



## CONNECTION & BELONGING: VOICES OF PARENTS IN RECOVERY

*“Some people have a hard time grasping that **recovery is prevention**, but when I’m a healthy parent and I have a healthy environment for my children to grow up in, that is way more prevention than you could ever provide to them.”*

*– Listening Session Participant*



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# A Note of Gratitude

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the parents in recovery who participated in our listening sessions. Without their willingness to share their experiences and journeys, this report would not be possible.

Thank you!



*“That's why this community is so great, though. Because we are trying to reach as many sick people as we possibly can that know nothing about it. It would be great to have some help, support. But that is our mission and our goal, to run back into the fire and get other people out. Like, **I am grateful for our community**, but yeah, there is a lot of things that could still be better.”*

*– Listening Session Participant*



# PARENTING THROUGH RECOVERY

Parents in recovery face a unique set of challenges. Recovery is a journey with constantly changing dynamics that require specialized supports. Parenting is an ongoing, everchanging challenge. When a person finds themselves walking both paths simultaneously, it can increase isolation, decrease connection to others, and bring specific challenges to the forefront.

This report was originally intended to look at what connects parents in recovery and what promotes their sense of belonging. Throughout the listening sessions, it became apparent the gaps in services and supports in the community - for both themselves and their children - were responsible for a significant level of this isolation and needed to be addressed.

We would like to take this moment to thank the parents in recovery for their openness and trust in us throughout this process. We acknowledge the difficulty and vulnerability in sharing their experiences and the responsibility of that was not taken lightly. Thank you.



About **1 in 8 children** (8.7 million) aged 17 or younger lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year substance use disorder (SUD)

[Children Living with Parents who have a Substance Use Disorder, 2017](#)



Adults with **2 or more children** in the household are not getting the support they need.

[\(Winnebago County Community Health Survey, 2018\)](#)





# PREVIOUS LISTENING SESSIONS

In 2018, the Winnebago County Community Health Survey displayed that people with mental health and substance use disorders experienced lower levels of social support than adults without these challenges. This led to the 2021 Report on Connection & Belonging: Voices of People in Recovery, which was shared with the community. The listening sessions were held with members of the recovery community to learn how connection, belonging, and support impact the recovery journey. From these sessions, participants defined social connectedness as the presence of strong relationships, a sense of belonging, and meaningful contribution.

Participants expressed a desire to strengthen basic needs and community supports, including offering affordable child care during evenings and weekends, especially for women. These findings created the need to understand how social connection and belonging specifically impacts parents in recovery. The 2023 listening sessions have reinforced the findings of the 2021 report and brought forth additional layers of struggles parents in recovery face.

## KEY THEMES FROM 2021

**Social Connectedness is Defined as the Presence of these Three Factors:**



**STRONG  
RELATIONSHIPS**



**SENSE OF  
BELONGING**



**MEANINGFUL  
CONTRIBUTION**

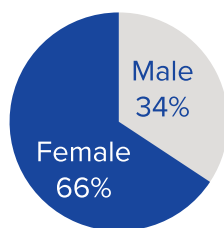
## 2023 Participant Demographics

### AGE RANGE



**24 - 44 Years Old**

### GENDER



### CAREGIVERS



**40% of caregivers care for  
2 or more children**

### PARENTS & CHILDREN



**Heard from  
38 Parents**



**Caring for  
69 Children**

## Listening Session Details

In partnership with Solutions Recovery Inc., the Winnebago County Health Department held five listening sessions for parents in recovery to further explore the findings of the 2021 Social Connectedness Report. Listening sessions were hosted at Solutions Recovery Inc. due to the concentration of recovery services in the Oshkosh area and Solutions' leadership and reputation within the recovery community. Participants were organized by groups: single mothers, fathers, those with children 0-5 years old, 6-12 years old, and 13-18 years old.

