

# IOWA

College of Public Health

Business Leadership Network

## Improving Employee and Family Health

### Community Forum Summary

May 28, 2025

Decorah



# BUSINESS LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The Business Leadership Network comprises Iowans who are leaders in business, educators, public health professionals, health care professionals, and community leaders who are interested in improving the health and well-being of their community through a mutually beneficial relationship with the University of Iowa College of Public Health (UI CPH). The Network is guided by a statewide Business Leadership Network Steering Committee which serves in a primary advisory role.

One way the UI CPH collaborates with Iowa communities is through the Business Leadership Network Community Grant Project. Grants are awarded annually on a competitive basis to community nonprofit organizations or local government agencies to foster collaboration to begin or strengthen partnerships among businesses and industry to address an identified public health issue. Five grants were awarded in 2025 to organizations in Burlington, Fort Dodge, Hiawatha, Marshalltown, and Mason City.

Support for the grant program is provided by the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation. More information on the grant program: <https://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/bln-community-grant-program/>.

The Decorah community forum provided opportunities for area business, community, public health, and healthcare leaders to discuss resources for employers on how to improve employee and family health and wellness in the areas of mental health and older adult care.

The forum was jointly sponsored by the UI College of Public Health's Business Leadership Network, Decorah Area Chamber of Commerce, Winneshiek County Public Health, the Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging (NEI3A), and WinnMed.



## WHAT IS PUBLIC HEALTH?

Public Health is the science and art of protecting and improving the health of communities through education, promotion of healthy lifestyles, and research for disease and injury prevention. Public health helps improve the health and wellbeing of people in local communities and often, while operating in the background, helps meet the public expectation for ensuring a quality of life – safe water, clean air, and protection from injury. The dramatic achievements of public health in the 20th and 21st centuries have improved our quality of life: an increase in life expectancy, safer workplaces, worldwide reduction in infant and child mortality, and the elimination or reduction of many communicable diseases.

[WWW.PUBLIC-HEALTH.UIOWA.EDU/BLN](https://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/bln)

**The Mission of the University of Iowa College of Public Health is to promote health and prevent injury and illness through commitment to education and training, excellence in research, innovation in policy development, and devotion to public health practice.**

# PANEL PRESENTATIONS



**Krista Vanden Brink** is the administrator of Winneshiek County Public Health.  
<https://www.winneshiekhealth.org/> Phone: 563-382-4662

The community health assessment in 2023 helped determine that mental health and older adult care are top concerns for Winneshiek County. As people age, more demands cause more mental health strain. Some might be in the sandwich generation, assisting their older parents while still having kids at home.

Winneshiek County Public Health offers a **Partners in Health program** that helps individuals who are able to live in their own home and don't qualify for traditional home health services.

- There is no billing of Medicare, the VA or insurances and it is done on a sliding fee scale. They can help ensure people are taking their medications, assist with bathing, or with house cleaning. As people age, these tasks are more hazardous if for example a person is using a walker while trying to mop the kitchen floor.
- They offer a **Loan Closet program** for people to rent equipment like walkers, knee scooters, commodes, and shower benches.

Self-care is important for you and your employees.

- It can mean getting a massage, taking a walk during lunch breaks, or just getting out in nature.
- If possible, employers could set up a self-care room in your workplace to accommodate employees that need to take a break.
- Winneshiek County Public Health will soon be offering **Reiki sessions** which promotes relaxation and stress relief for individuals.

**Kelly Kuennen** is a family caregiver specialist at Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging (NEI3A).  
<https://nei3a.org/>. The mission of NEI3A is to keep seniors in their homes, healthy as long as possible.

They have a **caregiver support group** that meets twice a month in Decorah. Contact Kelly at [kkuennen@NEI3A.org](mailto:kkuennen@NEI3A.org) or 563-277-6024 for more information.

Dementia is not a specific disease, it's an overall term that describes a wide range of symptoms associated with a decline in thinking skills, severe enough to reduce a person's ability to perform everyday activities. The symptoms include memory loss, social changes, sleep issues, changes in senses or sensory perception, a loss of balance, difficulty completing familiar tasks.

- Alzheimer's is one type of dementia and the most common at 60 to 80% of cases. Different types of dementia are caused by different biological changes in the brain.
- Age is the biggest risk factor for dementia, though young people can develop it also.
- In Iowa there are at least 62,000 people with dementia, including around 500 in Winneshiek County. (The numbers are likely higher as they only include people 65+ with Alzheimer's, and around 80% of these people live in the community, as opposed to living in nursing homes).
- You are likely interacting with people living with dementia every single day, whether it's in your professional role or in your personal life. Dementia can make involvement in business transactions, grocery shopping, navigating every life, much more difficult.



