



Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging | 1414 MacArthur Road, Suite B
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Testimony in support of Senate Bill 976 and Senate Bill 996

Thank you, Chair Tomczyk and committee members, for the opportunity to testify before you today in support of Senate Bill 976 (and Senate Bill 996).

I would also like to thank Senator James, along with Representative Snyder and members of the Elder Services Task Force, for their work and support in advancing falls prevention efforts here in Wisconsin.

My name is Jill Renken and I'm the Executive Director for the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging, which provides statewide coordination and support to falls prevention programming throughout the state.

Investing in falls prevention helps us stay active, independent, and connected as we age. Falls are the #1 cause of injury in older adults – a key driver of nursing home admissions, 911 calls, emergency department visits, and hospitalizations. Even minor falls create increased risk for more falls in the future, ultimately leading to serious injury and death.

While falls are common, they are NOT inevitable. Together, we can prevent a large percentage of them.

Senate Bill 976 (and Senate Bill 996), would provide \$600,000 in one-time grant funding to support the creation of community paramedicine programs in six communities and \$200,000 to the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging to continue statewide falls prevention work.

Community paramedicine and community-based falls prevention programming together form a well-rounded approach to reducing the burden of falls on our systems and families. They help move us from reacting to emergencies – to preventing them. Falls are one of the top reasons older adults call 911, and community paramedics are often the first to identify fall risks during home visits and lift assists. By connecting those individuals to proven, community-based falls prevention programs, we can prevent repeat falls, reduce emergency room visits and hospitalizations, lower healthcare costs, and help older adults stay safe and independent in their homes.

The evidence-based falls prevention programs we implement are specifically designed—and proven—to produce real behavior change.

Since the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging was founded, we've built a strong statewide network to deliver proven, evidence-based health programs. These programs improve quality of life and reduce health care costs.

To date, we've partnered with hundreds of local organizations to offer more than 5,000 workshops, reaching **over 51,000 participants**. Based on the health outcomes from these programs, we've helped Wisconsin save an estimated **\$38 million in health care costs**—that's an average of about **\$2 million every year**.

These statistics also have **incredible stories** behind them, one of those stories being from my own mother. Shortly after retirement, my mom started falling in her home. I encouraged her to take the **Stepping On program, which is proven to reduce falls risk by 31%**. After taking Stepping On at her local Aging and Disability Resource Center in Stevens Point, I noticed she was applying what she learned. She was doing her strength and balance exercises, talking to her health care team about adjusting some medications, and making some important home safety modifications. I can happily report she has not had a fall since - and it's been over 2 years!

As we age, we CAN maintain and even improve our quality of life. We see so many lives improve with these programs and services and need them to be both sustained AND more readily available in our Wisconsin communities!

Over the past decade, we've worked hard to diversify our funding, especially as grant dollars have decreased. We've made progress, but it's not enough to sustain this important work long-term. **State investment is critical** to maintain and grow these programs so that more communities can offer them and more older adults can benefit.

The need keeps growing. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services recently reported that emergency medical services responded to more than 140,000 falls in 2024. That's **21% of all 911 ambulance runs**—and it's **10,000 more** than the year before.

Now is the time to invest in community paramedicine and falls prevention. This legislation will help Wisconsin continue building the programs and services that keep us safe, independent, and thriving in our communities.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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