

2020 TOP RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AWARD WINNERS



Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network (WEESSN)

Vernon and Monroe Counties has been selected to receive the 2020 Wisconsin Top Rural Development Initiative award, one of two awards presented in 2020 by Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc. The presentation was made at a private ceremony following the cancellation of the Wisconsin Rural Summit due to the COVID virus.



Kickapoo Conversations launched Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network (WEESSN) with child care providers in January of 2019. Technology was used to help child care programs become more efficient and effective, with an embedded professional development model (so required continuing education can be responsive and done onsite, reducing travel and registration expenses) and creation of a highly qualified child care substitute teacher pool - Relief Squad - to address one of the biggest needs identified by providers.

The goal of WEESSN is to reduce program closure and turnover during a time of unprecedented decline in regulated child care programs. By saving programs time and money, by streamlining services through technology, by providing qualified substitute care, and offering site-specific needed supports, child care programs can thrive so children, families, and communities can also flourish.

WRP Board Member Steve Peterson presenting the 2020 TRDI Award to JoAnn Hayden, Area Coordinator - Wisconsin Early Childhood Association (r) and Vicar Michele Engh from Immanuel Lutheran Church - Viroqua (l)

"Our center has been a member of WEESSN since the beginning, and it has benefited us in many ways. They help us work toward more financial sustainability, through pooling resources, getting price breaks, and collaborating with other centers. They regularly disseminate information from the state, with additional guidance", said Jessica Anderson, Administrator of the Viroqua Children's House Montessori Preschool, LLC. *"I'm glad they were already up and running before the coronavirus pandemic, because they were extremely helpful in helping us understand the new regulations; they even had lawyers to advise the development of our new health checks and sick policies. They organized group chats, as well, so that we could help each other find the best solutions; and even got us donations of hand sanitizer at no cost! Childcare is under a lot of strain right now, and the Wisconsin Early Education Shared Services Network is a great resource,"* according to Anderson.

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More recently, two other communities (Dane and Milwaukee) launched the Shared Services Network as part of WEESN. Including the Vernon-Monroe County programs, the WEESN is serving 60 child care providers and over 900 children.

The group believes that when child care is strong and stable, communities thrive. Communities with high quality child care that is affordable and easy to access experience strong economic development because all interested parties can be in the workforce.

“Wisconsin Rural Partners (WRP) recognizes the need for quality child care services in rural communities and applauds Kickapoo Conversations and the WEESN program as an outstanding example of the many local efforts across the state to improve the lives of citizens in rural Wisconsin,” said Sandy Decker, WRP president. “These types of projects are notable, showcasing the variety and breadth of successful local efforts to enhance the quality of life in the rural areas of our state.”



The Grantsburg Revitalization Operation (GRO)



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The GRO organization was formed in the spring of 2014 and is focusing on the renewal of Grantsburg WI. The efforts of GRO are multi-faceted. While working on growing community resources for a diverse population, the goal is to grow the population and provide housing for these individuals once they

decide that Grantsburg is a good place to live.

Wisconsin Rural Partners (WRP) is the state’s federally-designated rural development council. Committed to improving the quality of life in rural Wisconsin, WRP is a non-partisan forum for identifying, discussing, and addressing rural issues. Through collaborations with a wide array of partners, including local, county, state, tribal, and federal governments, as well as for-profit businesses, non-profit organizations, and rural citizens, WRP fosters and promotes locally-based solutions to rural needs and issues.



This is the twentieth year that WRP has recognized Wisconsin’s Top Rural Development Initiatives. “The program is designed to identify, highlight, and share innovative models, practices and programs that have a positive impact on rural Wisconsin communities,” said Errin Welty, WRP past-president. “WRP created the program to provide a mechanism for rural communities to learn from each other and we are pleased to report that many of the award winners are still actively operating in their communities.”