

LIFE Report of Marathon County: 2017-2019

Executive Summary

This is the eleventh edition of LIFE in Marathon County, a report presenting information and data about the quality of life in Marathon County. The 2017-2019 LIFE Report has adopted a new structure. Over the first 10 reports (representing 20 years – 1997-2017) the report indicators were grouped in six categories. Those sections were:

- Economic Environment
- Education
- Basic Needs and Supports
- Health and Wellness
- Community Safety
- Environment and Energy

With the 2017-2019 report, a new structure was adopted that encompasses four broader sections:

- Prosperous
- Healthy
- Safe
- Connected



These four categories serve as descriptors in painting a picture of the quality of life in Marathon County: where we strive to have a county that is prosperous, healthy, safe and where residents are connected. These four categories closely align with the 2016 Marathon County Comprehensive Plan, a plan that was structured around the goal to be the healthiest, safest, and most prosperous county in Wisconsin. Factors of interconnectedness between the sections and indicators within this report show the need to work collaboratively to support efforts to improve the quality of life for all residents to ensure Marathon County is a great place to grow up, work, raise a family and retire.

“The LIFE Report has allowed the community to be more proactive. It has been a valuable tool many funding organizations reference and non-profit entities list as reasons why they are seeking funds.”

Brian Gurness
Executive Director
B.A. & Esther Greenheck
Foundation

“Marathon County has done an excellent job in coming together to address community issues. The community assessment identifies the important areas that need to be looked at in Marathon County and allows organizations to target those, investing their resources to provide the greatest bang for our buck.”

Antonina Olszewski
Director
Spiritual Care
Ascension Wisconsin

“When resources are pooled and the efforts are coordinated it creates a synergy that enhances the effectiveness of the overall effort. That is one of the biggest benefits of the LIFE Report.”

Rick Nevers
Senior Vice President
Aspirus/Past LIFE Chair

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Our Community is a System

Understanding that a community is a system of interconnected parts is increasingly important as the issues we face become more complex. The more we work collaboratively and across boundaries the more successful we will be in our efforts to sustain a high quality of life.

The graphic below illustrates the connectivity of the various aspects of our community. They are linked by the impact one has on the other, or by the interplay between them.



Every indicator in this report is linked in some way. As you read, multiple linkages between indicators will likely come to mind as you “connect the dots” between indicators. For example:



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Success and Progress

The LIFE Report identifies areas of success and progress based on the report data and feedback from community advisors and the LIFE Steering Committee. The purpose of the Success and Progress section is to identify areas of strength, improvement and willingness to address some of our community's most challenging issues. In this eleventh report, seven successes and progress were identified:

- Child Success in School
- Openness to Explore Diversity
- Access to Health Care
- Strong Economy
- Substance Abuse Education
- Affordable Housing
- Data on Youth Risk Behaviors



Child Success in School

Marathon County children are set up for success from kindergarten through high school graduation.

- Over 90% of children entering kindergarten in Marathon County pass literacy screening and all school districts in Marathon County have a higher graduation rate than the state average.



Openness to Explore Diversity

The community has created initiatives to address racial divisions such as Toward One Wausau and The Unity Project.

- Toward One Wausau is a grassroots effort formed in 2016 of people of many backgrounds coming together for one purpose – to move toward a vision of “One Wausau” that works for people regardless of race or ethnic background.
- The Unity Project focuses on creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Access to Health Care

Access to health care remains high in Marathon County with four health care systems located in the community and a primary care physician ratio better than Wisconsin's average. Residents continue to receive preventative health care and screenings across their lifespan. Examples of this include:

- High percentage of babies born at a healthy weight.
- High rates of two year olds with up-to-date immunizations.
- Decreased average length of time to reduce a child's blood lead level to safe range.
- High rates of screenings such as mammograms and cholesterol checks.
- The majority of LIFE Survey respondents report being satisfied with the accessibility of health care.

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Success and Progress continued

Strong Economy

Marathon County has a strong economy that positively impacts the greater region.

