

# Connected Fox Valley

## Connected Fox Valley Advisory Group | Meeting Summary

Date: Thurs., Aug. 21, 2025

Time: 1 – 3 p.m.

Location: First Five Fox Valley Building, 111 W. College Ave., Appleton

Facilitators: Wendy Harris (N.E.W Mental Health Connection); Karen Iverson Riggers and Lynn McLaughlin (Ebb & Flow Connections Cooperative)

Present: Rebecca Barry (Chilton Public Library); Sarah Bassing-Sutton (N.E.W. Mental Health Connection); Heather Chantelois-Kashal (Fox Valley Literacy Coalition); Julie Filapek (NeighborWorks Green Bay); Susan Garcia Franz (Winnebago County Health Department); Dawn Gohlke (Thompson Center on Lourdes); Brandy Hankey (Oshkosh Community YMCA); Paige Johnson (Pillars); Laura Kuehl (Heads Up); Jessica Moyle (Appleton Public Health); Katie Olson (ESTHER); Nick Ross (Diverse & Resilient); Sarah Schneider (Valley Transit); Barb Tengesdal (First Five Fox Valley); Amy Wilson (First Five Fox Valley)

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### **Agenda**

1:00 PM – Welcome & Recap

1:10 PM – Spotlight Round: Share an Existing Program/Strategy or Dream for a New One

2:10 PM – Listening Sessions Updates

2:30 PM – Report Planning & Feedback

2:45 PM – Emerging Themes for Breakout Work Groups

2:55 PM – Next Steps & Closing

*Note: The first two agenda items used up our meeting time. The remaining agenda items will be discussed at the October meeting.*

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*Summary written by Wendy Harris  
Project Coordinator, The Connection*

## Welcome & Recap

Wendy reported out on the results of the sticky note mapping exercise that members had participated in at the prior (June 9) meeting. The purpose of that exercise was to visualize and identify all the assets, barriers and opportunities that exist in our community around social connectedness.

After organizing all of the notes into spreadsheets by category - assets, barriers, and opportunities - the analysis revealed a strong foundation of community strengths, including trusted organizations, neighborhood groups, libraries, recreational programs, and parks, along with the resilience, resourcefulness, and leadership of individuals.

At the same time, significant barriers to connection emerged, with transportation challenges cited most frequently, especially the lack of affordable and reliable options in rural areas. Other barriers included housing instability, discrimination and inequities, language and literacy gaps, safety concerns, digital divides, and the difficulty of navigating fragmented service systems. Together, these challenges undermine opportunities for belonging and engagement, particularly for immigrant, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized communities.

The analysis also revealed several opportunities to strengthen social connection. Housing surfaced as a key catalyst, with ideas such as creating affordable, community-oriented developments with shared spaces and expanding transitional housing for young adults. Neighborhood-level efforts - supporting associations, hosting events, and investing in “community connector” roles - were also identified as promising strategies. Additional opportunities included expanding volunteerism and peer support, addressing the needs of youth and young adults, and creating more inclusive, multigenerational gathering spaces. Members emphasized aligning existing resources, reducing barriers to participation, and elevating the voices of those most impacted by disconnection as guiding principles for shaping future strategies.

## Discussion

In response, a couple advisory group members noted that the findings did not feel new or revelatory and echoed long-standing issues that have surfaced in past initiatives. Members, once again, expressed a sense of fatigue with initiatives that bring people together for conversation but do not result in meaningful action.

Both Wendy and Harris Sarah Bassing-Sutton, Executive Director of The Connection, acknowledged and validated the frustrations, and emphasized that we are at the beginning phase of this work, which is laying the groundwork for developing the recommendations. Sarah added that The Connection is committed to seeing this project through to not only develop recommendations, but hopefully taking a leadership role for implementation.

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

Below is a short summary of each member's "spotlight."

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

Barb Tengesdal, Executive Director of First Five Fox Valley, shared plans for the new *Together For Families: Fox Valley Family Resource Center*, which is opening in 2026. The \$8M project will feature a public play space, parent education programs, and collaborative offices for partner agencies, creating a welcoming hub where families can access services, connect, and thrive.

### **Pillars: Filling the Housing Gap for Single Adults**

Paige Johnson, Program Manager at Pillars, highlighted the agency's Single Room Occupancy Program, which offers affordable transitional housing for single adults in Appleton. With low flat rent and wraparound support, the program helps residents stabilize and reintegrate into the community. Paige's dream is to expand this critical housing option for more individuals. The program currently operates five houses in Appleton with a total capacity of about 25 individuals.

