

Florence County Alcohol & Other Drug Abuse and Mental Health Coalition

Increasing Community Capacity and Resources through Partnership

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Building a Culture of Health, County by County



Prepared by:
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Florence County, Wisconsin

Florence County is a small, predominantly White rural county in northeastern Wisconsin. Unlike the populous surrounding counties, the county has few resources spread across a large geographic area. On health outcome indicators, Florence County ranks as one of the least healthy counties in the state. Residents face limited access to public transportation, few social and human services, and a lack of mental healthcare providers. Residents often have to travel several hours to neighboring counties to access healthcare services. As one resident put it, “Proximity matters. Where you live in town determines your access to services.”



Fall in Florence County

In this county of 4,000 residents, rates of underage drinking, binge drinking, and prescription drug abuse are high. Youth in Florence County also have high rates of suicidal ideation. There is a shortage of mental health professionals in Florence, with only one mental health clinician serving the entire county.

Preventing Alcohol and Other Drug Use in Florence County

The Florence County Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Mental Health (AODA/MH) Coalition (“the coalition”) aims to educate and engage residents to decrease excessive alcohol use, prescription drug abuse, psychiatric hospitalizations, and completed suicides. Current efforts of the coalition primarily focus on substance use prevention and education and on early identification of mental health challenges among youth.

The coalition believes that prevention can reduce the demand for treatment and improve community health. As one coalition member explained, “Due to limited resources, the coalition is looking into prevention.” Focusing on prevention efforts also helps promote open conversations about substance use and mental health among youth and families and, in the process, reduce stigma about these topics. The coalition aims to change the social norms around substance use and mental health challenges, increase health-seeking behavior, and better coordinate limited resources.

FLORENCE COUNTY AODA/MH COALITION

Established in 2014

The Florence County Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Mental Health (AODA/MH) Coalition aims to keep Florence County safe and healthy.



FLORENCE COUNTY, WI

Geography: Rural

Population: 4,295

People of color: 4.4%

Median Household Income: \$47,058

Using School-Based Efforts to Improve the Health of Youth and Families

The coalition has a specific focus on preventing substance use and identifying mental health challenges early among youth. Stigma makes it difficult for community members to openly discuss mental health and substance use challenges and seek the support they need. A delay in receiving treatment results in prolonged, untreated symptoms go undiagnosed, which makes recovery more challenging. The coalition's initiatives are designed to meet youth and families in the community. Prevention initiatives equip youth with strategies and socio-emotional skills they can use to help cope with mental health challenges. The majority of free programs are delivered in partnership with local schools and school districts.

The coalition hosts school-based workshops on the topics of antibullying, stress, and substance use. Past events have included a sponsored art and writing contest for K-12 students focused on art that elevates the concept of hope, which the coalition sees as a protective factor against substance misuse. The coalition's evidence-based Dose of Reality initiative benefits youth and caregivers by exposing youth to the harms of painkiller abuse and preparing caregivers to recognize the signs of prescription misuse and engage in conversations with their children about drugs. The coalition has also facilitated Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR), a suicide prevention training, for school staff and adults who support Florence County youth.

Through school-based programming, the coalition expands students' and families' access to prevention services and information. Free programming targeting youth and families in the schools can enable the coalition to reach more residents. The coalition offers materials in Spanish to reach Florence County's small population of Spanish-speaking students. The membership of the coalition is comprised of service providers who live and work in Florence County; their close connection to the community creates an intimate understanding of the priorities and challenges impacting members of the community.

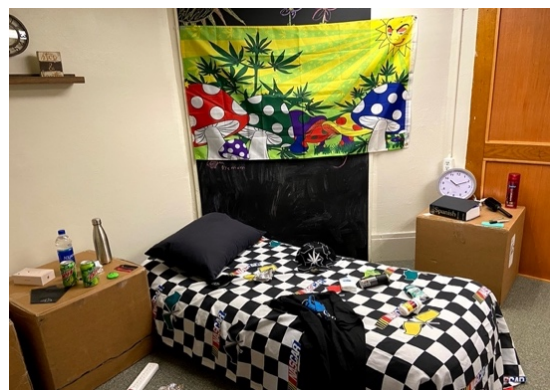


Keeping It REAL program

One of the Florence County AODAMH Coalition's most successful and continuous programs is the Keeping It REAL program. The program is a substance use prevention program modeled after the evidence-based Dose of Reality Tour program. The intended audience for the Keeping It REAL program is youth, ages 10-17, and their parents. Youth highly praise the program each year, especially the featured speakers. The ability to reach youth and their families increases the impact of the program and fosters an environment for youth and families to have open conversations about substance use and mental health.



Dose of Reality prescription- drug takeback table



Mock bedroom, used to equip parents with knowledge on where to look for hidden drugs

“In a smaller community, the school district is part of what makes them run. Here there is one elementary, middle, and high [school]. If parents are struggling, kids are struggling.”