**Dementia Friends** is an initiative with all Iowa Area Agencies on Aging that supports communities where people with dementia can live and thrive. We provide education in communities, to create a more welcoming, safe, and respectful space for people living with dementia and their caregivers.

<https://dementiafriendlyiowa.org/>.

They offer **free dementia-friendly 1-hour trainings for businesses** to feel better equipped to communicate with and serve this population. Examples of businesses where we have offered trainings: beauty salons, funeral homes, electrical companies, social service organizations.

- Businesses that go through the training with at least half of their staff, will receive a dementia-friendly business certificate, a window decal for your storefront, your logo on the Dementia Friendly Iowa website, and a highlight on social media.
- The training will provide skills to identify and communicate with a customer/client that might have dementia, and recommendations on how to modify your business practices (ex: have clear signage, reduce bright lights or loud sounds).
- Communities can also band together to launch Dementia Friendly efforts. Cedar Falls has done this by creating a local cross-sector action team, identifying local objectives and helping to launch local dementia supports.
- For more information contact Megan Zimmerman at [mzimmerman@nei3a.org](mailto:mzimmerman@nei3a.org) or 319-287-1182.

**Ryan Carnahan** is professor of epidemiology and project director of Iowa Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. <https://igec.uiowa.edu/>

NEI3A has a **dementia service specialist**, available for consultations. People can discuss where they are at in the disease process, their needs, and be referred to various resources. Contact Erick Hill at [ehill@nei3a.org](mailto:ehill@nei3a.org), 319-287-1163.

The University of Northern Iowa has a **dementia simulation house**. You walk through the house while wearing equipment that helps you understand and empathize with the sensory challenges that people living with dementia experience. We have heard from people that this experience changes the way that they interact with their loved ones. <https://csbs.uni.edu/family-aging-counseling/centers-initiatives/dementia-simulation-house>

The Iowa Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program has dementia support training programs:

- **Family involvement in care training**, helps people understand how to better communicate with healthcare providers about needs of their loved ones. <https://igec.uiowa.edu/family-involvement-care>



- Program **for healthcare providers** called Partnerships in Care, which is the flip side of the family involvement and care program to help people learn how to advocate, and healthcare providers communicate well with the caregivers or family.
- A video series on age-friendly healthcare, emphasizing the 4M's: what **m**atters to patients, **m**entation (delirium, dementia, depression), **m**edication, and **m**obility. <https://igec.uiowa.edu/age-friendly-lecture>

All older adults should be getting Medicare annual wellness visits.

- Most are not screened for cognitive disorders, though statewide, there's a goal to try to improve screening at annual visits. Identifying dementia early can prevent a lot of crises and safety issues and prevent family conflicts.
- Medication should also be reviewed as older adults often take medications that contribute to fall risk and cognitive problems. Falls are the number one cause of trauma (head injuries, broken hips) in older adults in Iowa. NEI3A has fall prevention programs.

They work with the **Iowa Community Hub** (<https://iacommunityhub.org/>), which helps connect people to resources such as the programs offered by NEI3A. This is a central source that any healthcare provider can reach out to, or any individual and find what resources are available for them.

**Ronald Hougen** is a licensed psychologist and chair of the Department of Behavioral Health at WinnMed. <https://winnmed.org/provider/ronald-hougen-ph-d>

Most of us worry at some point, which is a normal human process. The human brain has a built-in bias to imagine the kinds of things that can go wrong. If we can imagine the things that can go wrong, we can plan accordingly.

Our minds often misinterpret imagined threats as real dangers and can create vivid mental images that feel threatening even when they're not. This tendency, while rooted in our evolutionary need to anticipate danger, can lead us to treat harmless thoughts as real threats, contributing to anxiety and other mental health challenges.



When we have distressing thoughts and emotions, we try to avoid them which tends to increase their availability in our mind. Normal healthy brain processes gone awry can create mental illness. Having a mental health issue is not a weakness. Asking for help is not a weakness. Additionally getting regular exercise, good sleep, good nutrition, and social support does wonders for our mental health.

#### **Things that businesses can do to improve mental health of employees:**

- Create a supportive environment and let people know it is okay to ask for help.
- Provide health insurance that has good mental health coverage for the providers in the area.
- Create policies that allow employees to leave work to go receive mental health services.