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

Laura Kuehl, Executive Director of HeadsUp Fox Cities, described how her agency provides transitional housing and support services for youth leaving foster care, including access to rental vouchers and life skills support. Currently serving 36 youth, the agency hopes to grow its program and its community center, located in Neenah, into a vibrant hub for programming, mentorship, and collaboration with other organizations.

### **Aligning Decision-Makers with Community Needs**

Susan Garcia Franz, with Winnebago County Health Department, urged leaders and governing boards to better align with the lived realities of the people they serve. Her vision is to see institutions "rowing in the same direction," reducing fragmentation and creating more supportive systems, especially for marginalized communities.

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

Katie Olson, Director of ESTHER Fox Valley, emphasized that social justice and connection are inseparable. She spoke candidly about the weight of working on "big, wicked" problems like systemic inequities and the erosion of rights, and the dream to create spaces where advocates and community members alike can find support, balance, and encouragement.

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

Dawn Gohlke, Executive Director, provided an overview of the newly reopened (and renamed) Activity Center – in its new home at 3000 E. College Ave., Appleton – which offers 300+ annual programs for adults 50+, noting a surge of 800 new members in just the past month and a half. While the center fosters thriving and connection, Dawn stressed the need for funders to invest in sustaining this vital community hub.

### **Valley Transit: Public Transportation as a Connector**

Sarah Schneider, Valley Transit's Mobility Manager shared stories about her work to break down barriers for residents to access and use public transportation. She stressed that buses are more than a ride - they're spaces where people connect. Her dream is to overcome stigma and make public transit a more common part of community life.

### **Appleton Health Department: Home Visiting as a Lifeline**

Jess Moyle, Public Health Nurse with the Appleton Health Department, described the city's home visitation program for families with newborns, offering in-home support for breastfeeding, screenings, and referrals. With few barriers to access, the program eases early parenthood, but needs more coordination across agencies. Jess dreams of every family receiving at least one visit after birth.

### **Brighter Days at the Oshkosh YMCA**

Brandy Hankey, Director of Wellbeing at the Oshkosh Community YMCA, shared about Brighter Days, a free program for adults 55+ grieving the loss of a partner. It combines weekly peer groups, exercise sessions, and monthly social activities to support healing and connection. The program uses the Group Peer Support (GPS) model, an evidence-based approach that provides structured, trauma-informed peer support adaptable to different populations. Brandy hopes to expand Brighter Days to other YMCAs and tailor it for groups such as postpartum parents, immigrants, or LGBTQ+ communities.

### **Chilton Public Library: Bilingual Programs and Belonging**

Rebecca Barry, Director of the Chilton Public Library, highlighted her library's bilingual programming, which integrates English and Spanish without repetition so both groups can engage. By hiring bilingual staff and creating a community advisory board, the library has

become a hub of belonging. Rebecca's dream is to expand outreach and multigenerational programming.

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

Julie Filapek, Neighborhood Partners Program Manager with NeighborWorks Green Bay, described her work using Asset-Based Community Development to strengthen neighborhoods through "connectors" who link people based on their strengths and passions. 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. She emphasized the need to support and revitalize voluntary associations.

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

Heather Chantelois-Kashal, Program and Operations Director with the Fox Valley Literacy Coalition, stressed that more than half of U.S. adults read at or below a sixth-grade level, which isolates people and reduces participation. Fox Valley Literacy offers classes and partnerships that empower adults to thrive. Heather's dream is stronger cross-sector collaboration to make systems more accessible.

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

Nick Ross, Community Education & Outreach Advocate with Diverse & Resilient, Appleton, shared how LGBTQ+ people are increasingly isolated due to hostile political rhetoric and systemic barriers to healthcare, housing, and transportation. Diverse & Resilient responds by offering safe, affirming spaces through support groups and events. Nick called for both systemic change and greater capacity to continue this connection work.

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

Karen Iverson-Riggers and Lynn McLaughlin, co-owners of Ebb & Flow, gave an overview of their agency, which trains people in Emotional CPR - a way to deeply listen and respond to emotional distress. They also share about the successes of their Community Living Room in Appleton, a barrier-free space for connection and peer support that has welcomed more than 700 visitors since opening in October 2024.