

# Reducing Falls Among Older Adults in Wisconsin

## STATE ISSUE BRIEF

### Saving Lives, Preserving Independence, Reducing Costs

#### The Scope and Cost of Older Adult Falls:

**Scope:** Nationally, one in four older adults experiences a fall each year, but Wisconsin has the nation's highest rate of deadly falls among older adults.<sup>1</sup> Many assume Wisconsin's high death rate is due to the state's cold climate, but the majority of older adult falls occur in the home, and some states with similar climates have lower rates.<sup>1</sup> From 2018-2020, there were 4,986 deaths due to falls among the 65+ population in Wisconsin – nearly triple the number of people of all ages who died in motor vehicle accidents in the same period.<sup>2</sup> The falls death rate rose 15% over that time period, while the nationwide rate increased by 11%.<sup>2</sup> With the state's population aging, the problem is expected to grow.

**An estimated \$1 billion is spent annually on falls in Wisconsin which includes both Medicaid and out-of-pocket expenses.<sup>3</sup>**

**Health impact and cost:** Falls are a common cause of injury and disability. Ninety-five percent of hip fractures in older adults – a common cause of both long-term nursing home admissions and rehabilitation stays – are due to falls.<sup>1</sup> In Wisconsin, the median monthly cost for a semi-private room in a nursing home \$9,022.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, falls and their related injuries have a significant physical and financial impact on family caregivers. An AARP study revealed that family caregivers spend an average of \$7,242 annually on out-of-pocket costs related to caregiving.<sup>5</sup>

**Strain on emergency services and health care:** Fall-related calls have major implications for emergency medical services (EMS) availability as it can decrease well as financial consequences to communities and decreases the availability of EMS to respond to more urgent needs. According to the National Council on Aging, older adult falls (people aged 65 and older) accounted for 17% of all 911 calls some of which required transport to an emergency department while others simply required a lift assist.<sup>1</sup> Half of the calls requiring lift-assist resulted in a second lift-assist call within two weeks.<sup>2</sup>

**WAAN's position:** To reduce the high rate of deadly falls among older adults in Wisconsin, we request a \$450,000 annual state budget appropriation to support the Falls Free Wisconsin Center – a falls prevention center of excellence that

- 1) raises awareness of the incidence and cost of older adult falls,
- 2) helps older adults, their families and caregivers identify and reduce falls risk due to the multiple causes of falls,
- 3) reduces the burden of falls and provides resources to emergency services and health systems, and
- 4) delivers evidence-based prevention education and interventions across the state.

#### Reducing Falls in Wisconsin:

The good news is we know how to reduce falls in Wisconsin. Wisconsin's Department of Health Services (DHS) in partnership with the non-profit Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA) is poised to address the falls epidemic with the Falls Free Wisconsin Center – a statewide effort launched in 2023 to reduce falls in Wisconsin by creating a one-stop-shop for consumers, their

families, and caregivers and the professionals who support them. The Center engages in the following:

- **Raising Awareness:** Public education campaigns run periodically throughout the year to help older adults, their families, and caregivers better understand the risk of falls and how they can prevent them;
- Develop and maintain the **infrastructure to support implementation** of evidence-based falls-prevention programs and initiatives throughout the state;
- **Identifying people at high falls risk:** We work to encourage clinical and falls risk self-assessments and provide resources for both clinical and community-based interventions;
- Support local falls-prevention coalitions and initiatives;
- Support Aging & Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs), county and tribal aging units, public health, and other local partners in developing and training program leaders and recruiting participants;
- Develop and maintain an online hub of **falls-prevention information and resources** for consumers and community organizations;
- **Share data:** We collect and analyze data to support provide partners and the public with accurate information about the scope and impact of falls.

#### **Raise Awareness:**

**Identify People at Risk of a Fall Through Screening.** According to the CDC, the rising number of deaths from falls among older adults can be addressed “by screening for fall risk and intervening to address risk factors.”

**Increase Accessibility of Evidence-Based Falls Prevention Interventions:** WIHA’s evidenced-based Stepping On program has been researched and proven to reduce falls by 31%, with an average participant cost savings of \$345.40.<sup>6</sup> In another study, program participants experienced a 50% reduction in emergency department visits and a 50% reduction in fall-related hospitalizations.<sup>7</sup> In addition to delivering Stepping On, WIHA is a clearinghouse for other evidence-based programs and practices related to chronic disease, pain, incontinence, diabetes, and other physical conditions that increase the risk of falls.

WIHA partners with Wisconsin's Aging and Disability Network, health care systems and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health to train local agencies statewide to reduce fall-related injuries and deaths. However, **WIHA's local partners cannot deliver proven cost-effective programs without statewide coordination and support.**

Although these proven falls prevention programs save lives and reduce long-term care costs, they are cost-prohibitive for individual county or tribal Aging & Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs), Aging Units, or health care systems to implement without financial support. Local coalitions are working across Wisconsin to pull together resources and strategies to reduce falls in their communities, but they cannot succeed with their work in isolation.

## Sources

1. CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data/fall-deaths.html>
2. WI DHS WIHS: <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/wish/injury-mortality/icd10-form.htm>
3. Based on the CMS numbers from 2014 and the CMS based inflation rates.
4. Genworth: <https://pro.genworth.com/riiproweb/productinfo/pdf/282102.pdf>
5. AARP: <https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/financial-legal/info-2021/high-out-of-pocket-costs.html#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20new%20AARP,and%20engagement%20officer%20for%20AARP.>
6. **Clemson, Lindy, et al.**, “The Effectiveness of a Community-Based Program for Reducing the Incidence of Falls in the Elderly: A Randomized Trial,” *Journal of American Geriatrics Society*, 52:1487-1494, 2004.
7. **Bringing Healthy Aging to Scale: A Randomized Trial of a Quality Improvement Intervention to Increase Adoption of Evidence-Based Health Promotion Programs by Community Partners - Implementation Science News**, (<https://news.consortiumforis.org/abstracts/bringing-healthy-aging-to-scale-a-randomized-trial-of-a-quality-improvement-intervention-to-increase-adoption-of-evidencebased-health-promotion-programs-by-community-partners>)

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## Core member organizations

Aging and Disability Professionals Association of Wisconsin (ADPAW) • Alzheimer’s Association Wisconsin Chapter Board on Aging and Long Term Care (BOALTC) • Wisconsin Adult Day Services Association (WADSA) • Wisconsin Association of Area Agencies on Aging (W4A) • Wisconsin Association of Benefit Specialists (WABS) • Wisconsin Association of Nutrition Directors (WAND) • Wisconsin Association of Senior Centers (WASC) • Wisconsin Family and Caregiver Support Alliance (WFACSA) • Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA) • Wisconsin Senior Advocates • Wisconsin Senior Corps Association (WISCA) • Wisconsin Tribal Aging Unit Association

## Mission

The Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN) works with and for all older adults by educating community members and policy makers on priority issues while advocating for meaningful change. Learn more at <https://gwaar.org/waan>.