# FIVES THEMES

- 1 Parents and their children experience increased stigma and fear.
- 2 Parents distrust the legal and CPS systems and want shared decision-making for their children.
- 3 Accessing and navigating basic needs systems, such as housing and food, is difficult for parents.
- 4 Supportive housing is needed for parents and children during their recovery journeys.
  - Children need a safe place to live/stay without CPS involvement while a parent is in treatment or jail.
  - There is a need for more transitional and sober living housing options that provide reunification support for parents in recovery.
- 5 Parents in recovery reported barriers to child care.

## Connection Across Themes

Basic need systems “starts with access to fresh air and water, nutritious food, and the security of a stable home.” [1] Due to the way these systems are interconnected, difficulties in one area create a ripple effect and cause hardships in others.

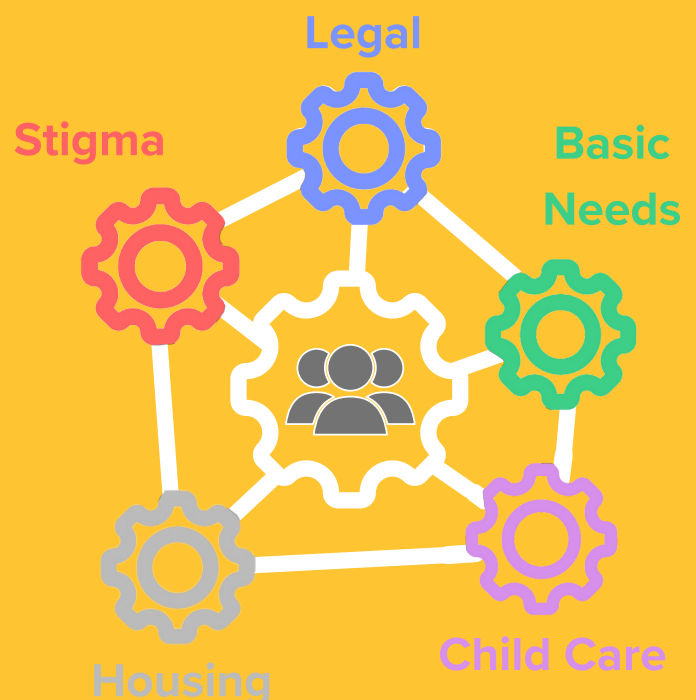
*"Our systems also don't help... I mean, big picture."  
– Listening Session Participant*

A study from 2021 examined children and basic need systems. “When families are able to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and medical care, parents and other caregivers experience less stress, which allows them to provide the critical support that children need to grow into healthy, productive adults.” [2] These hardships are not personal shortfalls; rather, the result of failures within systems.

[1]: <https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Basic-Needs-for-Health-and-Safety>

[2]: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/helping-families-meet-basic-needs-enables-parents-to-promote>

## Moving Parts of Recovery





## 1

## PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN EXPERIENCE INCREASED STIGMA AND FEAR

Parents in recovery experience layers of stigma for being in recovery, being a parent, and navigating the pervasive stigma around substance use. Listening session participants shared experiences of fear, judgment, and targeting by systems such as CPS, police, schools, and family court regardless of how far in the past their substance use occurred. Mothers in particular spoke into the fear of their children being judged by their peers and parents not in recovery.

*"I'm like well so far nothing has really happened in this school year but I'm always worried about that. What if her friends find out about my situation or [the friend's] parents find out about my situation and then they start attacking her in some kind of way."*

*"That is the biggest thing too... The fear of going to jail and the fear of CPS"*

*"[I]t's re-traumatizing for the kids too... my license plate was in my window instead of actually bolted on... I'm a valid driver, I have license registration. Five cop cars and a dog pull up. They pull my kids out of the car who have already been pulled out when I was actively using. Right? And they say like, oh, well we can put your kids in the back of a cop car. When I tell you like, my kids screamed and this was like within the last two months."*

*"I still struggle with that today. Like that fear of my child getting taken away."*

– Listening Session Participants

## 2

## PARENTS DISTRUST THE LEGAL AND CPS SYSTEMS AND WANT SHARED DECISION-MAKING FOR THEIR CHILDREN

Parents in recovery feel the legal system and CPS do not reflect the parenting or recovery journeys, with a resounding fear and mistrust of their power to take away a participant's children because of past substance use or treatment. Single mothers in particular felt the demands of the legal system were more harshly enforced on them.

