



2026 Buffalo County 4-H Countywide Service-Learning Project Overview

“Connections Across Generations”: Supporting Older Adults in Care Facilities

Project Overview: The 2026 Buffalo County 4-H Countywide Service-Learning Project focuses on meaningful service to older adults living in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and memory care communities. This project gives youth hands-on opportunities to build empathy, develop leadership, and strengthen community across generations.

4-H clubs will learn all about the needs of older adults, plan a club-level project, take action through direct and indirect service, and reflect on their impact. Activities may include visits, enrichment programming, comfort-item creation, and much more.

Project Theme: “Connection Across Generations”: This theme emphasizes reducing loneliness, increasing joy, and building meaningful bonds between youth and older adults through ongoing engagement and shared experiences.



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
BUFFALO COUNTY

Understanding the Audience: Older Adults in Care Facilities

Learning directly from those being served ensures the project meets authentic needs.

Clubs should explore:

- Who are the residents we hope to serve?
- What daily challenges might they face?
- What brings them joy?
- What activities are most meaningful and accessible?
- What support does the facility need most?
- Are there any donations the facility needs?

Ways to Learn:

- Talk with the Activities Director
- Invite staff to a meeting or a guest speaker
- Read about aging and dementia-friendly practices

Why Meeting an Authentic Need Matters

Understanding and meeting an authentic need is at the heart of meaningful service-learning . When clubs take time to learn directly from residents and staff, they ensure their project is truly helpful rather than based on assumptions. This teaches youth to listen and respond with empathy, honors residents' dignity and preferences, builds trust with facilities, and make impact visible. Residents feel valued, staff feel supported, and youth know their actions make a real difference.

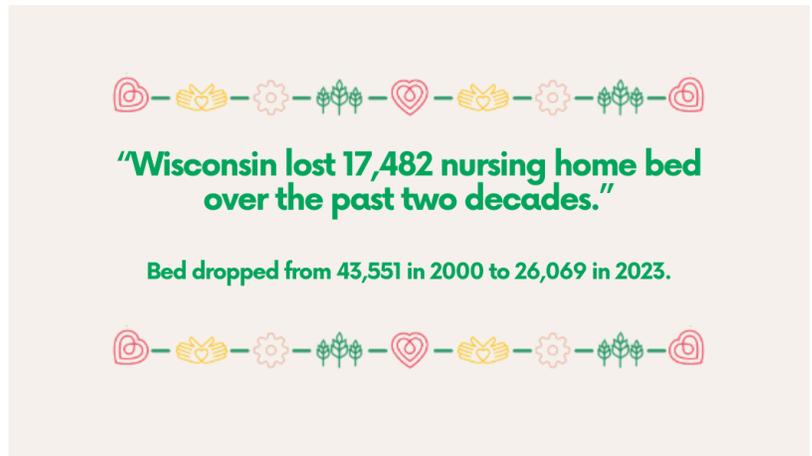


Why This Work Matters: The reality for Older Adults in Wisconsin

Wisconsin's older adult population is growing quickly, and many rely on nursing homes, assisted living, or long-term care facilities, or even daily support. These statistics help paint the picture of why 4-H youth can make such a meaningful impact through companionship, connection, and care.

Growing Need in Wisconsin

- Statewide occupancy sits at 68.5%, meaning facilities operate with fewer residents but still struggle to maintain staffing and engagement resources.
- Wisconsin has 325 active skilled nursing facilities with 17,352 residents as of January 2025.
- The population of adults 75 and older has risen steadily, increasing by 30,000 people per decade since 2000.



Why Your Service Makes an Impact

Your club's visits, handmade crafts, conversations, and kindness directly support:

- Older adults who may not have regular visitors
- Overworked staff who appreciate youth helping with activities
- Families who want their loved ones to feel connected and valued
- Residents experiencing loneliness, memory loss, or mobility challenges



In a state where the senior population is growing rapidly, and long-term care resources are stretched thin, your time, compassion, and presence matter more than ever.

Service Track Options for Clubs

This service project is designed as a six-month experience, giving clubs the flexibility to participate in ways that fit their schedules, group sizes, and access to facilities. Before choosing a track, clubs should know they are welcome to partner with another 4-H club in Buffalo County if they would like to visit or serve alongside others for additional support. Because Buffalo County has limited elderly-care facilities, clubs may also select a nearby location that best meets their needs, such as Winona, Wabasha, or other surrounding communities or even do some service learning at in-home facilities. The following service track options and planning questions will help your club determine which approach is the best fit and how to build a meaningful, well-coordinated partnership with the facility you choose.

