



School of Nursing

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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UW–Madison to expand wellbeing programs for older adults in rural communities

UW–Madison School of Nursing’s Center for Aging Research and Education will advance programs that improve the health of older adults in rural communities

Madison, Wisconsin—April 13, 2018—The University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Nursing, through its Center for Aging Research and Education (CARE), has announced plans to expand programs designed to improve the health and wellbeing of older adults, particularly those living in rural communities.

“Building a culture of health across the lifespan is critical for the vibrancy of our society and it requires attention,” says Dean Linda D. Scott. “These expanded efforts will enable us to continue developing and evaluating evidence-based programs that directly benefit older adults, caregivers, and communities throughout the state.”

Three CARE programs are included in the expansion: Geri-Res, which builds skills in new or recently hired long-term care nurses; PALS, which promotes functional fitness among older adults; and a Healthy Aging in Rural Towns (HeART) pilot to generate comprehensive planning tools for individuals and families to help them maintain independence.

“We approach the challenges of aging from a variety of angles because aging is complex and there are many, many factors that contribute to older adult health and well-being. And as we live longer lives, we know there can be some obstacles to maintaining the quality of life we desire. Nurses have a long tradition of finding innovative solutions to these challenges,” says Dr. Barbara Bowers, CARE executive director and UW–Madison School of Nursing professor, associate dean for research and sponsored programs, and Charlotte Jane and Ralph A Rodefer Chair. “We know these three initiatives will improve how we support older people, and we expect them all to have a positive impact.”

Geri-Res expansion meets workforce needs for training

Research has shown that investing in supported onboarding for new nurses can improve nurse retention, lower cost, and improve nurse preparedness for safe and competent practice. UW–Madison’s Geri-Res program is a long-term care nurse residency designed to build confidence in new or recently hired long-term care nurses. It was originally developed as a 16-week online curriculum with companion organizational programming for skilled nursing, assisted living, and home health care providers.

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The expanded effort will allow CARE to add modules to the existing Geri-Res program and develop a similar program for licensed practical nursing staffs, which practice under different licenses and laws.

“A better prepared, confident nursing workforce will ensure we can all thrive as we age,” said Bowers.

PALS expansion helps meet strong demand for the program

The Physical Activity for Life for Seniors (PALS) program uses group classes and home exercises to help older adults maintain and improve the strength, balance, flexibility, and stamina. It was developed originally in the School of Nursing and assessments showed not only improvement in multiple fitness measures but also that participants were able to sustain the improvements over time.

The program currently has a long waiting list.

“People respond not only to the functional fitness aspect of the program, but also to the opportunity for social engagement through the group classes,” said Bowers.

With the expansion, it will be possible to deploy the PALS program more quickly into new Wisconsin communities through a partnership with the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging. In addition, train-the-trainer workshops will be offered free of charge in 25 Midwest counties and Native American tribal communities.

HeART pilot engages three Wisconsin communities

Rural communities are experiencing a shift in demographics, with older adults making up a higher percentage of the population than in urban areas. Rural settings present wonderful opportunities for quality of life as we age, but these areas also present some challenges to meeting basic needs. Transportation alternatives, affordable housing, and adequate access to health care providers can be scarce in rural communities.

CARE has created HeART to bring together residents, care providers, and social supports to map needs and resources available for supporting the health and wellbeing of older adults. The program will pilot in three rural Wisconsin communities. Each community will undergo a needs assessment, develop an inventory of programs, prioritize needs, and develop specific action plans that they can use when working to benefit from the continuing contributions of older adults.

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“As problem solvers, when nurses see an opportunity, we figure out how to seize it – and when something isn’t working, we rethink our approach,” Bowers says.

“These initiatives reflect the vast expertise available through the School of Nursing as well as our commitment to improving health outcomes across the lifespan,” says Scott.

The program expansion is made possible through a grant from Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies.

About the UW–Madison School of Nursing

The University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Nursing was established in 1924 and is the leading nursing research institution in Wisconsin. It develops leaders for the profession and the society—making discoveries, enhancing systems, and improving health through research, education, and practice. CARE was founded in 2011 to improve the health and well-being of older adults by transforming the system of care and advancing workforce development in communities throughout Wisconsin and across the country.

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