

# Connected Fox Valley

## Spotlight Round: Share an Existing Program/Strategy or Dream for a New One

*Here are the detailed summaries of the ideas shared by attendees at the Aug. 21 meeting of the Connected Fox Valley Work Group.*

### **First Five Fox Valley: Creating a New Family Resource Center in Downtown Appleton**

*Barb Tengesdal, Executive Director  
First Five Fox Valley*

Barb shared an overview of her agency's most exciting project yet: the transformation of the historic downtown Appleton Trout Museum Building into the Together for Families: Fox Valley Family Resource Center. Located at 111 W. College Ave., the new center is set to open in summer 2026.

The center will span all five floors of the building, offering a welcoming hub where families can access services, connect with one another, and participate in enriching activities. Plans include a baby gift shop, an expansive family play space across the first two floors featuring climbing structures, infant-toddler areas, and imaginative design elements like tree-trunk pillars, a "river" running through the floor, and a waterfall-themed staircase. The second floor will also house a wellness studio, while upper levels will provide classrooms for child care, training, and community gatherings.

The third through fifth floors will serve as collaborative space for family-support organizations, including 13 offices for partner agencies and dedicated offices for First Five Fox Valley's own programs such as Parent Connection. A large training and meeting room will accommodate up to 80 people. The renovation is also focused on sustainability, with updates such as a new roof with solar panels, upgraded HVAC, mechanical, and LED systems to reduce the building's footprint.

The Building for Kids Children's Museum is curating the design of the play spaces, ensuring they are interactive and engaging. Access to the center will be intentionally affordable, with a nominal \$1 entry fee to encourage donations and help sustain operations while keeping the space open to all families.

The project budget is \$8 million, which includes \$5.5 million for building purchase and renovation, \$1 million for program startup and contingency, and \$1.5 million for an endowment.

Funding so far totals about \$2.86 million, with major support from Outagamie County (\$2 million), City of Appleton ARPA funds (\$750,000), and grants from the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region.

---

## **Pillars' Single Room Occupancy Program: Filling the Housing Gap for Single Adults**

*Paige Johnson, Program Manager,  
Pillars, Inc.*

Pillars' Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Program which provides affordable transitional housing for single adults who might otherwise remain in shelters or be unable to secure housing on their own. The program currently operates five houses in Appleton, each accommodating four to five residents, with a total capacity of about 25 individuals. Residents must have a minimum income of \$1,000 per month, but the program is designed to be accessible for people on fixed incomes, such as Social Security, or those working low-wage jobs. Rent is set at a flat rate of \$350 per month, with a \$500 security deposit, making it significantly more affordable than market rates, which have risen sharply in recent years. Each participant also receives wraparound case management, including support with budgeting, landlord-tenant relations, and overcoming barriers to long-term stability.

Paige emphasized that the program addresses a critical gap in housing options, as most resources focus on families while single adults face long waitlists and high barriers to entry, especially if they have past evictions. The SRO model not only provides a safe and stable place to live but also helps residents integrate into neighborhoods, counteracting “not-in-my-backyard” attitudes through positive community engagement. By offering both affordability and structured support, the program gives individuals a pathway to stability and self-sufficiency, rather than leaving them in prolonged shelter stays. Paige’s hope is that it can be expanded in the future to meet the growing need for single-adult housing in the community.

---

## **HeadsUp Fox Cities: Expanding Support for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care**

*Laura Kuehl, Executive Director,  
HeadsUp Fox Cities*

Laura Kuehl, shared how her organization supports teens and young adults who are aging out of the foster care system. HeadsUp provides transitional housing and wraparound services designed to help youth navigate the many challenges of independent living—everything from

securing stable housing and learning to live with roommates to accessing resources and building life skills. In partnership with Pillars and the Appleton Housing Authority, they also help youth access foster care initiative vouchers, which provide up to three years of subsidized rent for those who have been in the child welfare system at any point in their childhood. Currently, 36 youth are active in the program, with eight living in housing units (out of a 12-person capacity), while many more receive services and support outside of residential housing.

