



# “A Place to Belong” staff role-model behavior

*“When our staff has an attitude or behavior change, members follow their lead.”*

Sue Wilken, Executive Director  
“A Place to Belong”  
Fergus Falls and Detroit Lakes



## Partnering for Healthy Transformation

As a result of partnering with PartnerSHIP 4 Health, the staff at “A Place to Belong” (AP2B), a social club for those with serious mental health issues and located in Fergus Falls and Detroit Lakes, is making an effort to role-model healthier lifestyle behaviors.

In March of 2013, PS4H began a “Health Equity” initiative. This entailed partnering with organizations who serve populations that experience health-related challenges due to poor housing, disabilities, income, chronic disease and other social determinants of health. AP2B was thrilled when offered the opportunity to participate as the pilot site for this new initiative.

Since then, AP2B has enthusiastically been working to help their staff and members embrace healthier habits. “We have been able to make some significant changes,” said Sue Wilken, Executive Director at AP2B. “When staff undergoes attitude and behavior changes, members follow suit.”

“One of the biggest health issues for those who have a serious mental health condition is often heavy smoking,” Wilken said. “PS4H gave us the opportunity to send three staff members to attend a continuing education conference focusing on mental health and smoking and they were able to come back and share the education with members,”

“We now offer assistance to our staff and members who smoke; it has a varying degree of success,” commented Wilken. “If staff is tobacco-free, we can better encourage members to come alongside them to quit too.”

AP2B’s walking program, which Wilken states was what really helped healthy changes gain a foothold at their facility, has motivated members to get out and walk a few miles a day.

“With every ten miles a member walks, they earn a self-care item, such as a shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, things like that,” Wilken said. “But once they reach fifty miles, they are rewarded with a five dollar gift card they can use at almost every location in town, except to purchase cigarettes or alcohol. We have already had a gentleman reach the fifty mile mark and many of our members have reached the ten mile mark as well,” Wilken added.

“I had a member come up to me recently in a hurry and say she had everything packed and wanted to know if she had time to get her mile walk in before we all left for our camping trip,” laughed Wilken. “The guidance that PS4H has provided really got things started for us in terms of staff and members taking personal responsibility for their own wellness.” “The attitude difference around here is amazing,” Wilken added enthusiastically.

In addition to helping members quit smoking and encouraging them to take a 1-2 mile walk every day, AP2B has also been helping themselves and their members to a healthy dose of water, fruits and vegetables. “We used to drink a lot of pop at the Fergus Falls location. After setting up a two and a half gallon water container with lemons in it, the results were almost immediate. From day one members started coming in and drinking lots and lots of water,” stated Wilken.

AP2B offers its members a facility to prepare their own meals as well as fruits and vegetables for meals and snacks. “We have always had fruits and vegetables available but due to an increased emphasis on wellness we have made the commitment to provide up to two fruits and vegetables per day,” Wilken said.

“Our staff has been choosing to eat salads during lunch, which has encouraged our members to do likewise,” stated Wilken. “If we can model healthier eating, through fruits, vegetables and salads, our members see that and follow by our example.” AP2B and its staff have been pleased with the results of the PS4H initiative. Members at both facilities reap the benefits as the staff has been given the resources, training, and encouragement to consider and incorporate healthier habits.

“We would not have been able to do this without PS4H,” Wilken added appreciatively. “The difference is amazing. People are catching on and the overall attitude change has quickly turned things around. As attitudes change, the behavior seems to follow.”

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