Across listening sessions, parents discussed their frustration with CPS and how demoralizing the interactions made them feel. The underlying current displayed a need for more collaboration across systems. Specifically, there was a deep desire for joint decision-making regarding their children's placement, school plans, and overall well being.

*"[M]ore for moms than dad[s], sometimes that they feel like, if I admit to my addiction and admit to my problem and get real with someone, sh\*t's gonna hit the fan for my kids."*



*"I was afraid to get help because I didn't want to lose my son."*

*"My number one fear is that my house is not gonna be clean enough or their clothes are gonna be dirty."*

– Listening Session Participants

# 3

## ACCESSING AND NAVIGATING BASIC NEEDS SYSTEMS, SUCH AS HOUSING AND FOOD, IS DIFFICULT FOR PARENTS

Listening session participants expressed frustration with basic needs systems, specifically in navigating and qualifying for programs such as housing and food. These systems are not connected and all have their own enrollment process, eligibility requirements, and background checks. To access any program, parents need to apply for each program individually and complete any requirements the programs deem necessary. After the qualification process, parents need to live within the rules of the programs. Often, these rules do not reflect the realities of being a parent. Parents utilizing WIC are unable to use grocery pick-up, forcing them to shop in-store despite time constraints and child care needs, even though FoodShare allows this. A requirement of reunification for a parent may be to provide stable housing before children can return to the home, but in order to qualify for the proper program, they need their children currently in the home.

*"If you are trying to get your kids back, a requirement is to have a room for them separate for themselves. You know what I mean? Like it is hard...I don't have any evictions on my record, but I do have a few drug charges...Or my ability to pay the rent or my ability to live in a house and not destroy it."*

– Listening Session Participant



# 4

## SUPPORTIVE HOUSING IS NEEDED FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN DURING THEIR RECOVERY JOURNEYS

Children need a safe place to live/stay without CPS involvement while a parent is in treatment or jail.

There is a need for more transitional and sober living housing options that provide reunification support for parents in recovery.

Parents spoke to the need for safe, short-term placement plans for children while a parent is in treatment or jail. Parents expressed a desire to have autonomy in the creation of a plan and for alternative options that do not require involvement from CPS.

Transitional and sober living in general is difficult for people to access. It becomes even more difficult when a parent needs a safe place to stay for both them and their children, as most do not allow children. Single mothers expressed a barrier during the perinatal period due to limitations within sober living. This forces parents to choose between their sobriety and their children.

*"Like how do I even navigate that [going to treatment]? What am I supposed to do with my kids, if I can't take them with me, where are they gonna go and do I have a supportive family member and like most of the time not, then what? Right. Do I have to get them taken away from me? Do I have to give up my rights? Or can I do something differently? Can there be a different system of support and there is like this resource out there?"*

*"I know being as a parent, I didn't get to transition with my son because I was at [a sober living house] and kids weren't even allowed to come to the house to visit. So when I got my own apartment, boom, my kid got thrown at me and that's a whole different level of overwhelmed. I haven't had my son in the last three years. And it was just so overwhelming and it would've been nice to have that support."*

– Listening Session Participants



## 5

## PARENTS IN RECOVERY REPORTED BARRIERS TO CHILD CARE

Child care access and affordability issues are not unique to parents in recovery. Many parents in the community are currently facing the same struggle and it is forcing parents to find new, creative ways to have income, care for their children, and care for themselves. Parents in recovery echoed these same frustrations and added specific needs they have when it comes to child care.

Parents, particularly single mothers, spoke to the lack of affordability on a single income and the lack of availability for child care to attend recovery-related meetings and appointments, specifically therapy and counseling. These are essential resources to maintain recovery and can quickly become unattainable without the support to access the resources.

