseling sessions. Farmers and their families 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 copay 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. For each voucher used, DATCP reimburses the service provider \$100. Table 1 provides a history of voucher allocations, redemptions, and cost since 2009. Beginning in 2017, the reimbursement amount for vouchers increased from \$75 to \$100.

**TABLE 1**  
**Counseling Voucher Allocations**

<u>Calendar Year</u>	<u>Issued</u>	<u>Redeemed</u>	<u>Percent Redeemed</u>	<u>Cost</u>
2009	262	109	42%	\$8,175
2010	153	85	56	6,375
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 <sup>†</sup>	<u>95</u>	<u>40</u>	42	<u>4,000</u>
Total	896	406	45%	\$32,275

\*Reimbursement increased to \$100 per voucher beginning in 2017.

<sup>†</sup>As of July 30, 2019.

As seen in Table 1, approximately 45% of vouchers issued are eventually 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 its funding request to increase community involvement in addressing mental health issues.

Due to limited available funding, DATCP does not advertise its counseling vouchers. Instead, it conserves vouchers for the highest-need callers. Vouchers expire three months after issuance, although DATCP does not deny reimbursement for vouchers used after their expiration. If a voucher has not been used for one year, the Department assumes it will not be redeemed.

DATCP notes that it follows up with farmers who have been issued vouchers to encourage their use.

*Historical Funding.* DATCP reports funding for vouchers has been supported by various grants received under the Sowing the Seeds of Hope (SSoH) program, which consisted of a seven-state regional project to address issues related to farm stress. DATCP received grants primarily from the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) at HHS, as well as a small amount from private contributions. Other activities supported by SSoH included training of healthcare professionals for farm-specific counseling, mental health advocacy programming, retreats and support groups for farmers and their families, and operation of crisis hotlines. SSoH operated from 1999 to 2010. The Department has not received grant funding since that time, and it reports no federal funding is currently available. Awards by year are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**

**Sowing the Seeds of Hope Funding**

<u>Year(s)</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Grantor</u>
2000-01	\$62,500	Wisconsin Office of Rural Health
2001	3,700	Private contribution
2002	8,800	Wisconsin Office of Rural Health
2003-04	40,000	U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
2005	20,000	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
2008-10	<u>49,600</u>	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Total	\$184,600	

**ANALYSIS**

*Remaining Funding.* As of June 30, 2019, DATCP reports it had approximately \$2,800 in funding remaining for vouchers. Subsequent claims for vouchers processed through August 21, 2019, total approximately \$1,500. Because vouchers are processed on an ongoing basis, it is possible currently allocated funding may not be sufficient to cover vouchers that have already been issued. The Department reports it is in the process of determining a course of action if funding is depleted prior to the approval of any supplements, and it has not yet determined how it would handle reimbursement of existing vouchers once funds are depleted.

As of July 30, 2019, 40 of 95 (42%) vouchers issued in 2019 had been claimed, which is approximately consistent with historical usage rates. While it is difficult to anticipate future use of existing vouchers, it is likely a portion of vouchers issued more recently may still be claimed, which would increase this rate for 2019. Due to the uncertainty of voucher usage, it is not determinable how many new callers may still be able to receive mental health vouchers. At an average usage rate of 45%, the remaining approximately \$1,300 as of August 21, 2019, would allow for approximately 10 farmers to be allocated the standard three vouchers each. At a usage

rate of 100%, approximately four farmers would be able to use three vouchers each. In either instance, the issuance of further vouchers is dependent on claims of vouchers already issued by DATCP, which may continue to be claimed regardless of distribution of vouchers to new callers.

*Requested Funding.* DATCP intends to allocate annual funding of \$25,000 for counseling vouchers, \$50,000 for workshops for farmers and their families, and \$25,000 for workshops for partner organizations. DATCP reports it intends to hire a limited-term employee (LTE) in the Farm Center to support implementation of mental health assistance activities. The position would provide research assistance, program monitoring, logistical support, and reporting of program activities. The LTE would be supported from the requested funding.