The National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) has a **guide for what to say and do to help** people receive mental health services: <https://www.nami.org/family-member-caregivers/how-to-help-a-friend/>.

**Jonathan Platt** is assistant professor of epidemiology at University of Iowa College of Public Health. <https://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/people/jonathan-platt/>

Much of his work focuses on adolescent mental health. Adolescence is a time of extreme change, rearrangement of social relations and bonds, and rearrangement of the brain. When those changes don't happen in alignment, it can cause mental health problems. Additionally, there are a lot of generational challenges for young people growing up today.

In the last 10 to 15 years, youth antidepressant prescription rates have increased by about 40% compared to 15% for adults. Among high schoolers, 60% of girls and 30% of boys report feelings of persistent hopelessness, and sadness. This may reflect that people today are more willing to talk about mental health. Suicide death rates for ages 10 to 25 years are at an all-time high.

Social media is one factor that may be driving these patterns though more research is being done. We need to figure out how to regulate social media or equip young people to be critical consumers and have social media literacy. He co-authored a practice brief **"Recognizing and Mitigating the Mental Health Risks of Social Media Use in Adolescents: A Guide for Parents and Schools"**

<https://iro.uiowa.edu/esploro/outputs/report/9984586037202771>.

Young people feel a lot of the same stress as adults. A report by Nathaniel Anderson said, young people are increasingly concerned about their opportunity to thrive in a world with such monumental challenges (economic recessions, mass incarceration, the opioid epidemic, climate change, political radicalization, racial justice, COVID-19, school shootings and the perception of school no longer being a safe place to learn).

#### **Recognizing signs of mental health issues in adolescents:**

- Consider levels of impairment and the ability to complete tasks for daily living. Can they be accountable at school, keep themselves clean, be responsible for things they say they will do, or you ask them to do?
- Emotional symptoms of hopelessness or lack of pleasure in doing things they previously enjoyed.
- Behavioral symptoms of being easily irritated.
- Physical and cognitive changes like upset stomach, back and joint pain, headaches. Difficulty in focusing or finishing tasks.
- Anxiety, with extreme self-consciousness.
- Suicidal ideation, behaviors and thoughts around being excessively self-critical, feelings of hopelessness, commenting, joking about dying or taking one's life or hurting oneself.

## **GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

Participants divided into groups to further discuss mental health and older adult care.



## **Mental Health**

#### **Ideas for where mental health resources could be distributed to reach more people:**

- Pharmacies – when picking up a prescription for medicine that targets mental health, a resource guide of mental health services could be inserted in the prescription bag. Perhaps NAMI could assist with making this happen.

- At wellness doctor visits.
- Perhaps Winneshiek County Public Health could have a link to the list on their website.
- Childcare centers. Sunflower has information pamphlets for parents to take on topics like SIDS, the library, etc. Could also have a mental health flyer with a link to mental health resources. This could be added to any community organization that has flyers for people to take.

#### **How to reach employees concerned with the stigma of seeking mental health support.**

- With manufacturing workers, which are often men, there is a perceived stigma around mental health. Whereas employees working in an office might be more comfortable seeking help, many factory workers see this as a sign of weakness.
- Businesses could do a company-wide training/meeting where employees learn about mental health awareness. Everyone could be given a resource document.
- As a manager, talking about/normalizing mental health helps employees feel more comfortable.
- WinnMed has an integrated behavioral health (IBH) program, which is accessed through your primary care doctor. This helps catch people who otherwise wouldn't seek out mental health services. If a patient comes in for a physical, or other reason, the physician does a mental health screening. If the physician determines the patient could use help, a social worker comes in to do a triage and will try to get them seen for an initial mental health consultation within 5-10 days.
- For businesses with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), HR staff could provide employees with a more detailed description of how it works and what they should expect. An employee who has successfully used EAP could have a conversation with a co-worker to help them feel more comfortable reaching out for help.

#### **Examples of mental health policies and activities from Decorah area organizations:**

- The Decorah Police Department tries to normalize talking about mental health. To get hired, people undergo a psychological evaluation, and a face-to-face interview with a psychologist. They also post mental health resource information within their organization.
- Toppling Goliath Brewing uses all company meetings to include mental health as part of the conversation. They also do skill building activities like how to change a tire, but also how to find mental health resources. They are working on teaming up with the Humane Society to help them walk dogs during employee breaks.
- Allamakee-Clayton Electric Cooperative offers a 15-minute break, and if the employee exercises during the break they get an extra 10 minutes.
- Helping Services for Youth & Families, has wellness hours that employees can use every month for whatever they deem as wellness.
- Some organizations are thinking about starting annual mental health check-ins just as someone might get an annual physical checkup.



