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WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* NEWS

September 2026



CELEBRATING FIBER ARTS

FROM LIGHT SWITCHES
TO LIFELONG HABITS

READER RECIPE CONTEST

KIDS AND CRITTERS

LOCAL STUDENTS GAIN LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE AT YLC

Suring High School junior Aliya Cox and Lena High School senior Adrena Rabas represented Oconto Electric Cooperative at the 2026 Wisconsin Youth Leadership Conference (YLC), held July 14-16 at UW–Stout. Cox also served on the conference Youth Board, helping lead activities and guide fellow participants throughout the event.

The annual conference brings together students from electric cooperatives across Wisconsin to develop leadership skills, build friendships, and gain a deeper understanding of the cooperative way of doing business. Throughout the three-day event, students experienced college life firsthand while participating in leadership workshops, team-building activities, and discussions designed to prepare them for future success.

One of the conference's featured speakers was motivational speaker Craig Hillier, whose message on "Break-through Leadership" challenged students to turn setbacks into opportunities, respect differing viewpoints, and take ownership of their actions. Through interactive activities and inspiring stories, Hillier encouraged attendees to shape their own futures rather than letting circumstances define them.

Students also worked in cooperative districts, collaborating with peers from across the state to explore cooperative principles and solve real-world challenges. One activity challenged each district to create a TikTok video focused on a cooperative principle, combining creativity, teamwork, and leadership in a fun and engaging way.

Ben Bella, Director of Compliance Services for Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association, spoke about defensive driving and the importance of making thoughtful decisions. His message centered on a simple but powerful reminder: there is no reset button in life. Bella challenged students to

consider how their choices affect not only themselves, but also those around them.

Perhaps the most impactful presentation of the conference came from Hunter Gillett, who shared his remarkable journey of resilience following a devastating plane crash in 2017. As a high school athlete with dreams of competing at the collegiate level, Gillett's future seemed bright. But at age 18, a recreational flight with a friend ended in tragedy when the aircraft crashed into a river. Gillett survived with life-threatening injuries, including a broken lower spine, collapsed lung, shattered ankle, concussion, and severe facial injuries that required extensive surgeries and rehabilitation.

Beyond the physical recovery, Gillett spoke candidly about the emotional challenges he faced, including depression, anger, and survivor's guilt after losing his friend in the crash. Through the support of family, friends, and therapy, he gradually rebuilt his confidence and returned to UW–Stout, where he pursued the future he once feared he had lost.

Today, Gillett shares his story to help others navigate adversity and understand the importance of perseverance. His message resonated deeply with students: life will bring challenges, but difficult experiences do not define a person. Instead, growth often comes from how we respond to those challenges. He encouraged attendees to be grateful for each day, talk openly when they are struggling, and remember that their stories may one day help someone else.

By the end of the conference, students left with new friendships, stronger leadership skills, and lessons that will stay with them long after the event ended. From cooperative teamwork to personal resilience, the 2026 Wisconsin Youth Leadership Conference provided experiences that will help shape the next generation of community leaders.



OEC delegates Adrena Rabas (L) and Aliya Cox (R) joined students from across Wisconsin at YLC, where they developed leadership skills, explored cooperative principles, and heard inspiring stories of perseverance and personal growth.

Beyond the Monuments: Lessons, Leadership, and Lifelong Friendships on Youth Tour

Youth Tour was a one-of-a-kind trip! I saw monuments and memorials like the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, and Air Force Memorial. Those are just a few of the amazing places I visited while I was away.

The best part of the trip wasn't seeing all the big buildings or meeting CEOs—it was the people I shared the experience with. The friends I made are one in a million, and I am so grateful that we started as strangers and ended as family.

I'd like to give a huge thank you to Tina Walden for planning our days and giving us experiences we will never forget. YLC taught me valuable life skills and showed me how much there is to see beyond our small town. It encourages you to step outside your comfort zone, meet new people, and learn that networking is an important part of life.

The most important thing I learned from my trip and YLC this year is that you have to advocate for yourself and make your own path. I never thought I would have the opportunity to spend six days in Washington, D.C., meet incredible people, and talk with individuals I had only ever seen on TV.

If I could give anyone advice about why they should participate in YLC, I would say: Go for it! There are opportunities out there—you just have to be willing to take the risk.

No risk, no reward.

I promise you will not be disappointed.

Make your mark. — Aliya Cox



Aliya Cox joined 13 other Wisconsin delegates on the 2026 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour in Washington, D.C. Sponsored by Wisconsin's electric cooperatives through WECA, the group joined more than 2,000 young leaders from across the nation for the annual event, exploring our nation's capital, developing leadership skills, and building lifelong connections.

