

Dept. of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection: Farm Center makes mental health support for farmers, farm families a priority

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MADISON, Wis. – I have always considered it a privilege to have grown up on a dairy farm in central Wisconsin. I have so much respect for my dad and his two brothers' commitment to operating their business. I cannot thank them enough for instilling in me a work ethic and teaching me to value accountability and discipline. Even at a young age, it was easy to see the early morning and long days they invested into running the farm and the infrequent to non-existent vacation days or time away. There is no doubt farming is a rewarding way of life, but it is not an easy one.

Being an adult now and having to help manage my own family's finances, home, and healthcare, I have a brand new appreciation for all the stresses my parents and aunt and uncles likely dealt with. I find myself looking back and realizing how those stresses are magnified for farm families where extreme market volatility of input and output prices are, in nearly every case, outside of their control. Simply put, the mental toughness required to be a successful farmer is off the charts and I recognize this more each and every day.

Unfortunately, factors that can lead to anxiety, stress, and depression extend far beyond financials for farmers. Weather conditions, interpersonal conflicts with family members, isolation, and the pressure to grow and modernize are just some that play a role. A rural stress poll published by the American Farm Bureau Federation in 2019 reported a strong majority of farmers and farm workers think financial issues (91%), farm or business problems (88%), and fear of losing the farm (87%) impact the mental health of farmers. It is easy for me to see why this is the

case considering the overwhelming pressures farmers face to navigate challenges outside their control.

Regrettably, according to Sara Kohlbeck, Director of the Division of Suicide Prevention at the Medical College of Wisconsin, approximately 190 farmers died by suicide from 2004-2019, with farmers accounting for 2 percent of all suicides. With all that farmers do to produce safe, affordable, and nutritious food for the citizens of Wisconsin as well as the country and world, even one farmer suicide is too many. Recognizing the need to support Wisconsin's farmers and their families, Governor Tony Evers provided funding through his 2019-21 and 2021-23 biennial budgets to create and maintain a Farmer Wellness Program administered by DATCP's Wisconsin Farm Center. Through this program, our team works to confidentially connect farmers facing extreme stress with professional mental health support that is accessible, affordable, and tailored to their situation and needs.

Today, this program shows continued user growth with most of the services being utilized at all-time highs. In fiscal year 2021, the 24/7 Wisconsin Farmer Wellness Helpline received 167 calls. Further, 55 tele-counseling sessions were conducted and an all-time high of 176 vouchers for in-person counseling were redeemed. Interest in our online farmer support groups has also been high enough that an additional monthly session has been added to keep up with demand. Finally, the Rural Realities podcast has crossed more than 1,100 downloads. Episodes have highlighted topics such as the stigma of mental health, interpersonal communication, and using a positive mindset and gratitude in a farm business.

With my upbringing and professional background in farming, it has been an honor to have a leadership role in offering this programming and see first-hand how these services are making a positive difference in the lives of our state's farmers. Farmers are the cornerstone of Wisconsin's \$104.8 billion agriculture industry and produce products important to every citizen of Wisconsin. When considering how difficult farming can be and how we all benefit from farmer efforts, I truly believe they deserve affordable and accessible mental health resources and support. I am proud to be a part of the Wisconsin Farm Center and the work we are doing to help meet this need. It is a small way our state can give back to an industry that is so important to our citizens and our economy.