

Milwaukee County Future State *Draft* Recommendations

Project Background

Milwaukee County’s vision is “by achieving racial equity, Milwaukee is the healthiest County in Wisconsin.” To achieve this bold vision, Milwaukee County created a strategic plan which includes the goal “determine what, where, and how we deliver services based on the resolution of health disparities.” In 2024, Milwaukee hired BerryDunn and Kairo Communications to develop a future state model to reimagine Milwaukee County’s services and organizational structure toward advancing this goal in the most efficient, effective way possible.

After 18 months of community engagement and research, BerryDunn and Kairo Communications delivered the draft recommendations below. Recommendations for some topic areas are still under development and are listed as “placeholders” on the last page.

Throughout Spring 2026, the draft recommendations will be shared with community members across Milwaukee County to gather input before the recommendations are finalized in June. At that point, BerryDunn and Kairo Communications will present the final recommendations to Milwaukee County leaders for their consideration.

Recommendations Summary

DRAFT Recommendation 1: The County leads a unified, equity-driven public health model guided by a chief health strategist in its Office of Equity that coordinates strategy, data, and shared services across all municipalities.

Why? Right now, public health in Milwaukee County is split up. There are 11 local health departments serving 19 communities. Each one has its own staff, money, and programs. Because they work separately, it can be hard to share information, work as a team, and make sure everyone gets the same level of care. This system comes from past decisions and unfair patterns that affected how communities were built and funded. While local control can be helpful, it also causes problems when trying to work together and provide fair services for everyone.

Anticipated Impact: With this new plan, Milwaukee County would have a stronger and more connected public health system. Health services would be more equal across all communities, no matter how much money or staff a local department has. Sharing leadership, data, and services would help workers do their jobs better and focus more on helping people. In the end, this would lead to better health and support for all residents.

DRAFT Recommendation 2: The No Wrong Door (NWD) approach is fully integrated into service delivery countywide.

Why? Milwaukee County’s Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) uses a No Wrong Door (NWD) model, which means anyone can get help no matter where they start. People do not have to know which office to go to: they can just ask for help, and someone will guide them. This makes it easier for everyone to get the support they need. Community groups and County leaders believe NWD makes the whole system better. Expanding this will improve customer service and information sharing. The NWD approach makes it easier to help people find services and improves teamwork between County departments. Many see NWD as a foundation for transforming the County’s way of working with people.

Anticipated Impact: A countywide universal customer service framework means that everyone in Milwaukee County can get help easily, no matter which office they go to. All departments will be able to talk to anyone to start solving problems right away instead of being sent somewhere else. This includes shared processes for referrals and scripts for communication.

This makes getting help faster and less confusing for residents, business owners, and community members. Every resident receives seamless, person-centered support and is connected efficiently to the services that they need.

DRAFT Recommendation 3: Integrated case management is in place with an option to expand to a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

Why? Milwaukee County uses many different systems to manage the cases of people who receive health and human services in the community. Because there are so many systems, important information is not always shared or understood by everyone who needs it. This makes it hard for case managers to work together. The main problems are that information is not shared well, and staff do not always know what services people are getting. This can lead to issues for clients and providers. It can lead to mistakes and makes it harder to solve problems for people who need help and make data-driven decisions.

Anticipated Impact: In the future, there is one system for case management across Milwaukee County. Milwaukee County will own and operate a single system accessible to service providers for sharing data and information. A new system will help everyone work together and share information about who needs help and what services they are getting. This will make it easier for providers to do their jobs and for people to get the support they need. The new system will let providers see a full picture of each person and communicate better with other case managers or providers. With better teamwork, providers can share ideas, help each other, and make good decisions. This means people will have a smoother experience when they ask for help. In the end, this system will make getting help faster, easier, and better focused on what each person needs.

DRAFT Recommendation 4: Mobile service delivery, community-based hubs, and community navigators operate countywide.

Why? Milwaukee County’s current service delivery model is fragmented, with many essential human services spread across multiple locations. Residents struggle to access services, especially those facing poverty, unstable housing, disabilities, or limited transportation.

Milwaukee County’s 2026 budget shows there are ongoing problems with money and fewer services, which makes it tougher for people who need help the most. These financial pressures reduce available services and largely impact vulnerable populations. This limits the County’s ability to meet people where they are

Anticipated Impact: In the future state, Milwaukee County expands mobile service delivery, community-based hubs, and community navigators. There will be office locations, County staff-based hubs, and community navigators. There will be office locations as well as staff in the community doing the work and connecting with residents.

Milwaukee County has mobile service vans or pop-up enrollment stations that travel to neighborhoods with the highest levels of unmet need, including transit deserts and community gathering spaces. A future mobile housing unit could expand Milwaukee County’s current housing initiatives into a truly field-based, neighborhood-level support system. There is increased access for residents experiencing poverty, disabilities, transportation barriers, and people experiencing homelessness. This directly supports the County’s goals to place services in areas with the greatest need and focus more on prevention, so crisis intervention is less needed.

