



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

## How Do We Address Homelessness In Our Communities?

**Key Findings from Homelessness Deliberative Dialogues**

# OVERVIEW OF LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

## GOALS OF LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

In the fall of 2023, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) launched the Let’s Talk, Marathon County project.<sup>1</sup> Let’s Talk, Marathon County is aimed at fostering constructive conversations among residents on a variety of public issues.<sup>2</sup>

1. Create spaces for residents of central Wisconsin to address issues that matter in a civil and constructive manner.
2. Build and sustain a community culture of civil dialogue around important issues.
3. Improve feelings of trust among fellow residents despite differences in viewpoints.
4. Train local facilitators with capacity to moderate future deliberative dialogues.

The Let’s Talk team assembled a panel of 94 community members from across Marathon County to meet in groups of approximately 10 people to engage in conversations about public issues, starting first with *How Do We Support Youth Mental Health in Our Communities?* In the spring of 2024, additional dialogues were held on the topic of *How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?* Different topics will be discussed over the next several years. The goal was to select a panel of community members who reflected a range of political affiliations and ensured geographic representation from rural and urban areas of the county, as well as a cross-section of demographics.

## WHAT ARE DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES?

Let’s Talk, Marathon County uses a deliberative dialogue process to facilitate conversations among community members. Deliberation—sometimes called “choice work”—is a way for the public to weigh together various approaches to solving problems and find courses of action consistent with what communities and individuals hold valuable. An issue guide was provided to the participants and it consisted of background information, including a curated page of national, state, and county statistics on homelessness. In addition, it outlined three potential approaches for addressing homelessness: (1) prioritize housing and basic needs; (2) invest in rehabilitation; and (3) encourage opportunity and accountability. For each of the three approaches, the issue guide provided possible actions, as well as possible drawbacks.

## HOMELESSNESS DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES

In March 2024, seven deliberative dialogues were conducted on the topic of *How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?* Dialogues were held in three locations in Wausau, as well as one each in Marathon City and Mosinee; one was held virtually. Within each dialogue, the goal was to include approximately 10 panelists. In addition, each dialogue was structured to reflect a distribution of approximately 30% liberal, 40% moderate, and 30% conservative participants.

Community Member Deliberative Dialogues						
Political Affiliation	Let’s Talk Panelists	Percent (%)	Registered for Dialogue	Percent (%)	Participated in Dialogue	Percent (%)
Liberal	27	29	20	31	17	32
Moderate	40	43	27	42	23	43
Conservative	27	29	18	28	13	25
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100</b>

A total of 65 of the 94 Let’s Talk panelists registered for one of the homelessness dialogues; after accounting for cancellations and no-shows, a total of 53 individuals participated.

<sup>1</sup> Let’s Talk, Marathon County is fully funded by New Pluralists: <https://newpluralists.org/>. WIPPS was chosen from a pool of almost 800 applicants and no taxpayer dollars were used for this project. More information can be found at: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>.

## PANELISTS' VIEWS OF THE DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES

At the conclusion of each deliberative dialogue, participants were asked to complete a brief, 20-question survey about their experiences engaging in the deliberative dialogue. The questions were designed to gather information about whether the dialogues expanded participants' views on the issue of homelessness; helped them consider tradeoffs and solutions; increased appreciation for diverse viewpoints; and increased interest in engaging in community issues. Overall, 100% of dialogue participants completed the survey. The following are highlights of the participant's feedback.

- **A majority of the Let's Talk panelists who participated in the dialogues reported that the dialogue helped them better understand the issue of homelessness and also helped them to evaluate the pros and cons of potential solutions.** Seventy-one percent (71%) reported that participating in the dialogue helped them better understand the issue "quite a bit" or a "great deal" and 68% reported that the dialogue helped them evaluate the pros and cons of potential solutions "quite a bit" or "a great deal."
- **The dialogues were characterized by low levels of disagreement and considerable common ground.** Seventy-three percent (73%) of the Let's Talk dialogue participants reported "none" to "a little" disagreement and 94% reported "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of common ground; about one-fourth (27%) reported "some" disagreement.
- **The dialogues helped Let's Talk panelists expand their views on the issue of how to address homelessness in their communities.** About the topic of homelessness, many (56%) reported that they considered perspectives or viewpoints they hadn't considered before "quite a bit" or "a great deal." Ninety-one percent (91%) responded that they valued the input provided by the other participants "quite a bit" or "a great deal"; 47% felt that their input was valued "quite a bit" or "a great deal" by the other participants.
- **The dialogues were characterized by high levels of respect, including for those with differing views.** A majority (82%) of participants reported that those with differing views acted "very respectfully" towards one another.
- **The dialogues helped participants appreciate diverse viewpoints and helped them develop greater comfort with and trust in fellow community members with differing views.** About three out of four (73%) of the community members reported that participating in the dialogues made them value viewpoints that differ from theirs "somewhat more" or "much more" than before the dialogue. Seventy-seven percent (77%) reported being "somewhat more" or "much more" comfortable interacting with community members with different viewpoints.
- **Dialogue participants reported greater confidence in their community's ability to engage in civil conversations.** A large majority (83%) reported that participating in the dialogue made them "somewhat more" or "much more" confident that their community can engage in civil conversations about homelessness.
- **In general, participants reported an increased interest in learning more about what makes a healthy community and an increased interest in engaging with fellow community members about the issue of homelessness.** When considering percentage of community members who selected "quite a bit" or "a great deal," a majority reported that participating in the dialogues made them want to learn more about the issue of homelessness (81%); talk more with fellow community members about the issue (75%); collaborate more with fellow community members (79%); and be more involved in decision-making in their community about the issue (71%).

