



117 East Green Bay Street *(located inside ThedaCare)*
Shawano, WI 54166
Phone: 715.524.5272 Ext. 6141
E-mail: rhonda.strebel@thedacare.org

News from the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Shawano County Launches Rural Health Initiative; Names Program Coordinator

Shawano, Wisconsin (February 17, 2004)... As health care issues facing today's farm families continue to escalate, business, health care, and agricultural leaders in Shawano County have launched a rural health initiative unique to the state to address the growing concerns.

A key aspect of the initiative has been the hiring of Rhonda Strebel as rural health coordinator. In her position, Strebel will make "house" calls to farm families to provide health information, education, referrals to area services and, most importantly, a trusted ear to listen and keep in confidence concerns and issues these families face today.

The Need

More than 18 percent of Wisconsin dairy farm families have no health insurance. Another 41 percent have high deductible plans that provide only major medical coverage. And four out of five lack health insurance that covers checkups and preventive care.

"When a combination of the second most dangerous career is coupled with today's health cost escalation, the result is a crisis in the farming community," said Doug Wilson, Chief Executive Officer of Cooperative Resources International, headquartered in Shawano, Wis. "Hopefully, concepts like the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative can provide some positive solutions and serve as a model for others."

Continually increasing costs for health insurance often prevent farm families from seeking help. Without insurance, farmers are not likely to seek medical treatment for minor accidents, or chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, farmer's lung, milker's knee, melanoma, hearing problems, arthritis, bruises, or broken bones. They are also unlikely to seek preventive care for themselves or their dependents.

"Many chronic illnesses can be prevented or controlled, which can help the patient avoid devastating strokes, heart attacks, pulmonary emphysema, many forms of cancer, stress, degenerative arthritis, diabetes, and mental depression, to mention just a few," said Dr. John Mielke, retired cardiologist with ThedaCare and a member of the Community Health Action Team (CHAT), which supported the creation of the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative. "Compassionate education is prevention's best tool and that is what Rhonda Strebel is all about."

- more -

Rural Health Coordinator page 2

History of the Initiative

As the crisis in health care continues to escalate among our nation's farming community, a grassroots planning team consisting of more than 30 Shawano-area residents with an interest in farm family health began meeting in 2002 to address these issues and develop a strategy to combat the crisis.

From the group's work has come this Rural Health Initiative, the first of its kind in Wisconsin.

A key result of the group's efforts over the past year and a half has been the hiring of the program coordinator. Funding is provided through a fund established with the Shawano Community Foundation. Donations can be made by contacting the Foundation. The initiative has made a three-year commitment to fund the position.

To date, donations have been received from Genex Cooperative Inc., Mid-County Cooperative, ThedaCare, Inc., AgVentures LLC, Bay Lakes Cooperative and Premier Community Bank.

Overseeing the activities is a committee of local business, agricultural, and health care leaders.

Goals of the Initiative

Rural Health Coordinator Strebel, who was raised on a farm in Shawano County, will provide a key connection to important community resources for farm families who lack the resources of time, money, and awareness needed to maintain a focus on a healthy lifestyle. "I look forward to working with farm families to help them plan and implement ways they can improve their quality of life," she said. "By taking advantage of this program, farm families really have an opportunity to take control of their health."

As Strebel works with the area's farming community, it is anticipated the health and well-being of those families will be enhanced, more families will implement preventive health practices, and more of the families will say they have improved access to health services.

In other words, farm families in Shawano County should find value in their relationship with the rural health coordinator.

"If I do my job," Strebel said, "attention to preventive health care by our farming community will no longer take a back seat to farm survival and providing the basic essentials of living."

- 30 -

For more information, contact:

Megan Wilcox, ThedaCare Marketing Specialist at 920-830-5847 (office), 920-554-0730 (pager), or megan.wilcox@thedacare.org

Jim Leuenberger, CRI Publication Manager at 715-526-7503 or jleuenberger@crinet.com

Rhonda Strebel

Coordinator

Shawano County Rural Health Initiative

Rhonda Strebel, Coordinator of the Shawano County Rural Health Initiative, was born and raised on a farm in Shawano County. Her parents, Dennis and Sally Rank, were dairy farmers near Cecil in northeastern Wisconsin.

Rhonda graduated from Bonduel High School in 1986 and attended college in Hotel and Restaurant Cookery and Management. She started at UW River Falls, then transferred to Fox Valley Technical College, where she received an Associate Degree, became a certified chef and competed in the National Restaurant Association competition in Chicago, where she earned a silver medal.

Although she continues to work in the food industry as a local caterer for Sally's Catering, Strebel went back to college to study Sports Medicine, with an emphasis on Leadership. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Concordia College.

Strebel and her husband, Eugene, reside in Shawano.

"I look forward to working with the farming community, where I can bring my life experiences and education back to my beginnings as a local farm girl," she said.



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Shawano, WI 54166
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E-mail: rhonda.strebel@thedacare.org

Rural Health Committee

Tom Anderson, Co-chairperson

Agriculture Agent
UW Extension
715-526-6136
Thomas.Anderson@ces.uwex.edu

Sharon Hanks, Co-chairperson

Director, Physician Services
ThedaCare, Inc.
920-830-5894
sharon.hanks@thedacare.org

John Doman

Ag Lender, Premier Community
Bank, Pulaski
920-822-4736
jdoman@premiercommunity.com

Bonnie Engel

Dairy Producer
715-526-5726
engelwood1@hotmail.com

Ron Hillmann

Manager, Mid-County
Cooperative
715-526-3197
hillmannr@mid-county.coop

Gordon Holten

Shawano Area Community
Foundation
715-526-9473
gholten@charter.net

Jim Leuenberger

Publication Manager, Cooperative
Resources International
715-526-7503
jleuenberger@crinet.com

Carolyn Long

Dairy Producer/Nutritionist, Bay
Lakes Cooperative
715-853-1226
carolynl@baylakes.com

John Mielke, MD

Community Medical Director,
ThedaCare, Inc.
920-734-6228
jemielke@athenet.net

Paula Morgen

Community Affairs, ThedaCare,
Inc.
920-830-5848
paula.morgen@thedacare.org

Linda Olson

Family Living Educator, Shawano
County University Extension
715-526-6136
linda.olson@ces.uwex.edu

Lisa Schiller

Nurse Practitioner, ThedaCare
Physicians
715-524-8160
lisa.schiller@thedacare.org

Steve Schnell

Vice President, Dairy Genetics,
Genex Cooperative Inc.
715-524-3438
sschnell@crinet.com

Tod Severson

Vice President, Agriculture
Lending, M&I Bank Corporation
715-526-7428
tod.severson@micorp.com

Mardelle Sievert

Dairy Producer
715-758-8529
happycows@tds.net

Rita Simon

School Nurse, Shawano-Gresham
School District
715-526-2175 x4188
simonr@sgsd.k12.wi.us

Rhonda Strebel

Coordinator, Shawano County Rural
Health Initiative
715-524-5272 x6141
Toll free 877-644-2641
Cell 715-853-3007
rhonda.strebel@thedacare.org

Megan Wilcox

Marketing Specialist, ThedaCare,
Inc.
920-830-5847
megan.wilcox@thedacare.org

Deborah Zernicke

Shawano County Public Health
Nurse
715-526-4808
puhdebby@co.shawano.wi.us