This approach works to ensure resources are distributed efficiently and equitably, improving access for people who are most at risk and most in need.

DRAFT Recommendation 5: The County’s Birth-to-Three program is adequately funded and resourced.

Why? The Birth-to-Three program is a service that every county must provide, because it is required by the federal government. The time from when a child is born until they turn three is universally recognized as an important window, when there is fast brain development and more sensitivity to conditions that affect health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes. (Known as social determinants of health or SDOH) As children’s brains grow fast during this time, things like family, health, and where they live can make a big difference in how they develop. Funding pressures have decreased providers in Milwaukee County who serve this age group. The costs continue to rise, but enrollment has grown. Increased reliable funding is needed to continue this program.

Anticipated Impact: More investment in children in the earliest stages of life improves their health and well-being outcomes. It also reduces the number and cost of services that would need to be provided to children and adults at later stages. If the program gets enough money, more families can use it. Sharing data and information about the program often and clearly helps people trust it and makes sure it keeps getting resources.

DRAFT Recommendation 6: Milwaukee County is the regional leader of a unified, integrated prevention-focused housing system that results in equitable access to stable, affordable homes.

Why? Milwaukee County has good housing programs, but there are not enough affordable homes. Families, young people, seniors, people with health needs, and people returning from jail all struggle to find housing. Rent has gone up, but many people’s incomes have not. Because of this, there are more people who need housing than homes available. It is also hard for people to figure out where to go for help. Housing services are spread out, and there is no single place to start. This makes it confusing for residents, especially those in crisis, and makes it harder for agencies to work together and share resources. Because of this, people at risk of losing their housing are not always helped early enough to keep them in their homes.

Anticipated Impact: Milwaukee County knows that working together on housing can make a big difference. When housing programs are coordinated, people get help faster, emergencies are reduced, and lives are improved. To meet today’s needs, the housing system must work as one connected system with enough funding.

In the future, the County would help bring together housing programs, homelessness services, health care partners, and supports for everyone with housing needs. This would replace a broken system with a focus on prevention and long-term stability. By working closely with cities, housing groups, health systems, and community partners, Milwaukee County can help make sure more people stay safely housed and get the support they need.

DRAFT Recommendation 7: Youth in Milwaukee County are served by a Housing First system that provides rapid, equitable access to safe, developmentally appropriate housing and supports.

Why? Many young people in Milwaukee County do not have a safe place to live. There are not enough affordable homes, and it can be hard to get mental health care and other support. Different systems do not always work well together, which makes getting help confusing.

Even though the County has helped many adults through Housing First, young people are still one of the groups most in need. Many youth face extra challenges because of unfair housing policies from the past, lack of investment in neighborhoods, and barriers to school, jobs, transportation, and health care. These problems make it easier for young people to lose housing, especially youth who need extra support.

Anticipated Impact: In the future, Milwaukee County would use one system to help young people find housing and stay safe. Every young person would have a place to live, no matter who they are or where they come from.

Housing would come first, not last. Once young people are housed, they can focus on school, work, and their health. Services would be designed to fit their age, culture, and life experiences. Different groups—like the County, schools, health providers, and youth-serving organizations—would work together and share information. With everyone working as a team, fewer young people would become homeless, and when it does happen, it would be short and rare.

DRAFT Recommendation 8: The aging, housing, and health systems in the County are aligned with shared accountability for early, preventive supports that keep older adults safely and affordably housed as they age.

Why? Milwaukee County already does many good things to help older adults. The County runs aging services through the Department of Health and Human Services. Programs, like the Division on Aging and the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC), help people age 60 and older and people with disabilities find services and support. However, the needs of older adults are changing. More people are getting older, and soon there may be more older adults than children. Many seniors struggle with high housing costs, homes that need repairs, or homes that are hard to move around in. These problems are connected to health, housing, and money, but the systems that help do not always work well together.

Anticipated Impact: In the future, services for older adults would be better connected and easier to use. Housing would be a main focus, and help would start earlier before problems become emergencies. By working together, aging, housing, health, and mental health services could better support seniors. Older adults would get help faster and have an easier time finding what they need. More people would be able to stay safely in their homes and communities. This approach would also help the whole community. Preventing emergencies saves money over time and helps older adults live healthier, more stable lives.

DRAFT Recommendation 9: The County continues to enhance community engagement and awareness of County services.

Why? Milwaukee County has given people more chances to share their ideas and concerns in meetings, like listening sessions, budget hearings, and town halls. Many residents took part in the 2026 budget talks. People shared their main worries: they want things to be fair, they want to know how their feedback makes a difference, and they want to know about the changes the County is making. Because some programs have less money, and departments have fewer resources, it is even more important to spend money on what the community thinks is most important and to show people exactly what is paid for and why.