# PANELISTS' INSIGHTS ON HOMELESSNESS

This following summarizes key themes and panelists' insights from the seven Let's Talk dialogues held on the topic of *How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?* Detailed reports can be located at: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>.

## Summary of Let's Talk Deliberative Dialogue Participant Views about Actions to Address Homelessness<sup>3</sup>

Issue Approach and Action Items	Let's Talk Deliberative Dialogues						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3/6/2024	3/12/2024	3/14/2024	3/18/2024	3/23/2024	3/25/2024	3/28/2024
<b>APPROACH 1: PRIORITIZE HOUSING AND BASIC NEEDS</b>							
Increase housing search and navigation assistance	Support		Support	Oppose	Support	Support	
Increase emergency rental assistance		Mixed	Mixed	Support	Mixed		Support
Increase eviction prevention initiatives	Mixed	Oppose	Support	Mixed	Mixed		Mixed
Experiment with publicly-funded monthly stipends		Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	
Limit zoning and land use policies to increase affordable housing			Oppose	Mixed	Oppose	Support	
<b>APPROACH 2: INVEST IN REHABILITATION</b>							
Educate the public about the struggles faced by the homeless	Support	Mixed	Support	Mixed	Support	Support	Support
Establish and grow mentorship programs	Support	Support	Mixed	Support	Support	Support	
Increase vocational training programs; help develop skills		Mixed	Mixed	Support	Support		Support
Train and hire more mental health and addiction professionals	Support	Mixed		Oppose	Support	Support	
Maintain and expand supportive home settings	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Support		Mixed
<b>APPROACH 3: ENCOURAGE OPPORTUNITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY</b>							
Expand bus routes and hours to access jobs and services	Support	Mixed	Support	Mixed	Mixed	Support	Support
Incentivize employers to hire unhoused individuals	Oppose	Support	Support	Oppose	Support		
Expand police training/operations with mental health experts	Mixed		Support	Mixed	Mixed		
Protect public places; enforce laws for urination, loitering	Mixed		Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Oppose	Oppose
Promote free financial literacy courses			Support		Oppose		

If a cell is blank, the action item was not discussed by the group or was only raised by one person without affirmation for or against by other participants.

- **Participants generally agreed that addressing issues of homelessness in their communities requires a combination of action items drawing from multiple approaches and perspectives.** The complex nature of the issue requires a multi-faceted approach that includes elements of meeting basic needs; prioritizing stable and affordable housing; addressing substance use and mental health disorders; and encouraging opportunity and personal accountability.
- **Resource limitations and financial constraints pose barriers to addressing homelessness in communities, yet many noted that government entities, organizations, and communities could do a better job of collaborating and sharing resources.** Leadership, collaboration, and public engagement are needed in order to take action on issues of homelessness, including at the county, city, and community levels.
- **Some homeless individuals may not want assistance or they may not be ready to receive help due to mental health or substance use concerns. Others questioned if there is a larger issue of homeless individuals not necessarily knowing where to go in order to obtain help.** Efforts to address homelessness need to consider the perspectives of those experiencing (or who have experienced) homelessness.

<sup>3</sup> There were additional action items for Approach 1 that emerged during the discussion and had support, including: work with landlords to consider creative lease options; create layers of more affordable housing options; refurbish abandoned buildings, including old hotels (proposed in 2 groups); consider tiny houses; increase community engagement and establish a housing coalition; create a resource center or "clearinghouse"; and provide wrap-around services with case management (proposed in 2 groups). An additional action item raised by one group during the discussion of Approach 2 was to decentralize services and implement mobile services. There were no additional action items were proposed for Approach 3.