Laura emphasized the need for additional funding to sustain their current work and pursue her vision of expanding impact. A central piece of that dream is to grow the HeadsUp community center in Neenah into a larger, more vibrant hub where more young people can connect, receive programming, and find stability. She imagines the center not only serving as a safe gathering place but also as a collaborative space where other organizations can partner to provide mentorship, support groups, skill-building workshops, and resource navigation. By expanding the center's capacity and programming, Laura hopes to reach more youth, give them stronger foundations for independence, and create a supportive community around them during this critical life transition.

---

### **Susan Garcia Franz: Aligning Decision-Makers with Community Needs**

Susan, who works for Winnebago County Public Health and is also deeply involved in community organizations such as CASA Hispana, the Neenah Joint School District Board, and Kids Forward, shared a broader vision rather than a single program.

She reflected on the challenge of aligning decision-makers with the lived realities of the people they are meant to serve. Too often, she noted, those in leadership or governance roles are disconnected from community needs, resulting in fragmented efforts across large institutions like the county. Her "dream" is to see organizations and boards moving more cohesively in the same direction, rather than working at cross-purposes. Even reaching 60% alignment, she said, could begin to shift the trajectory of outcomes for communities.

Susan also spoke personally about the toll of working in spaces where political and organizational structures rarely align with her values or with the needs of marginalized populations. Having spent much of her life fighting uphill battles, she acknowledged that she has rarely experienced what true support from leadership looks like. Her hope is for a future where she and others who share her passion can find spaces of mutual support and solidarity, working together in alignment toward community wellbeing.

---

### **ESTHER Fox Valley: Building Justice Through Connection and Care**

*Katie Olson, Director*

*ESTHER Fox Valley*

Katie reflected on the tension of trying to stay present and connected while juggling many competing demands - a reality she noted is common among community leaders and advocates. She emphasized that at its core, ESTHER is about social justice, and that social connectedness is inseparable from justice work. She shared an example of a recent folk dance event hosted by ESTHER, which created a joyful space for people to gather, connect, and reflect together. While the evening included conversations about systems change, it was also simply a chance for people to feel a sense of belonging and community—something participants have been eager to see happen again.

Katie also spoke candidly about the weight of working on “big, wicked problems” like systemic inequities and the erosion of rights, which can feel overwhelming and unsustainable without support. She framed her “dream” as cultivating spaces—within ESTHER, across organizations, and in the wider community—where people can both cope with difficult realities and find encouragement in one another. With ESTHER currently expanding its team through new staff and interns, she expressed a commitment to building an environment where colleagues don’t feel consumed by chaos but instead can experience connection, balance, and mutual care as they pursue justice.

**About ESTHER Fox Valley:** ESTHER (Empowerment, Solidarity, Truth, Hope, Equity, Reform) is a faith-based social justice organization in the Fox Valley that works to address systemic issues such as immigration reform, racial equity, criminal justice reform, and affordable housing. They mobilize people of faith and conscience to build community power, advocate for policy change, and foster equity and inclusion.

---

## **Mary Beth Nienhaus Activity Center: Engaging Older Adults**

*Dawn Gohlke, Executive Director*

*Mary Beth Nienhaus Activity Center*

Dawn described the center as a place where adults age 50 and older can thrive through meaningful connections, wellness opportunities, education, and more. The center offers more than 300 unique programs annually and has seen tremendous recent growth, welcoming over 800 new members in just the past six weeks. Dawn highlighted the daily connections she witnesses among participants as proof of the center’s strong foundation and impact.

At the same time, she voiced frustration with the cycle of planning and report-writing that too often fails to translate into action or sustainable support. Despite producing ample documentation for funders, the financial investment needed to sustain and grow their work is lacking. Her dream is to ensure funders are not just aware of the center’s efforts but actively

engaged and supportive, so that programs like theirs—and the broader Connected Fox Valley initiative—can avoid fizzling out and instead continue to flourish.