Community Support Creates Memorable VBS Experience

Thanks to the generosity of Community Change, Grace Lutheran Church in Oconto Falls was able to provide more than 80 children with an amazing Vacation Bible School (VBS) experience. Open to all area youth, this year's VBS theme, Rain Forest Falls: Exploring the Nature of God, transformed the church into a spectacular rain forest adventure. Throughout the week, children enjoyed daily Bible lessons, music, arts and crafts, games, and other engaging activities. The week concluded with a special concert where the children proudly showcased what they learned and experienced during their journey through Rain Forest Falls.





Investing in Community, One Project at a Time

The power of community giving continues to make a lasting impact across Oconto County. Change Matters is a special grant that Community Change distributes utilizing funds provided through the generosity of the former Bay Lakes Cooperative. This grant is meant to provide far-reaching enhancement for a neighborhood or community. Recent grants were awarded to the Machickanee Players and Rainbow House Domestic Abuse Services, Inc.

Preserving a Piece of Oconto History

For more than four decades, the Machickanee Players have brought creativity, entertainment, and community engagement to Oconto County. The volunteer-driven theater organization has produced 141 plays and provided opportunities for 592 individuals to participate in every aspect of theater production, from acting and directing to set construction and costume design.

Beyond the stage, the organization offers an annual Art Poetry and Short Story Contest, hosts a youth theater camp, and makes its historic facility available for community events.

The group's home is a treasured landmark with a rich history of its own. In 1987, an anonymous benefactor generously gifted the building to the Machickanee Players. Today, it remains the oldest church structure in both the City and

County of Oconto.

To help preserve this historic building for future generations, Change Matters awarded the organization \$4,500 toward the replacement of six aging windows believed to date back to the original 1866 construction. The grant provided the momentum needed to move the project forward alongside other donations already secured by the organization.

The window restoration project is expected to be completed before winter, helping protect the historic structure while improving energy efficiency and functionality.



Change Matters funding will help Rainbow House in supporting domestic abuse victims from dangerous situations. (197301)

Enhancing Safety for Domestic Violence Survivors

Rainbow House Domestic Abuse Services, Inc., received a \$5,500 Change Matters grant to strengthen safety resources for survivors of domestic violence in Oconto County who face the highest risk of severe injury or homicide.

The period immediately following a domestic violence incident is often the most dangerous time for survivors. Yet many individuals served by Rainbow House lack access to basic safety tools. Some do not have a working phone, have had communication devices disconnected by an abusive partner, or live in remote areas where law enforcement response times can be lengthy.

The grant will help provide critical resources, including:

- Eight emergency cell phones
- Thirty-six Blink wireless security systems
- Twenty-nine hours of advocate follow-up support

These services are expected to assist approximately 25 to 30 high-risk survivors annually.

By addressing immediate safety needs and ensuring continued support from trained advocates, the project will give survivors greater access to resources, communication, and peace of mind when they need it most.



Change Matters funding is helping the Machickanee Players preserve their historic 1866 building through the replacement of six original windows, which are currently boarded up.



National Night Out

Oconto Electric Cooperative was proud to participate in National Night Out in Lena—a wonderful summer evening filled with community spirit and family fun. Lena was one of several communities in our area celebrating this annual event, and we were excited to be a part of it.

Visitors stopped by the cooperative's booth to explore electrical safety resources designed for both children and adults. Young attendees enjoyed receiving hard hats, bracelets and taking photos with our lineman cutout, while learning important lessons about staying safe around electricity.

National Night Out also reflects Cooperative Principle #5: Education, Training, and Information, one of the seven guiding principles that cooperatives follow. We're grateful for the opportunity to connect with our community and share information and resources that benefit our members and strengthen our communities.

Thanks to everyone who stopped by—and to all who helped make the evening such a success!

Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

September kicks off the fall shoulder season, when cooler mornings and milder evenings often mean you can give your heating/cooling system a break. Open windows, use ceiling fans and enjoy the fresh air whenever temperatures allow. It's also the perfect time to schedule annual HVAC maintenance before colder weather arrives. Because demand is typically lower during the fall, heating and cooling professionals often have greater availability, making (58201) it easier to book an appointment. Regular maintenance can improve your system's efficiency, help prevent unexpected breakdowns and keep your home comfortable all year long.

Source: Dept. of Energy

HIDDEN ACCOUNT NUMBERS

Oconto Electric Cooperative hides two account numbers in the local pages of the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News* each month. If you spot your account number, call our office before you receive the next issue, and OEC will give you a \$15 credit on your electric bill or a \$25 credit if you have a load management receiver.



Ryan Miller, CEO

Katie Jagiello, Communications and Marketing

7479 REA Road, P.O. Box 168, Oconto Falls, WI 54154
www.ocontoelectric.com

Hours of Operation: 7:30 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

Hours of Lobby: 9:00 a.m.– 3 p.m. Friday

Non-emergencies: 920-846-2816

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