*"Yeah. Childcare is huge. Also, some what you're saying, like some flexible childcare where it's not, you have to pick him up by 5:00 and if you have two strikes and no more childcare."*

*"It's hard for a single mom or a single... It's hard for a family too, it's just because you meet that [income] bracket and there's no help and childcare is super expensive."*

*"It's always so so helpful that there's childcare here on certain nights. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to do most of these things."*

*"I kind of felt the same way about like, childcare when I did have my kids. And I found it easier to just watch my kids and then I could also get stamps as well, like \$700. So that's the difference."*

– Listening Session Participants

### MOTHERS AND FATHERS: A CONTRAST IN FOCUS

While there were many similarities in findings, there was a distinct difference in focus between the fathers and mothers expressed by listening session participants. Fathers were primarily focused on self-improvement as a parent through education and parenting classes. Mothers were focused on protecting their children from experiencing negative effects of their past use (such as judgment from school, police, court and CPS systems, peers, and other parents). Additional follow up and research is needed to fully understand this difference.



*"Because if we're coming from such a place where we're really incapable of being the parents that we wanted to be and a lot of us don't really know how to be the parent that we wanna be, we know that we want to be a good parent but we don't really know what that looks like."*

– Listening Session Participant

# WHAT THE COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO TO SUPPORT PARENTS IN RECOVERY

The initial findings of the 2021 Social Connectedness Report were meant to educate the community on addiction, help people navigate services, strengthen basic needs and supports, and improve access to treatment services. While these remain priorities, the findings of the current listening sessions show there is additional work to be done to support parents in recovery. Suggestions to improve supports include:

## ① Reduce Stigma for Parents in Recovery

### **As a Community Member:**

Learn more about addiction and recovery to better understand what these parents are going through.

### **As an Organization:**

Pursue training opportunities for your employees to learn about addiction and recovery.

Parents in recovery face extra layers of stigma in addition to the surrounding stigma of substance use, which impact their ability to navigate the world for themselves and their children. Parents need flexibility within the social norm of what a parent “should” be, especially when working with systems like CPS, family court, and schools. Learn to recognize and acknowledge the compounding layers of stigma to help play a role in dismantling them.

## ② Provide Support and Assistance for Navigating Basic Needs

### **As a Community Member:**

Learn about the basic needs systems and their complexities to better understand how complicated they are.

### **As an Organization:**

Embed navigators who have experienced these difficulties within systems to help parents access, navigate, and utilize basic needs programs.

Navigating basic needs systems is challenging and parents have extra considerations in accessing and utilizing these programs. Organizations who provide these services need to be proactive in understanding how stigma and fear impacts a person’s ability to truly utilize these services. Embedding navigators and advocates to communicate within and across systems will help relieve these pressures parents in recovery face to provide basic necessities for their children.



# WHAT THE COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATIONS CAN DO TO SUPPORT PARENTS IN RECOVERY

## ③ Create Supportive Family and Recovery Spaces

### **As a Community Member:**

Recognize that people in recovery and their children are valued in our community. Use person-first language when discussing recovery and acknowledge the strength it took to achieve recovery.

### **As an Organization:**

a. Consider sponsoring or when planning events, consider not having alcohol, or not have alcohol be a focus, to make events more family and recovery friendly.

b. Create affinity groups for single dads, single moms, a place where kids with parents in recovery can connect to other kids experiencing the same.

There are very few areas or events in the community that are intentional about being both family and recovery friendly. Parents in recovery need to be able to connect to the community in a way that is safe and supportive of their recovery journey. These spaces include: family-friendly community events that are alcohol-free, parks, school events, holiday celebrations, and others.

When creating community events, bring those in recovery to the table to have input in the creation of the events. Allow their voices to be heard, acknowledged, and valued within the community. Recognize that when parents in recovery thrive, so do their children and so does the community.





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This project is supported by Winnebago County Public Health and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services Overdose Data to Action Community Prevention grant program and in partnership with Solutions Recovery Inc.

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December 2023