The Mary Beth Nienhaus Activity Center, formerly known as the Thompson Community Center on College Avenue, recently relocated to its new home on North Meade Street in Appleton and was renamed in recognition of community philanthropist Mary Beth Nienhaus. The center provides a vibrant hub for older adults to connect, stay active, and engage in lifelong learning, offering everything from health and fitness classes to cultural, recreational, and volunteer opportunities.

---

## **Valley Transit: Public Transportation as a Space for Social Connection**

*Sarah Scheider, Mobility Manager  
Valley Transit*

Sarah shared powerful stories that illustrate both the barriers and opportunities in her work. She recalled helping a woman named Lisa who was bedridden and needed access to a YMCA pool in order to lose enough weight to qualify for bariatric surgery. Although a bus stop was just 12 feet from Lisa's front door, the true barrier was the lack of a wheelchair ramp, a reminder that transportation challenges often go beyond transit itself. Sarah also receives frequent calls from adult children worried about aging parents losing their licenses, and from families just outside transit boundaries who desperately need access. These experiences reinforce her belief in making a difference one person at a time, even as larger systemic issues remain.

She also spoke passionately about the stigma attached to public transportation. Sarah noted that while many professionals dismiss or avoid buses, she has come to deeply value the sense of community they foster. Riders talk with one another, ask about families, pets, and classes, and build social bonds that would never happen in isolated cars. Her dream is to see a cultural shift where public transportation is not stigmatized, but embraced as a meaningful connector that enriches lives. She challenged the group to consider how changing perceptions - especially among professionals - could make transit not only a practical service, but also a celebrated space of social connection.

---

## **Appleton Health Department: Home Visitation as a Lifeline for Families**

*Jess Moyle, Public Health Nurse  
City of Appleton*

Jess Moyle, Public Health Nurse with the City of Appleton Health Department and a lactation consultant at St. Elizabeth Hospital, highlighted the value of home visitation programs for families with newborns. She described these visits as a “gift,” offering parents in the overwhelming early days of infancy a direct lifeline—someone who comes to them, answers questions, weighs babies, supports breastfeeding, screens for mood disorders, and connects them to healthcare and community resources. Unlike some programs with eligibility restrictions, Appleton’s home visiting program has very few barriers aside from jurisdictional boundaries, making it broadly accessible to families in need.

At the same time, Jess noted challenges such as staffing shifts during crises like the pandemic, which pulled nurses away from family support, and the resulting inconsistency that makes referrals difficult. She also acknowledged confusion among community partners, since multiple agencies in the area provide home visiting services with different criteria. Her dream is that every family in the region could receive at least one or two home visits after birth, regardless of circumstance, to ease their transition and build stronger community ties. She also hopes for better coordination and reconnection among local agencies offering home visitation, as collaboration weakened during the pandemic and needs to be rebuilt.

---

## **Brighter Days: Healing Grief Through Support, Exercise, and Community**

*Brandy Hankey, Director of Wellbeing  
Oshkosh Community YMCA*

Brandy Hankey, Director of Wellbeing at the Oshkosh Community YMCA, highlighted the success of the Brighter Days program, which supports adults 55 and older who are grieving the loss of a partner. The program intentionally goes beyond a traditional support group, offering three integrated components: a weekly peer support group to discuss the difficult and often unspoken realities of grief; weekly exercise sessions that strengthen both mental and physical health; and monthly social outings such as equine therapy or cooking demonstrations tailored to participants’ needs. Brandy shared how deeply meaningful the program has become, both for participants and for herself, describing the group as “all my grandparents now.”

Originally launched in collaboration with NAMI, Brighter Days now uses the Group Peer Support (GPS) model, which blends evidence-based clinical approaches with trauma-informed peer support. GPS has adaptable curricula for diverse populations, and Brandy sees enormous potential to expand Brighter Days beyond its current scope. Her dream is to broaden the program by training more facilitators, extending it to other YMCAs, and adapting it for different groups—such as postpartum parents, immigrants, or LGBTQ+ communities. She emphasized that these groups are always free of charge, designed to build protective factors and foster resilience, and she views the program as one of the most impactful initiatives she has ever been part of.