#### **Providing flexibility for employees**

- If you create workplace policies, consider offering general paid time off (PTO) instead of separate accounts of sick time, family sick time, vacation time, etc.
- Having flexibility for employees to be able to leave work to take their kids to mental health appointments is important. Especially when a child needs to go frequently, and the employee may not have that much time off.



## Schools

- It would be great to have mental health services available in school so kids have easier access, get help early, and parents wouldn't need to take time off of work.
- Have a school counselor available after school so kids that do worry about stigma, can get help without their peers knowing.
- What is the impact on over-scheduling kids? There are statistics that show that high school students have a higher GPA if they are involved in activities. Sometimes high achieving students feel anxiety and stress from the need to be perfect that gets reinforced when they perform well. This is also an issue for college students as there's many activities for students to do and we want them to be involved. But some students are over involved, and other areas of their life starts to suffer.

## Mental Health First Aid Training

Whether for use in the workplace or in your personal life, you can get trained to better assist people until they can get professional help. The National Council for Mental Wellbeing has a mental health first aid certification that teaches you how to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The training helps you identify, understand, and respond to signs of addictions and mental illnesses. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/take-a-course/>



## Older Adult Care

There is a growing need for caregiving services in Winneshiek County due to a growing aging population, lack of affordable services, and challenges with staffing and reimbursement for caregivers.

### Caregiving Facilities

- More nursing homes are needed, and several have closed in northeastern Iowa over the past few years due to a lack of staffing.
- Monthly rates at long-term care facilities are very expensive (~ minimum of \$10,000 per month).
- Medicare and Medicaid do not cover as much as they used to, and providers are at risk of not receiving reimbursement for their services. Need to advocate for policy changes.
- Continuing care communities offer levels of care, from independent apartment style living with many amenities and social events, to the most advanced nursing home care. These often have a large upfront cost and then monthly payments remain the same even if the person moves into the nursing home. Western Homes Community in Waterloo is a great example.

### Caregivers

- There is a great need for more nursing staff, more CNAs in particular.
  - CNAs are not highly compensated and can earn more with better benefits elsewhere.



- Many nursing programs in Iowa have waiting lists, making it hard to get enough people trained.
- There is a movement to try to professionalize CNA work and provide opportunities for advancement with additional training/add-on credentials. There are some state CNA apprenticeship programs to learn more advanced skills, with a slightly increased salary.
- Medicaid has a program that pays the patient's children for caregiving, but it is changing at the end of June 2025 and will reduce the amount of people who qualify. The program covers some tasks such as assisting with bathing, making meals, cleaning, laundry, at about \$1,000 a month. Many people are providing this caregiving while still needing to maintain their own jobs.
- Family caregivers need more supports including improving access to respite care, that can provide the caregiver with occasional breaks to tend to their own needs.
- Employers should review their employee benefits. Is parental or dependent care coverage included?

### **Training for community members/businesses**

- Dementia Friends is a great program to help community members and businesses be more accommodating for people living with dementia.
- With other mental health conditions, people may have different challenges, and it would be great to have training on what to do or who to call if you feel someone may need help.

### **Keeping older adults in their homes for longer**

- Winneshiek County Public Health has limited staff to assist with home care. WinnMed is the only certified home health agency in Winneshiek County and may not be able to see new patients right away. They also have hospice. There are several other homecare organizations in the area, but they are often at capacity and unable to take on new clients.
- An assertive community treatment program works well for people with serious mental health challenges who have not done well with traditional services. A multidisciplinary team provides a wide range of services including mental health treatment, medication management, social activities, housing assistance and jobs training.
- Prevention and helping people understand how to be more functional for longer.
  - Fall prevention programs, disease self-management, socializing, eating better, being more active. It is never too late to start exercising, even if you're lifting one-pound weights.
  - Determine a care plan for your aging parents and yourself before any services are needed.
- Home modifications
  - Decorah is a historic town with a lot of older homes that are not accessible, and often only have an upstairs bathroom.
  - Occupational therapists are good resources for determining changes to make. St. Ambrose University's occupational therapy program is centered around what home modifications can be done to support people.
- A multi-discipline collaborative opportunity would be to develop a new training program to help people age in place. From public health to health care, to architectural programs collaborating on retrofitting existing homes or best practices for new homes designed for this purpose.



**Questions?** Contact: Tara McKee [tara-mckee@uiowa.edu](mailto:tara-mckee@uiowa.edu).