

Extension Responds: Stress and Safety

Sowing The Seeds Of Hope: Responding to the Distress of Wisconsin Farm Families

By Roger Williams

Most Wisconsin farm families have experienced financial distress for the past 20 years. They have struggled with plummeting land values in the mid-1980s; severe drought in 1988; major feed shortages in 1989; low milk prices in the early 1990s; drought in 1992; floods in 1993; feed shortages in 1994; intense heat in the summer of 1995; a cold, wet spring in 1996; low milk prices in 1997; low beef, hog, corn and soybean prices in 1998-99; extremely low milk prices in 2000; a cold, wet spring followed by dry conditions in 2001; and very low milk prices in 2002.

The “Sowing the Seeds of Hope” project is a seven-state, federally funded project to help farm families respond to stress. In Wisconsin, the project offers the following targeted services to ease the chronic, prolonged stress facing Wisconsin farm families.

Weekend Getaways

Taking a weekend away from the farm is something people who milk cows two or three times a day seldom do. During these weekends, farm couples and farm women learn to handle stress more effectively, to communicate more clearly with spouses and kids and to problem-solve and plan for the future. They also learn about helpful state and local resources and start to create a network with other farm couples and women in similar situations. The project also offers Farm Family Weekend Getaways when parents can participate with their children. For these Weekend Getaways, the project provides funds to help cover the cost of farm labor and child care while parents are away from the farm.

Trainings for Professional and Natural Helpers

Seeds of Hope offers training to sensitize both professionals and natural helpers (people who regularly work with farm families) to the farm culture, the stressors farm families face, signs and symptoms of distress, resources available to help farm families, and ways they can respond to farm families in distress. Professional helpers include health care, mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence prevention professionals; clergy; University of Wisconsin-Extension agents; and technical college instructors. Natural helpers include

veterinarians, milk testers, milk haulers, cattle haulers, machinery dealers, feed and seed dealers and creditors. The training program creates a network of “helpers” and informs them about resources available through the Wisconsin Farm Center, the Harvest of Hope Fund, the Wisconsin Farmers Foundation, UW-Extension, technical colleges, health agencies, food programs, winterization services and other resources for farm families.

Help for Stressed-Out Youth

Financial and family stress has unique effects on young people. A sample of Wisconsin teenagers said they are most stressed by three circumstances:

1. Farm responsibilities in addition to church, school and extra-curricular activities.
2. The stigma of being a farm kid in communities where farm families are a minority.
3. Their lack of money in comparison with other kids in their communities.

Seeds of Hope project funds supported development and distribution of a guidebook called “It’s All in The Farm Family”. This book is designed to strengthen communication and problem solving within farm families.

Counseling Services

Counseling programs for farmers have been helpful in other states, and farm families have increasingly requested counseling in Wisconsin as well. The Seeds of Hope project offers a voucher program so families without insurance or with inadequate coverage can get the counseling services they need. The project also created a database of almost 1,000 mental health and substance abuse counselors who are familiar with the farm culture and who want to work with farm families in distress. You can access the database and the counseling vouchers by contacting the Wisconsin Farm Center at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Accessing Services

For more information about any of the services offered through the Sowing the Seeds of Hope Project please contact

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Sowing The Seeds of Hope project is a seven-state, federally funded Midwestern project in which each state developed support services for farm families in need. Leaders from the seven states learn from each other through monthly teleconferences and occasional face-to-face meetings. The Wisconsin Farm Center is the lead agency for Wisconsin's project. Other partners in the project are the Professional Development and Applied Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the Diocese of Green Bay, the Diocese of La Crosse, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, STAR Outreach, Visitation Rural Ministries, the Harvest of Hope Fund, the Wisconsin Department of Commerce, the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, the Wisconsin Farmers Foundation, the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, the Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association and the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation.

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