Reducing Falls Among Older Wisconsinites

STATE ISSUE BRIEF

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Preserving Independence, Reducing Costs, Improving Quality of Life

The Scope and Cost of Older Adult Falls:

Scope: Aging is a lifelong process that connects us all. Today, one in four Wisconsinites is age 60 or older—and by 2040, it will be one in three. Now is the time to invest in systems that promote health, connection, and independence throughout our lives—strengthening the foundation for well-being in every community.

WAAN's position:
To support the Falls Free Wisconsin Center – a falls prevention center of excellence supporting programming and local initiatives, we request a $450,000/year annual budget appropriation to:

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

Research has demonstrated that **no matter our age, we can learn and carry out effective strategies to increase resilience, therefore reducing our risk of falls and improving our quality of life.** Preventing falls is one way we can collectively make a significant positive impact in our communities. Falls are the number one cause of injuries as we age and are a key driver of emergency department (ED) visits, hospitalizations, and nursing home admissions. One in four older adults has a fall each year, and Wisconsin has the highest rate of deadly falls in the nation.[1] Even a minor fall creates a ripple effect of more serious falls to come, which gives us the opportunity to intervene early and promote resiliency, therefore decreasing risk for future falls.

Reducing Falls in Wisconsin: The good news is that while common, falls are not inevitable as we age. Many can be prevented with state investment in prevention efforts.

Ask: $450,000 per year to fund the statewide infrastructure supporting falls prevention programming and local initiatives.

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 initiative– a statewide effort launched in 2023 to reduce falls in Wisconsin by creating a one-stop-shop for community members, families, caregivers, and the professionals who support older adults (FallsFreeWI.org).

Falls Free Wisconsin provides:

- Virtual falls-risk assessments and interactive resources to educate and empower older adults to maintain independence.

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- State and local public awareness campaigns to help Wisconsinites find and access falls prevention resources.
- Support and funding for local falls prevention programs and initiatives.
- Coordination of Wisconsin's statewide falls prevention coalition.
- Support and resources for emergency service and health professionals.
- Data to support partners and the public with accurate information about the scope and impact of falls and effective intervention strategies.
- Sustainability and expansion of Stepping On — **an evidence-based program reducing falls by 31%.**[2] To date, over 24,700 people in Wisconsin have participated in the Stepping On program. Conservatively, Stepping On alone **saves almost $1 million in healthcare costs each year in Wisconsin.**[3]

Health Impact and Cost:

- $1 billion is spent annually on falls-related health costs in Wisconsin which includes Medicare, Medicaid, and out-of-pocket expenses.[4]
- More than 51,000 older people went to the emergency department due to a fall in 2023; over 11,000 were hospitalized.[5]
- Falls are a common cause of injury and disability, which are a common cause of both long-term nursing home admissions and rehabilitation stays – In Wisconsin, the median monthly cost for a semi-private room in a nursing home $10,646.[6]
- Falls and their related injuries have a significant physical and financial impact on family caregivers. A 2026 AARP revealed that family caregivers spend 27 hours per week on average on caregiving, and the economic value of family caregivers in Wisconsin is $11,100,000.[7]
- Falls have a major impact on emergency medical service (EMS) and health care providers. EMS providers responded to over 140,000 falls across the state making falls the top injury response in 2024, with over 10,000 more than in 2023. Over 20% of EMS responses were for older adult falls in 2024. The majority of these falls happened in the home.[8]

State investment will sustain the infrastructure needed to support local community-based falls prevention programs. WIHA partners with Wisconsin's aging and disability network, public health, and health care systems, training local agencies to implement programs that reduce falls risk. However, WIHA's local partners cannot deliver proven cost-effective programs without statewide coordination and support. Although these proven programs save lives and reduce long-term care costs, they are cost-prohibitive for individual county or tribal community organizations 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.

Together, we can increase falls resiliency! We can preserve independence — all while reducing the burden and costs to families, health care, and public safety.

Find this and other WAAN issue briefs at: https://gwaar.org/issues-and-initiatives

Sources: *(continued on page 3)*

Core member organizations

Aging and Disability Professionals Association of Wisconsin (ADPAW) • Alzheimer's Association Wisconsin Chapter Board on Aging and Long Term Care (BOALTC) • InControl Wisconsin
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 gwaar.org/waan.

Reducing Falls Among Older Wisconsinites Sources

1) CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/falls/data-research/index.html
2) 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.
3) WIHA By-the-Numbers 2024: https://wihealthyaging.org/about-wiha/reports/
4) WI DHS, Office of Health Informatics, 2023 data
5) WI DHS WISH - Injury-related health outcomes, Unintentional fall-related injuries. https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/wish/injury-ed/query.htm
6) Genworth: https://www.carescout.com/cost-of-care
7) AARP: https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/topics/ltss/family-caregiving/valuing-the-invaluable-2026-family-caregivers-contribution-reaches-1-trillion.doi.10.26419-2fppi.00402.001.pdf
8) WI DHS, Wisconsin EMS and Falls Report (2024). https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p03493-2024.pdf

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