Myriad signs point to the need for better connecting farmers to services that help them deal with stress, depression and other mental health challenges. First, there is the history of the problem: In a study examining various industries between 1992 and 2010, The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that farm operators and workers had the highest suicide rate.

Second, many rural U.S. communities struggle with shortages of mental health professionals: 65 percent don’t have a psychiatrist and 47 percent lack a psychologist, according to a 2018 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. Third, many of today’s agricultural producers are dealing with high levels of stress, due to factors such as low commodity prices and decreased farm incomes.

“The volatility we have seen recently is unprecedented,” North Dakota Rep. Michael Brandenburg says. The burdens can prove overwhelming for some, he says, noting that one of his neighbors committed suicide when faced with the financial collapse of a farm operation.

The 1980s are often cited as a time of failing agricultural businesses and related stresses, but today’s suicide rates for male farmers are 50 percent higher than they were during that tumultuous decade. “Now is the time to start addressing rural suicide and mental health issues,” Illinois Rep. Norine Hammond says.

That is why she and other legislators pushed in July for passage of a resolution urging adoption of the federal FARMERS FIRST Act.

The Midwestern Legislative Conference passed this resolution on the final day of its Annual Meeting. (The resolution came from the MLC’s Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee.) Under the FARMERS FIRST Act, state departments of agriculture, extension services and nonprofit entities would get federal funding for help lines, suicide-prevention training and support groups.

The idea for this type of state-federal partnership is not new. The Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network was established in the 2008 U.S. farm bill, but never received funding. The MLC resolution also encourages legislators to explore rural mental health programs in their respective states and provinces.

For more than a decade, the Wisconsin-based Sowing Seeds of Hope (funded in part with state and federal dollars) served as a model for how to help connect farmers with mental health resources and professionals. It did so through a mix of training, outreach and financial support. A lack of funding ended Sowing Seeds of Hope in 2014, but some rural-specific resources remain in the Midwest. Examples include Nebraska’s Rural Response Hotline, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Mental Health Outreach Program, and the Wisconsin Farm Center.

“We need to let the men and women who work in agriculture know there are resources like the Farm Center available to help manage the stress of farming and, most importantly, remind them they are not alone,” Wisconsin Rep. Joan Ballweg says.
Midwest Legislative Conference resolution farmers mental health rural areas

Policy Area Agriculture Policy Area Health Mental Health and Substance Abuse

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