

Monday February 17th

**Testimony of Walter J. Orzechowski, Executive Director, Southwestern Wisconsin  
Community Action Program in support of the Wisconsin Opportunity Act**

**Senate Bill 467 & Assembly Bill 508**

Submitted to the Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government, Small  
Business, Tourism and Workforce Development & the Assembly Committee on  
Housing and Real Estate

**About**

Southwestern Wisconsin Community Action program (SWCAP)

SWCAP is an anti-poverty organization that provides multiple programs and services to low income individuals and families in rural southwestern Wisconsin. It provides housing, transportation, food assistance, homeless shelters, small business development, job training, clinic services, energy savings and behavioral health assistance.

**Issue & Response**

While SWCAP provides a wide range of programs and services as part of our anti-poverty mission in the past few years SWCAP has identified problems of mental health and behavioral health in all five of our rural counties. Much of this is being driven by significant economic stresses placed on farming communities due to economic difficulties in the dairy industry but there are also significant cultural and social changes taking place in our rural area. In the past two years SWCAP using some private grant funding has begun to organize community groups to work on the multi-faceted problems of mental health especially for persons and families without many financial resources.

With one of our projects we are working with the courts and have established a project to help persons recover from opioid addiction. Our project provides our first sober living house for up to five women who would be homeless or returning to a dangerous environment who need a safe and supportive environment to fully recover from addiction. At the same time we are working closely with our regional health care systems to provide substance abuse counselors in the emergency rooms and train physicians in Medication Assisted Treatment.

SWCAP has also identified farmer suicides as a tragic result of farm bankruptcies and foreclosures that force farmers into taking drastic measures that end their lives. Using a small grant we have started to develop programs and services to work with farmers and many partner organizations to deal with their economic issues upstream along with preventing or offering assistance to farmers experiencing depression and other risk factors that may lead to suicide.

**Comments on Legislation**

There are several others today who will address the issues of homelessness, food insecurity, lack of transportation, poor job skills, etc. However, I would like to talk about how this legislation could impact on the urgent issues of rural opioid addiction and farmer suicides. Our programs are limited in impact by

funding. We currently have started our first opioid addiction recovery program that includes Medication Assisted Treatment, peer counseling, housing and wraparound services (E.g. job training, transportation, etc.). However, because of funding limitations we have only one recovery house for five women in one county and we could develop at least one and possibly two (one for women and one for men) in each of our rural counties. We have also started education and services by working with farmers to reduce and hopefully eliminate farmer suicides but in only two of our counties and even in those on a small scale. As proposed in AB 508/SB 467, a state supplement to the CSBG program would bring extra resources to these efforts as would the creation of a grant program to provide CAA's with support to respond to the needs of communities and low-income families and individuals in crisis resulting from opioid addiction related issues. With additional funding we could ratchet up our efforts to provide programming in all five of our counties and hopefully provide a model for all of rural Wisconsin.