



Photographs: Harlen Persinger

Sandi Cihlar (left), board member of the Rural Health Initiative in Shawano County and AgriSafe Network, confers with Certified Safe Farm auditor Gail Hoffman (right) and dairy producer Dale Mielke (center) at the Mielke farm near Marion, Wisconsin.

# Committed to a cause

Decades of hard work and effort create safer, healthier future for farm families

By Cheryl Tevis, Farm Issues Editor

**O**n a cold February morning in 1989, Sandi Cihlar, a 39-year-old Wisconsin mother of three was cleaning calf pens when she felt chest pains. They didn't subside after she went into the house.

She didn't mention it to her husband, Dennis. But she described her symptoms when she arrived at her part-time job at a medical clinic. As a precaution, she was given an electrocardiogram. The results were abnormal and after further tests, she had double bypass heart surgery.

This life-threatening blockage became a life-changing catalyst. "From that day, when I debated getting involved, I'd ask, 'What's the worst that can happen?'" she says. "I decided if there was something I wanted to do, I should get on with it."

And so she did. Cihlar, now 59, has lived a life of passion and commitment. From the milk house to the statehouse, she's worked tirelessly to improve farm safety and health.

As a young mother in the early 1980s, she had faced the challenges of raising three sons safely on the family dairy farm near Mosinee. "It started with keeping my boys safe," she says. "I couldn't accept injuries as just a part of farming. Our kids' safety has to be our bottom line." ▶

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## ► MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

In 1990, she was persuaded to apply for the 1990 Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program (WRLP).

“I’m an inherently shy person,” she says. “I never felt I had enough information to be comfortable as a spokesperson. I found out I didn’t need to have all the answers. But I learned to ask the right questions.”

Cihlar later served on the WRLP Board. In 2002, she was honored with an Outstanding Alumni Award.

In 1991, she worked with the 4-H county agent and the National Farm Medicine Center in Marshfield to host the first 4 Safe Kids Day Camp in Marathon County at their farm.

“Parents love their kids,” she says. “But they’ve lived with farm risks for so long, they can’t see them.”

That partnership carved a role for Cihlar in a series of committees and conferences organized by Marshfield’s National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety. In 1998, she helped draft the Center’s landmark North American Guidelines for Children’s Agricultural Tasks.

“Gaining the leadership and resources of the Center was a huge boost for farm safety,” she says.

A few years later, the Cihlars’ machine shop was the site of the first tractor safety certification program in the county. She spoke in support of a 1996 law requiring youth under age 16 to complete training before operating farm equipment on roads.

## BRINGING HEALTH SERVICES TO FARMS

During her 26 years of work at medical clinics, she saw an urgent need for farmers’ health services.

So she didn’t hesitate when asked to serve on the board of Shawano County Rural Health Initiative, a unique coalition that offers on-farm health screenings and referrals.



Lisa Schiller, a nurse practitioner with ThedaCare Physicians in Shawano County, conducts a health screening for Deb Mielke, a Marion, Wisconsin, farm woman and Farmers Health Cooperative member. ThedaCare is supportive of the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative and is the first AgriSafe clinic in Wisconsin.

“Farmers are up at 5 a.m.,” Cihlar says. “It’s hard for them to fast until they finish chores and get to town in time for their lab blood tests.”

Four years ago, she joined the directors of AgriSafe Network, a nonprofit focused on improving farm families’ access to preventive health and safety services.

Cihlar says health and safety fit

hand and glove. More than 18% of Wisconsin farmers do not have health insurance. Another 41% have high-deductible plans that don't cover preventive tests.

"If they can't afford preventive coverage, they won't go to the doctor until they have a chronic condition," she says.

She became an advocate for the Farmers Health Cooperative of Wisconsin, launched March 1, 2007. As a board member, she helped push coverage for work-related injuries, preventive, and maternity care. The co-op currently has 2,600 members.

"It's the only entity of its kind in the U.S., and it's looked at as a model," she says. "It's proven and it's practical. Eventually you build momentum, and others will join you."

Cihlar knows that health issues are too important to let public officials or the public process intimidate her.

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SANDI CIHLAR, BOARD MEMBER OF THE RURAL HEALTH INITIATIVE, SHAWANO COUNTY, WISCONSIN

She recalls being on a panel with a legislator who had helped block more health coverage for farm kids. (Committee votes are rarely known.) Without mentioning his name when she spoke, she made him squirm.

"Now he knows when I show up with my pile of papers that I'll hold his feet to the fire," she says. "Sometimes that's what it takes."

### ADVOCATE FOR FARMS, COMMUNITIES

Melissa Duffy, executive director of the Farmers Health Cooperative, has worked closely with Cihlar.

"She's volunteered her talents and countless hours over many years to make this state a healthier and safer place to farm and raise children," she says. "Sandi keeps her sight on the big picture and works tirelessly toward her goals. Her steadfast determination, boundless energy, and incredible generosity are just a few of the things I admire about her." ▶▶

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►► Community service is a strong fiber in the fabric of Cihlar's life. She helped persuade the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation to create a pilot program for farm women who are victims of domestic abuse.

She's promoted agriculture in the schools and served as a director of the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board for 11 years. She's also advocated for land conservation issues.

She and Dennis, along with Dennis' brother, Allan, and Allan's wife, Peggy, have opened their farm to visitors. "As dairy producers, it's easy to get caught up in our operations," she says. "If we're not at the table to provide input on decisions shaping our lives and industry, someone else will be there. We need to be part of changes we're seeing."

Cihlar is encouraged with the strides made in farm safety, occupational health care, and insurance access. "I see decades of hard work coming together," she says. "But with limited resources, it's important to keep the flames burning." ■



Melissa Duffy (left), executive director, Farmers' Health Cooperative of Wisconsin, worked closely with Sandi Cihlar (right) and several key legislators to create a health cooperative. State law was amended in 2003 to allow its formation. Coverage won't be denied because of pre-existing health conditions.

## INNOVATIVE TOOL KIT

Wisconsin is on the cutting edge of fabricating a tightly woven farm health and safety net. More work is needed to achieve a seamless web.

"It's exciting to see these separate models partnering," says Sandi Cihlar, farm safety and health advocate.

It starts in Shawano County with on-farm medical screenings that circumvent chronic illness. ThedaCare Physicians is pairing Certified Safe Farm (a voluntary hazard review born in Iowa) with Shawano's Initiative.

AgriSafe Network, based in Iowa, now has clinics in Wisconsin and nine



Personal protective equipment sold at [www.agrisafe.org](http://www.agrisafe.org) is key to reducing occupational illnesses. An Rx for farm families is medical screenings, occupational safety advice, and health insurance.

other states, raising awareness of ag health issues and offering training.

The Farmers Health Cooperative of Wisconsin, launched in 2007, is an innova-

tive effort to use a familiar model to help farmers gain negotiating clout with insurers. "Health insurance costs are keeping many farmers from growing their business," Cihlar says. ■