



Family Resource Centers: Transforming Health in Rural Wisconsin

Social Determinants of Rural Health Disparities

Children and adults who live in rural areas are at high risk of poor health outcomes.¹ Rural health disparities are partly driven by social determinants such as a lack of employment opportunities, housing insecurity, transportation barriers, and social isolation. Local solutions that increase access to social and economic supports are needed to improve the health of rural families and communities.



Social determinants of health are conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect health and well-being.

Family Resource Centers

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are community hubs that offer a variety of services and supports to all families regardless of income or need. Many of the 40+ members in Wisconsin's FRC network² serve rural areas. FRCs provide parenting support, child development activities, and help with basic household needs. They also connect families to each other and to other local agencies for support. While research on FRCs is limited, evidence indicates they strengthen family protective factors and promote family functioning.^{3,4}

Strong & Stable Families Study

The Strong and Stable Families Study is a first-of-its-kind investigation of FRCs and their long-term impact. The study follows 2,135 Wisconsin families, nearly a third of whom received support from one of 18 FRCs. Data sources include family surveys, focus groups and interviews with families and FRC staff, and matching Census and child protective service records. For more information, see:

<https://uwm.edu/icfw/strong-and-stable-families/>



STRONG AND STABLE FAMILIES

Study Results Show FRCs Reduce Rural Access Barriers

Many families who seek FRC support face social and economic challenges. For instance, results showed that nearly half earned less than \$50k and more than 1 in 5 earned less than \$20k per year.⁵ For rural families, the challenges are even greater due to a lack of community resources and opportunities. In fact, families in rural ZIP codes are nearly 3 times as likely as families in non-rural ZIP codes to be in a low-opportunity area.⁶

As one family interview participant put it:

“Like it's just this small area community that I live in, there's a lack of resources, period.”

FRCs fill these gaps, not only by providing direct support, but also by connecting families to local resources. Results showed FRC participation increased access to many resources such as employment assistance and child disability services. Rural families were even more likely than non-rural families to have received resource referrals.⁶

Implications and Future Directions

Family Resource Centers increase access to services, resources, and opportunities. These programs are one-stop shops where children and families establish connections and receive support. In rural areas, FRCs play an especially vital role in establishing a system of care among community agencies and providers.

Yet, like many of the families they serve, FRCs often face financial challenges due to their reliance on inconsistent and time-limited grants. Reflecting this concern, two of Wisconsin's FRCs closed in 2025 due to insufficient funds, and two others were forced to scale back hours and reduce staff time. To unlock their full potential to strengthen rural families and communities, greater investments in FRCs are needed.



Key Takeaways

- Rural health disparities are tied to a lack of resources and opportunities.
- Family Resource Centers support families by offering direct services, strengthening social connections, and providing referrals to local resources.
- With increased investment, FRCs have the potential to significantly transform rural health in Wisconsin.

References