---

## **Chilton Public Library: Bilingual Programs and Belonging in a Small Community**

*Rebecca Barry, Director  
Chilton Public Library*

Rebecca reflected on both the challenges and advantages of leading a small-town library. On the one hand, the lack of public transportation makes it difficult for many rural residents—who make up about half of the library’s circulation—to attend programs or access resources. On the other hand, the library’s small size allows for flexibility and responsiveness, with fewer bureaucratic hurdles and strong backing from both the board and community. This support has enabled Rebecca to quickly turn ideas into action and to say “yes” to new opportunities that meet community needs.

She highlighted one area of particular pride: a three-year effort to better serve Chilton’s Hispanic and Latinx communities through intentional hiring, bilingual programming, and cultural celebrations. These programs are designed so that content flows naturally between English and Spanish—rather than repeating the same material twice. For example, a presenter might deliver part of a program in English and then continue in Spanish, with supporting slides projected in translation so everyone can follow along. This approach allows English speakers to experience a bit of what it’s like to navigate language barriers, while also making Spanish-speaking residents feel fully included and recognized. The library has also created an advisory board of community members to guide programming and outreach, ensuring the offerings reflect real needs. Rebecca’s dream is to further amplify outreach so newcomers know the library is a place for them, with welcoming bilingual staff, resources, and programming. Looking ahead, the library is also exploring multigenerational programs that connect seniors and youth, creating opportunities for knowledge-sharing, cultural exchange, and stronger community ties.

---

## **Neighborhood Partners: Investing in Connectors and Associations**

*Julie Filapek, Neighborhood Partners Program Manager  
NeighborWorks Green Bay*

Julie described her work as being centered on “connection as a verb” - intentionally building relationships among neighbors and associations. Since 2009, she has led efforts in Appleton, Menasha, Denmark, and now Green Bay to develop Neighborhood Connectors, residents whose role is to engage with others, identify strengths, passions, and knowledge, and link people together. This approach, rooted in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), builds stronger, more resilient neighborhoods by focusing on local assets rather than deficits. Julie

emphasized that social connection is the foundation of any meaningful neighborhood change, whether through block parties, neighborhood champions events, or other activities that bring people together.

Looking ahead, Julie sees opportunities to broaden this work beyond geographic neighborhoods to include all types of voluntary associations—PTAs, cultural or identity groups, civic clubs, faith communities, and more. She noted the decline in such associations, citing research from Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, and stressed the importance of revitalizing these spaces as engines of social connection.

Julie supports investing in community connectors who can sustain deep, people-focused work, and to make practical tools and resources (like guides for block parties, front porch music festivals, and neighborhood leader training curricula) widely accessible. She invited participants to an October 13th event in Appleton, where voluntary associations will come together to share strategies for strengthening connection and building organizational capacity.

---

## **Fox Valley Literacy Coalition: Breaking Barriers to Connection Through Literacy**

*Heather Chantelois-Kashal, Program and Operations Director*

*Fox Valley Literacy Coalition*

Heather described the unique programs her organization offers to break down barriers of language and literacy while fostering connection. One example she shared is a class she teaches with women from Afghanistan and Congo who are learning to read and write for the first time in any language while also building English communication skills. These participants, she noted, often come from cultures where social connectedness is second nature, but face profound isolation in the U.S.'s more individualistic and time-driven environment. By supporting literacy, Fox Valley Literacy not only helps individuals navigate healthcare, schools, and daily life, but also creates opportunities for the community to learn from immigrants and refugees about sustainable, joyful ways of being connected. Heather encouraged others to reach out when they encounter community members who seem disengaged or find systems inaccessible, as literacy support can often make the difference.

She also highlighted the scale of the challenge. More than half of U.S. adults (54%) read at a sixth-grade level or below, and stigma often keeps people from seeking help, leading to self-isolation and reduced community participation. Fox Valley Literacy conducted a recent survey of nearly 800 people found that one in four native English speakers sometimes struggle to communicate clearly, and nearly 40% struggle with reading and writing. Heather emphasized that cross-sector partnerships are essential to respond to these needs and to build more inclusive programs where everyone can thrive.



