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WisBusiness: Rural issues forum covers health care, farming, local food initiatives
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VIROQUA -- Issues ranging from health care for farmers to local food initiatives consumed the first of three rural issues forums being held across the state by the Center for Rural Affairs.

Steph Larsen and Virginia Wolking, rural policy organizers from the Nebraska-based center, moderated the session Monday in Vernon County.

Similar sessions will be held Tuesday at the public library in Menomonie and Wednesday at the village hall in Superior.

Several people at the Monday forum said health care costs were a problem for area farmers and often necessitated that somebody in farm families hold down a job outside the farm to get benefits.

According to a report by the Access Project, nine in 10 farm and ranch operators have health insurance, but 23 percent report that premiums and other out-of-pocket health care costs are causing financial difficulties for themselves and their families.

Some spent as much as 42 percent of their incomes on premiums and overall health care costs. Forty-four percent included in the report spent at least 10 percent of their annual income on premiums, prescriptions and other medical costs.

The group has emphasized the health care issue in recent meetings across the region. "In order to attract more farmers to grow food for a sustainable food system, we need meaningful health care reform that addresses the needs of farmers, rural communities and small business owners," Larsen said in a center publication.

"The stark reality of health care costs for farmers, who often must purchase insurance as individuals and pay more for it as a result, is enough to make anyone waver in their desire to start a farm."

Methods for developing local food markets and distribution were also discussed. The Vernon County area has started a local food initiative and has more than 30 CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) producers.

Sue Noble of the Vernon Economic Development Association said she is working with a number of startup businesses that are involved with the local food initiative.

Mary Christensen of Prairie Ridge School in Viroqua said people need to be better educated about ties between human health and organic farming and agriculture based on maintaining the health of the soil. Vernon County has the most organic farms of any county in Wisconsin. Organic Valley, an organic cooperative based in La Farge, was a sponsor for the forum.

The challenge of retaining, and attracting young people to farming also was emphasized at the forum. Jack Knight, an organic inspector based in Iowa, said Minnesota and Iowa have model programs for beginning farmers. "There are programs that are out there and working," Knight said.

Larsen and Wolking gave tips on how to approach the media and state legislators with concerns about rural issues. The Center for Rural Affairs offers training for community leaders in rural areas and serves as an information clearing house on a variety of topics ranging from grants to community development resources.

The center was established in 1973 by rural Nebraskans concerned about family farms and rural communities. The center has focused on rural micro enterprise development, federal farm and rural policy, research and analysis of rural economic issues and trends and work with beginning farmers and ranchers.

Center organizers have been working in Montana, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin in recent months and often work with local sponsors on forums. The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service is sponsoring the forum in Menomonie and the Northeast Entrepreneur Fund is sponsoring the Superior forum.