Track 1: Relationship Track

Best for clubs to visit in person

- 2-4 visits
- Activities include games, crafts, music, conversation, etc.
- Reflection after each visit

Track 2: Enrichment Track

- 1 visit and 1-2 enrichment kits or decoration projects
- Reflection at conclusion

Feature	Track 1: Relationships	Track 2: Enrichment
# of visits	2-4	1
Good for	Clubs that want ongoing resident interaction	Clubs with limited access to time
Reflection	After each visit	On reflection at the end
Best if...	You can travel multiple times	The facility is far away

Activity Menu for Clubs

Below is a menu of in-person and indirect service options. Clubs may choose any combination based on capacity and facility needs

Direct Service Activities

Connection & Companionship

- One-on-one or small group conversation
- Share stories, photos, or hobbies
- “Adopt-a-Grandfriend” paired visits
- Reading aloud: short stories, poems, or news articles

Games & Social Activities

- Bingo
- Card games (Uno, Go Fish, Rummy)
- Trivia hour
- Dominoes, Yahtzee, Large Jenga

Creative Arts

- Painting or simple crafts
- Seasonal decorating
- Adult coloring sheets

Music & Movement

- Youth music performances
- Group sing-alongs
- Simple chair stretches (led with staff approval)
- Rhythm instruments (shakers, tambourines)

Technology Help

- Assist with video calls to family (with staff supervision)
- Help set up music playlists

Comfort & Sensory

- Lap blanket gifting
- Guided sensory activities

Indirect Service Projects

Facility Support

- Door decorations
- Puzzle and craft kits
- Bulletin-board materials
- Seasonal decor

Comfort Items

- Lap blankets
- Grip socks
- Jumbo playing cards
- Easy-grip pens
- Tissues, lotion, and lip balm

Kindness/Comfort Kits (Examples)

- Crossword books
- Magazines
- Hard candies
- Tissues
- Small lotions
- Adult coloring books
- Markers/pens
- Cards & letters

Ongoing Relationship Builders

- Pen-pal letters
- Monthly birthday cards
- Seasonal crafts

Advocacy & Community Education

- Intergenerational interview project
- Write about the importance of supporting older adults

Participation (Be mindful of age-appropriate activities)

Ages 6-9

- Create cards and artwork
- Help assemble comfort kits
- Participate in songs, simple games, or show-and-tell
- Attend short, structured visit times

Ages 10-15

- Lead simple games or crafts with residents
- Help read stories aloud
- Help set up and run activity stations
- Assist with decorations, trivia, and enrichment kits

Ages 16-18

- Help coordinate planning with facility staff
- Lead intergenerational interview activities
- Support technology help (video calls, music playlists)

Families

- Support kits assembly
- Join group visits
- Participate in holiday events or craft days

Safety & Respect Guidelines

- Always follow facility rules and staff directions
- Respect resident privacy
- Stay home if sick
- Keep conversation positive and respectful

Countywide Impact Reporting

At the end of the 6-month project, clubs will be asked to share:

- Number of residents reached
- Number of visits, items, and kits delivered
- Photos (if permitted)
- Short stories or quotes
- Youth reflection highlights

Club Tools & Templates

Use the following pages as printable planning and reflection tools for the clubs participating in the 6-month service learning project.

Facility Contact Script (Phone or Email)

Phone Script:

Hello my name is _____ and I am calling from the _____ 4-H Club in Buffalo County. We're participating in a 6-month countywide service learning project focused on supporting older adults in care facilities through meaningful connection and enrichment. We would love to partner with your facility for a visit or an enrichment project. Who is the best person to speak with about activities or volunteer visits?

If you connect to the right person, continue:

We can offer (choose): games, simple crafts, music/sing-alongs, conversation visits, or assemble enrichment kits/seasonal decorations. We want to meet your residents' interests and your facility's needs. Could I ask a few questions and discuss possible dates/times?

Email Template:

Subject Line: 4-H Service Learning Partnership Opportunity

Hello [Name],

My name is [Your Name], and I am with the [Club Name] in Buffalo County. Our clubs are participating in a 6-month countywide service learning project focused on supporting older adults in care facilities through meaningful connections and enrichment activities. We would love to partner with [Facility Name] for either in-person visits or a combination of visits and enrichment kits/decorations.

We would like to plan activities that match your residents' interests and your facility's needs. If you are the right contact, would you be available for a brief call, or could you share preferred dates/time and any guidelines for volunteers?

Thank you for considering this partnership!

