

Trees as Health Care Partners in Wisconsin

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Wisconsin's natural beauty abounds, and the state has long recognized the interconnectedness of nature and human well-being – a legacy carried forward by Aldo Leopold. Leopold, author of *A Sand County Almanac* and professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Wisconsin, is regarded as a pioneer of modern conservation. He developed the “land ethic,” a philosophy that extends the idea of community beyond people to include “soils, waters, plants, and animals – the land.”¹ Since Leopold's time, we have learned much about nature and human interconnectedness. Harvard Biologist E.O. Wilson coined the term “biophilia” to capture this interconnectedness: simply put, biophilia is the love of life or love of other living organisms.² We are drawn to nature, to majestic landscapes, bucolic scenery, and its components – the animals, the plants, the trees. But can this lead to better human health outcomes?

With “land ethic” and “biophilia” as frameworks, scientists have examined how nature (and trees specifically) affect human health.

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Wolf et al conducted a comprehensive scoping review of more than 200 studies investigating the effects of urban trees on human health;³ grouping these benefits in 3 domains. *Reducing Harm* describes how vegetation can lessen harmful environmental conditions, including exposure to air pollution, extreme heat, and

exercise, *forest therapy appears to be more likely to produce outcomes like remission and response to treatment, with adequate acceptability or adherence*” (emphasis added).⁸

How might health care organizations harness this knowledge for improved health outcomes? Based on the available evidence,

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crime. *Restoring Capacities* describes how time spent in natural environments supports psychological and physiological well-being through benefits such as improved cognitive function, stress reduction, and clinical outcomes. *Building Capacities* describes how experiences in nature support individual and community wellness through active living and social connections. Across these domains, the review clearly indicates that exposure to urban forests is associated with positive health outcomes. Similar findings have been reported in Wisconsin, where studies have demonstrated potential benefits for mental health, sleep, active transportation, and cardiovascular health.⁴⁻⁷ In another recent review, Rosa et al specifically investigated the treatment of depression using forests therapeutically and found that “compared to antidepressants, similar activities in a hospital or a non-forested urban setting, or even diet and forest-based

investing in trees and natural features on Wisconsin's health care campuses could have a wide range of benefits for patients, staff, and communities.^{3,8,9} A new benchmark offers a clear target for action. The 3-30-300 benchmark challenges organizations to ensure that there are 3 established trees visible from every building, 30% tree canopy cover in every neighborhood, and that no one is more than a 300 meter walk to a park or other green space.¹⁰ In addition, the Arbor Day Foundation's Tree Campus Healthcare program guides health care organizations to invest in their campuses' trees and recognizes them for their accomplishments. According to an email on May 12, 2025 from Dayna Berry, program manager for Tree Campus, the program recognized 59 health care campuses across 18 states, with Wisconsin leading the nation with 20 campuses. Despite this leadership, opportunities for participation remain, given that approximately 150 hospi-

tals and health systems operate in Wisconsin.¹¹ Participating campuses commit to improving community wellness through tree education, investment, and community engagement. Achieving Tree Campus Healthcare recognition demonstrates a health care organization's commitment to promoting health beyond the clinic walls by investing in a healthier environment that supports the well-being of patients, staff, visitors, and communities.

To further understand the program, information was obtained through personal communication on August 20, 2025, with Jimmy Parilek, senior program manager for system facilities management and sustainability at Aspirus Health. Aspirus has demonstrated leadership in Wisconsin and nationally, with 13 designated campuses in Wisconsin, 2 in Minnesota, and 3 in Michigan. Parilek emphasized that the program aligns with broader organizational values, including doing the right thing for Wisconsin's communities and creating inviting campuses for patients, visitors, and staff to enjoy, seek respite, and remember fondly. He stated, "Our mission of healing people, promoting health, and strengthening communities really ties into this ... continuing our path forward and evolving our sustainability program, as well as helping those around us" (Zoom, August 20, 2025). According to Parilek, this mission directly supports the continued evolution of the organization's sustainability initiatives. He emphasized the importance of giving patients something beautiful to look at while they go through the healing process. In addition, he described benefits for staff, ranging from the pride facilities teams take in beautifying the grounds, to excitement for events, including tree giveaways where all available saplings were distributed within an hour.

Given the operational demands of health care settings, questions were raised regarding whether maintaining such a program poses challenges. Parilek acknowledged that keeping things up and running can create challenges, but there was no question about moving forward: "We're going to continue those things moving forward ... everybody here at the organization was excited that all 18 hospitals were able to receive that Tree Campus designation ... it was really awesome to see everybody come

together to want to achieve that. From the executive level all the way down, we're all looking for ways that we can help the environment" (Zoom, August 20, 2025). He noted strong organizational support across multiple levels. For health care organizations considering the program or related efforts on greening and sustainability, Parilek emphasized the widespread availability of resources, including the Arbor Day Foundation and Practice Green Health, as well as potential financial and technical assistance through state-level programs such as the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Urban Forestry Grant Program. The DNR offers a range of forestry grants, including both regular (\$25,000) and startup (\$5000) grants.¹²

The 3-30-300 benchmark and Tree Campus program offer tangible goals and support for achieving them. Implementation can begin with feasible actions such as improving visible tree cover, improving access to nearby green spaces, and integrating trees into planned site improvements and redevelopment projects. Partnerships with municipal forestry programs, nonprofit organizations, and grant-supported initiatives may help reduce technical and financial barriers. Based on the available evidence, health care campuses may realize improved health outcomes by reaching these goals. Which campus in Wisconsin will be the next to find out?

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