– Zach Wedge, Florence County School District

Bringing Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Services through Collective Action

In a small rural area like Florence County, the health department plays an important role in convening providers and local stakeholders. The county prioritized mental health and substance use in the 2013 Community Health Assessment process, which resulted in the formation of two separate coalitions—one on mental health and another focused on alcohol and other drug abuse. Recognizing the connection between these health concerns and the limited county resources, the coalitions consolidated in 2014. The member organizations rotate facilitation responsibilities to foster shared ownership. Currently, the Human Services Department serves as the coalition’s facilitator.

The success of the coalition is rooted in the high level of cooperation and resource sharing among its members. The coalition model helps provide organizations, often with limited capacity and resources, the opportunity to partner and expand their impact. This coordination allows each organization to leverage resources, share information about service gaps and trends, and expand its reach through additional communication channels. The coalition members often utilize the network to promote organizational events or share knowledge of emerging resources. One coalition member shared that their organization is “so small, and with the coalition [they] are able to specifically focus on AODA and MH issues and reach out to partners to help with specific initiatives.” The coalition’s shared responsibility results from each member having an individual and collective interest in the health of the community that many coalition members call home. The connectedness of the coalition members is vital, as one member described: “We either learn to work together, or we fall apart.”

“Through the years, we have worked really hard to get those [behavioral health] services available. We knew we had issues but didn’t have resources.”

– Florence County AODA/MH Coalition Focus Group Participant

One of the coalition’s most impactful collective actions is increasing access to mental health and substance use services to address the significant gaps in treatment services. Florence County has only one mental health provider. This clinician noted the “challenge for the [county’s] youth, [who] don’t have access for psychological assessments besides what the school provides for learning disability accommodations.” The coalition creates additional mental health resources to support prevention and expand access to community support. For example, the coalition hosts evidence-based Youth Mental Health First Aid trainings. These trainings aim to reduce mental health stigma and build the capacity of community members to provide support for mental health and substance use concerns. The coalition has also used the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model to bring behavioral health assessments to youth in schools. In expanding access to school-based mental health services, the coalition aims to remove barriers to treatment and support early intervention.

Valuing Local Trusted Data

The coalition has used County Health Rankings and Roadmaps (CHR&R) resources during the formative stages and to track progress in the county. Data from the County Health Rankings informed the Community Health Assessment process, which led Florence County stakeholders to focus on addressing substance use and mental health concerns. The coalition uses the excessive-alcohol data from CHR&R as an indicator of the coalition's impact.

Given the county's small population, quantitative data does not provide an accurate or comprehensive assessment of how the county is doing on substance use and mental health indicators. An example shared by one coalition member is that "suicide gets lumped in with accidents. Therefore, we can't do community safety planning because we don't have the nuanced data." The county's small size often leads to its data not being provided at the micro level. To address this barrier, the coalition relies on the expertise of its members to provide community-level data and insights on trends they have noticed through service provision. For example, the Florence County Human Services Department provides more regularly updated local alcohol and other drug data than the county-level County Health Rankings data does. By the time the coalition members have access to County Health Rankings data, it may be outdated compared to real-time updates from the coalition members. The coalition members are viewed as trusted community experts for offering real-time and localized insights that may not show up in quantitative data.

The coalition leverages its partnership with the school district to obtain data on the emerging needs of youth with regard to alcohol and other drug abuse and mental health. This data guides the development of new programs and supports the coalition in identifying topics for future awareness programs and improving existing resources. The coalition demonstrates the powerful impact of the value of coordinating scarce resources. By meeting youth and families where they are at, the coalition is expanding access to supports and preventing future substance use and mental health concerns. To sustain its impact, the coalition needs investment resources that recognize and respect the uniqueness of its rural community.

FLORENCE COUNTY AODA/MH COALITION

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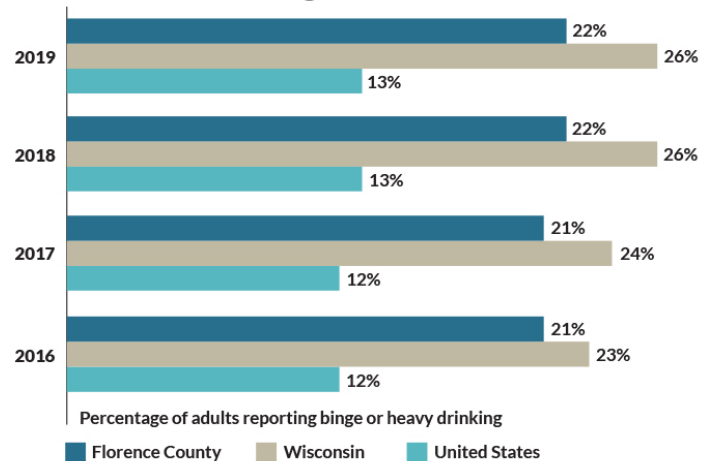
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Excerpt from Florence County's 2020 CHA/CHIP report that featured CHR&R Ranking data.

Alcohol and Drug Use Florence County Health Department



Source: County Rankings and Roadmaps (2019)

Binge drinking or heavy alcohol use among adults within the past 30 days in Florence County is lower than the state, but above the nation.

"We want a national organization to recognize the difference and uniqueness of small and rural counties and the needs we may have. We deserve the same level of services that larger counties, like Milwaukee County, may receive."

-Jen Steber, AODA/MH Coalition Member