The Department intends to increase its capacity to provide vouchers for counseling sessions to farmers and their families. As DATCP reimburses providers \$100 per session, DATCP would be able to provide approximately 250 vouchers annually. Given recent allocations of vouchers, it is unclear if DATCP would be able to distribute 250 vouchers each year. However, it should be noted that DATCP currently does not advertise its counseling voucher program, which may decrease distribution of existing vouchers. Further, combined with workshop efforts described below, it is possible that interest in, and utilization of, the Department's counseling vouchers would increase.

The Department intends to allocate \$50,000 annually to host workshops on stress management, coping and grieving, financial planning, farm succession planning, and other Farm Center services and resources. Additionally, DATCP intends to coordinate with workforce development organizations to assist farmers in improving their job-seeking skills and prepare them for nonfarm work. To support this effort, DATCP intends to use funding to update informational and reference materials related to job seeking in coordination with the Department of Workforce Development. DATCP argues that hosting workshops across the state would increase participation by making it easier for farmers and their families to attend.

The Department also intends to allocate \$25,000 annually to coordinate with mental health providers and nonprofits, and host workshops that: (a) educate providers on the unique challenges facing farmers and context surrounding farmer mental health issues; and (b) share best practices related to working with farmers and their families. DATCP argues that these workshops would allow providers to more effectively address the unique circumstances of the farming community.

*Incidence of Farmer Suicide.* The National Agricultural Statistics Service's (NASS) 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture found that total statewide net cash farm income in Wisconsin declined 22% since the last Census of Agriculture in 2012. NASS also reports the monthly all-milk price for Wisconsin, after peaking in September, 2014, at \$26.60 per hundredweight (100 pounds), has averaged approximately \$16.76 from January, 2018, through June, 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 Agricultural 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 the "Agricultural Workers" category 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 all working-age adults (age 16 to 64) was 17.3 per 100,000 in 2016. Thus, data suggests that farmers responsible for management of farming operations are disproportionately affected by suicide, as compared to the national average, while agricultural workers have approximately average rates of suicide. 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).

*Alternatives.* Considering mental health 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 approving the request for \$100,000 each year [Alternative 1]. The Committee could also consider providing the \$25,000 each year sufficient for the proposed allocation towards counseling vouchers [Alternative 3], or \$50,000 each year [Alternative 2]. If the Committee wished to provide funding on a limited-term basis, it could consider specifying funding be provided on a one-time basis during the 2019-21 biennium [Alternative 4], or only in the first year [Alternative 5]. Providing funding only in 2019-20 would allow DATCP to begin implementing programs, after which the Committee could further evaluate funding needs for 2020-21 in a subsequent request.

In March, 2019, the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention was convened to: (a) evaluate current resources dedicated to suicide prevention; (b) identify opportunities to support at-risk individuals, including farmers and youth; (c) investigate options to improve treatment and support services; and (d) provide a report on its findings, including policy recommendations. The task force is expected to complete its work by fall, 2019. Given that legislative review of programs related to suicide prevention and mental health is ongoing, the Committee could consider denying the request [Alternative 6]. DATCP would be able to reapply for release of funding once additional information and legislative guidance is available upon completion of the task force's work in fall, 2019.

## **ALTERNATIVES**

1. Approve DATCP's request to transfer \$100,000 GPR each year of the 2019-21 biennium from the Joint Committee on Finance supplemental appropriation [s. 20.865(4)(a)] to DATCP's farmer mental health assistance appropriation [20.115(3)(c)]. Funding would be ongoing and reflected in the agency's adjusted base for the purposes of preparing the 2021-23 biennial budget.
2. Modify DATCP's request to transfer \$50,000 GPR each year of the 2019-21 biennium.
3. Modify DATCP's request to transfer \$25,000 GPR each year of the 2019-21 biennium.

4. In addition to one of the alternatives above, specify that funding be provided on a one-time basis during the 2019-21 biennium.

5. Transfer \$100,000 GPR in 2019-20 from the Joint Committee on Finance supplemental appropriation [s. 20.865(4)(a)] to DATCP's farmer mental health assistance appropriation [20.115(3)(c)].

6. Deny the request.

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