- The county had a gross regional product (GRP) of 6.1 billion dollars and 10.2 billion dollars in sales in 2014.
- Marathon County is a regional economic hub that provides job opportunities for County residents and commuters from outside of the County's borders.

Substance Abuse

The issue of substance abuse has been kept in the public by engaging the media as well as educating and providing expertise to policy makers.

Data on Youth Risk Behavior

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data from all 10 school districts in Marathon County provides a rich local data source regarding the behaviors of our community's youth. The 2017-2019 LIFE Report marks the second collection of county-wide YRBS data, allowing for comparisons to prior years and for the first time, middle school data is available.

Affordable Housing

Marathon County has made strides to address affordable housing.

- Emergency housing assistance recipients have increased housing stability. In 2016, 57% reported having housing stability 3 months after services were provided.
- The Coordinated Entry System in Marathon County, which prioritizes the most vulnerable chronically homeless, has resulted in more homeless people being housed.



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Calls to Action

The LIFE Report sets community level Calls to Action on the report data and feedback from community advisors and the LIFE Steering Committee. The purpose of these Calls to Action is to advance community dialogue and stimulate action to improve our community's well-being. In this eleventh report, five complex interconnected Calls to Action were identified:

Mental Health

The mental health of individuals in Marathon County, especially youth, warrants attention as does the need for accessible mental health services.

- Schools throughout Marathon County are struggling with managing mental health of children as a result of childhood trauma.
- Suicide risk has increased among high school students as has the number of youth reporting feelings of hopelessness.
- Stigma, cost and a shortage of mental health providers (psychiatrists and dual certified therapists) remain barriers to accessing services.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse and misuse continues to be of concern in Marathon County.

- Illegal drug use was the number one issue of concern among 2017 LIFE Survey respondents.
- Drug overdoses were the number one cause of injury related deaths among individuals aged 15-64.
- While alcohol remains the largest substance abuse burden in our community, rates remain unchanged among adults and youth.
- E-cigarette use is on the rise, yet, there is a low level of concern regarding their use.

Bullying

Bullying, the pressures of social media, and social isolation pose a threat to the security, confidence and self-esteem of both youth and adults in Marathon County.

- 43.5% of high school students who took the 2017 Marathon County Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicate they believe bullying at school is a problem, an increase from 40% in 2015.
- 27% of students said they do not feel they have a teacher or other adult whom they can talk to if they have a problem.

Broadband Access

Broadband access is crucial to keep up with trends in education, employment, healthcare and public safety.

- 40% of rural Wisconsin does not have broadband, according to the FCC.
- Costs of Internet services also tend to be much higher as areas become more rural.

Future Job Growth

Training to job demand will be key to delivering the workforce needed with in-demand skills (technical know-how or specialized skills) to fill upcoming vacancies created by retirement and additional new job growth, especially in health services and education.

- From 2012 to 2022, the North Central Wisconsin Region can expect to add between 14,000 and 16,000 more jobs to its economy.
- There is also a need to promote training and education to not only fill those openings, but to encourage people to move into higher paying jobs.

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Community Assets

The quality of life in Marathon County is enhanced by its strong community assets.

Education

- Collaboration of educational organizations.
- Strong birth to higher educational opportunities.

Environment

- Collaboration of natural resources organizations/efforts.
- Active outdoor lifestyle.
- Natural resources with specific reference to water and air.

Lifestyle

- Great place to raise kids.
- Spiritual support is accepted and available.
- Safe place to live.

Economic

- Numerous family-owned manufacturing companies.
- Marathon County is the north central economic hub providing an attraction for others to come here.
- Collaboration on access to broadband.
- Educational institutions provide train-to-job demand resources.

Health

- Health initiatives are active and supported.
- Collaboration is a way of life – active in substance abuse and among health care systems.
- Medical College of Wisconsin is in Marathon County, has a psychiatry residency, and a focus on generating rural doctors.

Connected

- Spirit of collaboration in shared outcomes and people who care.
- Care about diversity.
- The LIFE Report itself demonstrates the community's commitment to quality of life.