—Anticipated Impact: Milwaukee County will work to give residents more power in making important decisions about budgets, rules, and programs. The County will use easy-to-understand language and offer information in many languages, so everyone can share their ideas and know how their feedback makes a difference. A resident will be able to share their thoughts, help design programs, and see the results. The County will hold more town hall meetings and listening sessions throughout the year — both in person and online — so people can join easily. Community members will understand projects and be able to contribute, so people can share their opinions before plans are finished and see how their ideas are used in decisions.

DRAFT Recommendation 10: Milwaukee County residents have increased access to legal resources for civil cases.

Why? Many people in Milwaukee County go to civil court without a lawyer. This can make it hard for them to understand the process and protect their rights. These cases often involve important issues, like housing, money, child support, and access to Social Security benefits. While the County and its partners offer some legal help, there is not enough support to meet the needs of everyone who needs it. Many legal problems that affect people’s health and safety—such as utility shutoffs, unsafe housing, domestic violence, child custody, or being denied benefits—are handled in civil court.

Anticipated Impact: Research shows that legal problems are closely connected to health and wellbeing. By setting aside dedicated tax funding for legal services, Milwaukee County can better support residents as they go through the civil court system. With more access to legal help, fewer people will have to go to court without a lawyer. This investment creates opportunities for the County to work more closely with community organizations and health centers. It also can lead to better health outcomes and more stable lives for families.

DRAFT Recommendation 11: Milwaukee’s bus system has dedicated and reliable funding, and a regional transit authority serves the transit needs of Milwaukee County municipalities and residents.

Why? In the past, rules separated people by race, and this led to many people of color living in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates. In central Milwaukee, not enough money was spent to help these areas, and many jobs moved out to the suburbs. The suburbs do not have enough buses or trains, so it is hard for people to get to jobs, schools, health care providers, and other places that they need or want to go. As funding is being cut, people are dealing with higher bus fares, longer trips, fewer buses at certain times, and not enough routes to get places.

Anticipated Impact: A Regional Transit Authority (RTA) can extend transit benefits throughout southeastern Wisconsin, improving access for all residents and areas of the county. Connecting buses and trains helps workers get to their jobs and other places. Funding can bring more jobs and attract talented people to Milwaukee County. Regional sponsorship usually strengthens funding opportunities, including access to federal and state money to fund buses, signals, and safety projects.

DRAFT Recommendation 12: A special purpose Parks District oversees and manages County Parks and the Zoo.

Why? Milwaukee County Parks and the Milwaukee County Zoo are important places for the community. They support health, fun, learning, and caring for the environment. Over many years, there has not been enough money to take care of these spaces. This has caused buildings and equipment to wear down, and some parks do not have the same level of access and amenities as others. There are also fewer staff than before. Right now, parks must compete with other County services for limited funding, which makes it hard to keep them in good shape. To keep parks open, staff have worked with cities and nonprofit groups.

Anticipated Impact: In the future, Milwaukee County could work with the State to create a new Parks and Zoo District. This district would have its own tax levy funding to pay for daily operations, repairs, and improvements. The district could also borrow money to fix long-standing maintenance problems more quickly. With this new funding, parks and the Zoo could continue to serve the community and stay well maintained. The County would still look for partnerships and smart ways to manage park spaces based on community needs. Creating this district could also help the County balance its budget and allow more funding to support programs that improve health and fairness across the community.

DRAFT Recommendation 13: Milwaukee County, the City of Milwaukee, and other local jurisdictions operate in a shared services model for internal operations and 911 dispatch.

Why? Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee have faced money challenges for many years. These challenges have grown over time and have led to budget cuts and fewer resources for public services. Because of this, both internal services and services for residents have been affected. The County also has limits on how much money it can raise through property taxes, which makes it hard to pay for services as costs increase. The City and other local governments in the County face similar problems. These shared challenges create an opportunity for governments to work together and share services to save money and use resources more wisely.

Anticipated Impact: In the future, the County and the cities and villages within it can build on past work to share more services. By sharing services, like human resources, benefits (e.g. health care) purchasing, building management, vehicle fleets, and 911 dispatch, governments can lower costs. Sharing services can also help improve equity, service quality, and long-term financial stability. Over time, this approach can lead to better use of public dollars and stronger services for the community.

DRAFT Recommendation 14: Criminal Justice Placeholder -- A recommendation addressing criminal justice/public safety is being developed

Why? TBD

Anticipated Impact: TBD

DRAFT Recommendation 15: County Governance Placeholder -- A recommendation addressing County governance structure is being developed

Why? TBD

Anticipated Impact: TBD

DRAFT Recommendation 16: Economic Development/Stability Placeholder -- A recommendation addressing revenue, taxation, and growth is being developed

Why? TBD

Anticipated Impact: TBD

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Share your thoughts on the recommendations. Take a brief survey.

