

COMMUNITY NEEDS REPORT



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



2026 Sheboygan County Community Needs Forum

Positive Youth Development

Introduction

On June 17 and 18, 2026, Sheboygan County hosted a Community Needs Forum focusing on the Community Development and Positive Youth Development Institutes with participation from representatives across local community organizations. Attendees included local government officials and leaders of youth organizations. They engaged in facilitated discussions around current goals, challenges, existing and needed resources, hard to reach audiences, and opportunities for collaboration. The purpose of this report is to highlight community-identified needs relevant to the Positive Youth Development Institute (PYD), and to demonstrate how programming from Sheboygan County Extension could address these gaps.

Forum Discussion Overview

Although youth came up throughout the conversation, the main questions Extension asked were:

- What potential **benefits** could come from more active youth involvement?
- What **concerns** would you have about youth participation?
- How could you envision youth being involved in **your municipality**?

For Example:

- Certain committees or projects
- Elections (ages 16+ can be a poll worker)
- Voting information or registration efforts
- Planning Decisions

Forum participants connected efforts to involve youth in civic education with a potential increase in adult public participation down the road. Youth in Governance programs are one way Extension does that in other counties, but no municipality present expressed a desire to have young people serving on elected boards. Instead, they were more **interested in increasing resident engagement with local governments**. Three current efforts were noted as good examples: 1) The Town of Wilson's partnership with Extension to bring more young people's opinions into their comprehensive plan review is a recent example. 2) County Government Day, co-organized by Extension, which involved three school districts this year. There was interest in expanding the reach of that activity so that more students could participate. 3) The Teen Court coordinated by

Sheboygan County Health and Human Services with North and South High students and Judge Natasha Torry. Trained peers interview students who have admitted to wrongdoing at school. The peers determine consequences that will address the root cause and invite repair of harm done. Later, the same teen serves as a peer for others coming through teen court.

Participants identified the barrier of **local governments finding it difficult to connect with school staff**, who are already busy and programmed in a tight curriculum, clubs, and sports schedule. Since some area schools count student service hours or require them, forum participants felt that service projects initiated in schools could be more closely tied to their governments' work if there was regular communication. It would be nice for municipalities to benefit from students' efforts and for students in turn to see their work benefitting the larger community. While many government projects and meetings are slow and procedural, projects like park design or improvements could be directly applicable to kids with easily visible finished products.

If students are involved, participants believe parents would also take more of an interest which would increase overall engagement into the decisions the town boards are making. They would like parents to bring kids to board or plan commission meetings, voting opportunities, and even encourage them to work on campaigns to get a sense of what it means to be elected. Participants notice a difference in the way municipal halls are used now. They used to be community centers where people gathered for basketball and other recreational activities outside of government meetings. That is no longer the case in most halls now, and it's puzzling to find ways to recreate the same sense of togetherness and ownership of the municipality that contributed to in the past.

Additionally, it seems to participants that many adults don't know how or when to communicate with their local officials. Local officials work for their residents and want to know how to do better, but they are often seen as neutral or even as adversarial by residents who don't pay close attention to their work. **Demystifying local government** for young people could help remove barriers or anxiety residents feel about talking with their leaders or even running for office themselves. The age of current boards is noticeably older in the county, and only one county board supervisor seat was contested in the April 2026 election.

Another challenge participants identified is the **limited availability of both paid and volunteer workers in local government**. Rural townships are starting to lose poll workers as many older adults retire from that role. Wisconsin law allows people age 16 or over to serve as poll workers, which participants thought could be another opportunity to teach young people about the process of voting, the effort that goes into fair elections, and the potential to work in local government as adults. Clerks and building inspectors are the most sought after professions now, according to Sheboygan County's rural townships, and it is not usually young people who take these jobs.

Summary of Community Needs

- There is overall low public participation in local government activities such as opportunities for resident comments and running for office.
- With low participation comes poor understanding among residents of the role of local government. This leads to more alienation and blame rather than involvement in public processes.
- Local government officials would like to connect with youth, but contacting nearby schools is too complicated by their tight schedules and multiple staff.

- Most people involved in local government are older. It is especially hard to find people for Clerk and Building Inspector jobs and poll worker volunteer positions.
- There is a concern about succession planning in local governments with few younger people involved as residents, employees, or elected leaders.

Extension Alignment

The half-time Positive Youth Development educator will shift from a sole focus on Youth Empowerment and add Career and College Readiness. This reflects the needs identified by local government interest holders indicating both low engagement in public processes but also low interest in volunteer, paid, or elected roles.

The PYD Educator will:

- Seek ways to better connect school staff with nearby municipalities for potential collaborations.
 - Explore opportunities for teens to be poll workers for the Towns of Sherman and Holland (and others as interested).
 - Continue conversations to plan more County Government Days involving more school districts.
 - Continue seeking youth input for the Town of Wilson's comprehensive plan update.
- Explore potential opportunities with [Inspire WI](#) for teens to learn more about the jobs of municipal clerk and building inspector through job shadows or internships.
- Continue to provide educational opportunities in which teens grow their sense of confidence in their ability to make decisions that are good for themselves (**self-efficacy**), their future (**career**), and their community (**leadership**).

Additional Extension Resources to support Sheboygan County

- [Youth as Partners in Civic Leadership](#): annual state conference for groups of high-school age youth and adults sharing decision-making roles in communities, schools, and organizations. **Next:** Nov. 13-15, 2026 at Upham Woods, Wisconsin Dells.
- [Summer Academy](#): This hand-on experience helps youth explore career and hobby pathways in various fields while building friendships and networks with people across the state. **Next:** June 13-17, 2027, UW-Madison
- [Wisconsin Restorative Justice Summit](#): annual statewide educational forum that brings together young people and youth-serving professionals to collaborate in advancing equitable, evidence-based restorative justice and peacemaking practices that aim to transform youth service, program, and communities in Wisconsin. **Next:** July 2027