## APPROACH 1 – PRIORITIZE HOUSING AND BASIC NEEDS

- **In multiple dialogues, there was general support for investments in housing search and navigation assistance in order to connect those looking for housing with available opportunities.** However, without an inventory of housing that is affordable, developing a more centralized program to connect people to housing will not be productive.
- **Many participants expressed concerns about the lack of affordable housing in the Wausau area, thereby generating a need to create more affordable, varied, and layered housing options.** Some participants expressed concerns about high rents and the need to limit how much landlords can increase rents.
- **Participants expressed mixed support for programs to increase emergency rental assistance during difficult times, noting the need to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to ensure longer-term stability.** Case management should be considered along with temporary help since individuals may need help navigating systems. Participants also expressed concerns about the sustainability of emergency funding programs.
- **Eviction prevention initiatives, such as placing limits or caps on penalties for not making rental payments on time, had mixed support.** There needs to be a balance between the rights and protections for renters, as well as for landlords who should be able to evict delinquent tenants, when appropriate. Landlords need rights to ensure that people are being responsible and keeping-up the places they are renting out.
- **Participants had mixed views about experimenting with providing homeless community members with publicly-funded monthly stipends to be used for housing and other basic needs.** There were concerns about how to ensure that funds were being used as intended and the potential to create a dependency on government assistance. Others noted that investing in such a program might generate long-term savings by keeping people out of jail.
- **Reducing or eliminating residential zoning and land use policies in order to increase affordable housing options was generally not supported, with some expressing concerns that such policies could isolate homeless individuals in geographic areas.** Some preferred other approaches like refurbishing abandoned buildings or tiny homes.

## APPROACH 2 – INVEST IN REHABILITATION

- **Addressing the root causes of homelessness, especially mental health issues, was recognized as being an essential component of tackling the broader problem.** The relationships between mental health, addiction, and homelessness were woven throughout the dialogues. There was support for training and hiring more social workers, case managers, and mental health professionals, but a range of views of how these resources should be focused.
- **Participants generally expressed support for efforts to educate the public about the difficulties and struggles that those experiencing homelessness face and to encourage residents to treat homeless individuals with dignity.** Educating the public to counteract stereotypes is important.
- **Participants expressed support for mentorship programs that match individuals overcoming addiction with someone who will check on them and help them with tasks, like job searches.** However, concerns were raised about the qualifications of mentors and whether this should be a paid or volunteer-based role.
- **Increasing vocational training programs can help the homeless develop skills for jobs in industries facing workforce shortages such as retail, food service, production, and assembly.** However, there may be challenges in implementing effective training programs among a population that does not have stability and transportation.
- **Participants had a range of views and perspectives on the benefits of maintaining and expanding supportive home settings (like community-based residential group homes) to help individuals thrive in a community setting.** For some, they sounded like the creation of “camps”, which seemed isolating. Others recognized that some may benefit from the support and sense of community that could be provided.



### APPROACH 3 – ENCOURAGE OPPORTUNITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Limitations with transportation, especially bussing, were viewed as a considerable challenge and barrier to addressing homelessness.** Participants recognized the need to improve and expand transportation so that community members, including homeless individuals, can access training, jobs, and health services.
- **Participants expressed support for involving employers in discussions about housing and transportation challenges.** However, incentivizing employers to hire or providing housing for the homeless had mixed support.
- **Participants value community safety and the rights of individuals to feel safe, but had mixed views on the role of expanding police officer training and operations with mental health professionals [such as Crisis Assessment Response Teams (CART)].** Many had concerns about police interactions with homeless. They also felt that promoting policies and enforcing laws for offenses such as destruction of property, public urination, and loitering would have mixed success since this would not address the causes of homelessness.
- **While there was relatively little discussion of promoting free financial literacy courses as way to provide skills to achieve financial independence, those who did support it mentioned the need to offer it community-wide.** Financial literacy could be tied to other programs offering housing assistance or vocational training. Concerns were noted that the topic may be difficult depending on the participants’ education levels.

### TERMINOLOGY

Readers will note that throughout this report, for the sake of consistency, the terms “homeless” or “homelessness” are used when describing this topic. We recognize that other terms such as “unhoused,” or more precise terms such as “unsheltered” or “sheltered” homeless may apply in certain contexts.

### RESOURCES

As a courtesy to readers interested in more information, we have provided these links to local organizations assisting those experiencing homelessness. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive list or representative of all community resources.

Bridge Street Mission – [www.bridgestreetmission.org](http://www.bridgestreetmission.org)

Catholic Charities – [www.cclse.org/ausau/](http://www.cclse.org/ausau/)

CW Solutions - [www.changewithin.net/](http://www.changewithin.net/)

Gospel TLC – [www.gospeltlc.org/](http://www.gospeltlc.org/)

Hagar House – [www.thehagarhouse.org/](http://www.thehagarhouse.org/)

North Central CAP Services – [www.northcentralcap.org/](http://www.northcentralcap.org/)

Salvation Army – <https://centralusa.salvationarmy.org/ausau/>

Wausau Community Development Authority – [www.wausauwi.gov/your-government/community-development](http://www.wausauwi.gov/your-government/community-development)

Wausau Free Clinic - [www.wausaufreeclinic.com/](http://www.wausaufreeclinic.com/)

The Women’s Community – [www.womenscommunity.org/](http://www.womenscommunity.org/)