**About Fox Valley Literacy Coalition:** Fox Valley Literacy Coalition provides free classes and tutoring for adult learners in essential areas: reading, writing, math, English language, civics & citizenship, digital literacy, and individual projects. The agency believes literacy is the foundation of a stronger community, empowering adults to grow personally, engage civically, and contribute to economic stability for a brighter future for all.

---

## **Diverse & Resilient: Creating LGBTQ+ Connection Amid Systemic Barriers**

*Nick Ross, Community Education & Outreach Advocate*

*Diverse & Resilient*

Nick Ross shared how LGBTQ+ communities are feeling more isolated and under attack than ever due to the current political climate. Harmful rhetoric from government leaders is filtering down into local institutions, with some healthcare systems already limiting services, despite legal injunctions against such restrictions. These systemic barriers - lack of access to healthcare, housing, and transportation - create profound obstacles that no amount of social programming alone can resolve. Nick stressed that while connection is important, true equity requires systemic change, and his dream is for agencies with power to shift focus toward meeting basic needs and dismantling those barriers.

At the same time, Nick highlighted how Diverse & Resilient creates safe, affirming spaces where people can build community and resilience. As Wisconsin's largest LGBTQ+ nonprofit, with offices in Milwaukee and Appleton, the organization provides advocacy and support services for LGBTQ+ survivors of violence, runs weekly youth groups and adult support groups, and hosts social events. These programs give people a place to find belonging, share experiences, and grow together. Nick, who once participated in these groups as a teen, now facilitates them and he emphasized that while systemic challenges persist, the capacity to continue this work of social connection is vital to the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people.

**About Diverse & Resilient:** Founded in the 1990s, Diverse & Resilient is Wisconsin's largest LGBTQ+ nonprofit organization, with offices in Milwaukee and Appleton. The Appleton office opened in 2019, expanding services to LGBTQ+ people in the Fox Valley. The organization provides advocacy, education, and support services that promote the health, safety, and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people across the lifespan.

---

## **Ebb & Flow Connections Cooperative: Emotional CPR and The Community Living Room**

*Karen Iverson-Riggers & Lynn McLaughlin*

*Co-Owners of Ebb & Flow Connections Cooperative*

Karen and Lynn shared how Ebb & Flow centers its work on emotional health and social connection. Founded in 2021, the cooperative is dedicated to how we connect with one another through training, events and listening spaces. The agency's main offering is Emotional CPR, a community education program that teaches people how to truly listen and support others in emotional distress. Through training and practice, Emotional CPR helps people honor lived experiences, break down stigma, and build healthier, more supportive communities.

They also highlighted their agency's Community Living Room, a non-clinical, peer- and mutual-support space designed to remove barriers that people often face when seeking help. Opened in October 2024 in downtown Appleton (113 W Harris St.), the Living Room has already welcomed more than 700 visitors. There are no forms, no appointments, and no requirements—people can simply come as they are, whether that means working remotely, sitting quietly with a book, or talking with others.

With snacks and a welcoming atmosphere, the space was intentionally designed as an alternative to crisis responses that often involve law enforcement and escalation. Instead, it provides a safe, human-centered place where people can connect, laugh, cry, and support one another before reaching a crisis point. Karen and Lynn emphasized that the Living Room is not just for clients, but also for frontline workers and community leaders themselves, who also need a space of care and connection.

#### **About Ebb & Flow Connections Cooperative & The Community Living Room:**

Ebb & Flow Connections Cooperative is a worker-owned cooperative in Appleton focused on emotional health, peer support, and social connection. Its members deliver Emotional CPR training to individuals, organizations, and communities, equipping people to respond compassionately to emotional distress. In 2024, the cooperative opened The Community Living Room, a barrier-free peer support offering drop-in opportunities for connection, rest, and mutual care.