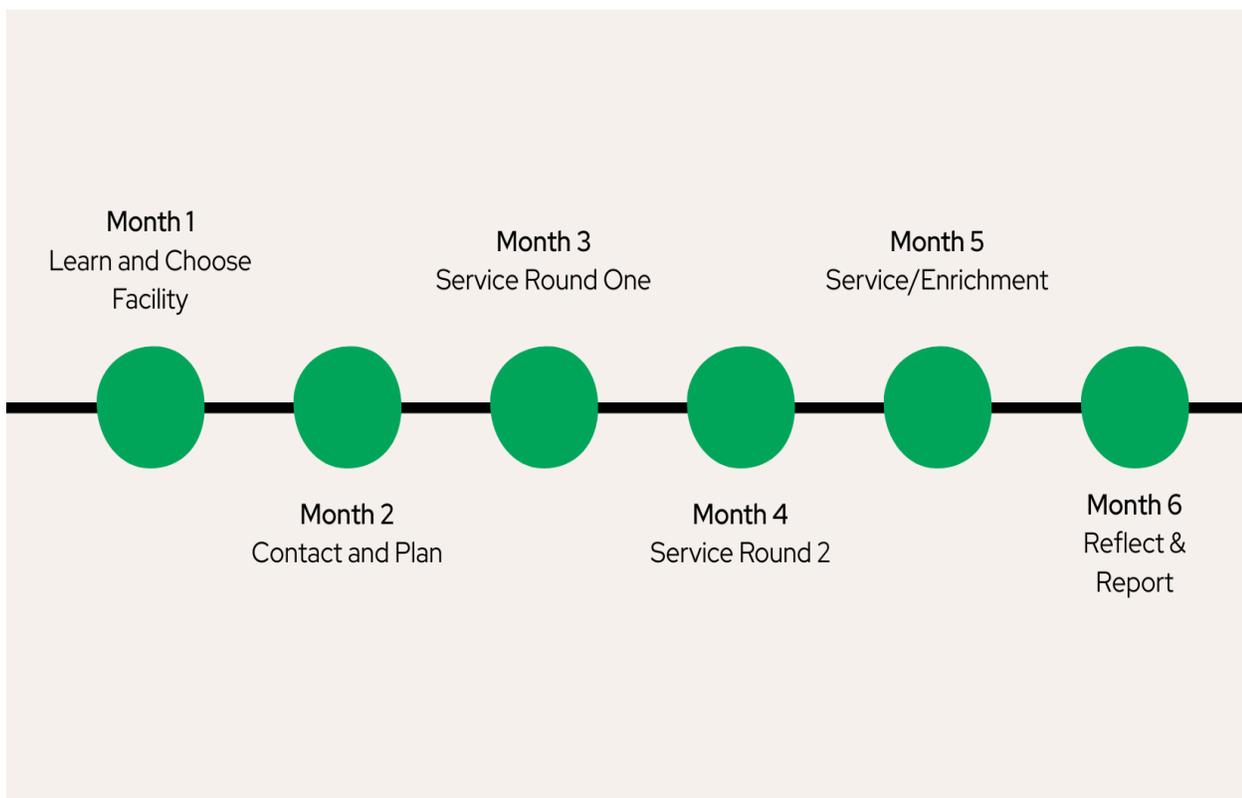
[Name] [Club] [Phone/Email]

Facility Planning Questions For Clubs to Use

When contacting a facility, clubs may ask:

- 1) What do your residents enjoy most?
- 2) What activities are most successful?
- 3) What types of groups do you welcome?
- 4) Is there a time of day that is preferred?
- 5) Are there items your facility always needs?
- 6) Are there photos allowed?
- 7) Is there anything we should avoid?
- 8) Do you have upcoming holidays or events we can support?

6 Month Project Timeline (Quick Visual)



Tip: Add your specific start and end months to the timeline.

Youth Visit Prep Guide

Before the visit:

- Dress neatly and comfortably. Wear closed-toe shoes.
- Bring only approved supplies.
- Review names/roles and your plan.
- Wash or sanitize your hands when you arrive and often during the visit.
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Conversation Starters

- What is something you loved doing when you were my age?
- Do you have a favorite season or holiday memory?
- What music did you enjoy growing up?
- What is something you are proud of?

During the visit:

- Speak clearly and kindly.
- Be patient; some residents may move or speak slowly.
- If someone repeats a story, listen again with respect.
- If a resident seems tired or upset, notify staff and gently redirect.

Inclusive & Respectful Communication (Dementia Friendly Tips)

- Approach from the front and introduce yourself.
- Use short sentences and simple choices.
- Sit at eye level to avoid appearing rushed.
- Always introduce yourself at each visit (many residents forget).
- Avoid correcting someone harshly and focus on feelings and comfort.
- Validate emotions (That sounds really important to you.)
- Use a calm tone, gentle humor, and give them time to respond.
- Always follow staff guidance.



Reflection Tools

Why Reflection Matters

Reflection helps youth make sense of their service experiences. It strengthens learning, helps them grow leadership and empathy skills, and ensures that clubs continue improving their approach. Through reflection, youth connect their actions to real needs, recognize their impact, and plan how to deepen their service in the future.

Reflection Prompts

Ask Youth

- What did you learn about older adults?
- What moment stood out to you?
- What would you change next time?

Ask the Facility (if possible)

- What did residents enjoy?
- How did the club's service help?
- What ideas would improve future visits?

Ask your Club

- What skills did we grow?
- What impact did we make?
- How can we continue supporting older adults?
- How did our service meet a real need?
- What did we learn about aging?
- What should we repeat next time? What should we change?

Quick Reflection:

1. One thing I noticed today was: _____
2. I felt most proud when: _____
3. I learned: _____
4. Next time, I want to: _____



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