

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

APHSA Honors Kate Luster, Director of Rock County Human Services, with the Excellence Award for Local Member

Arlington, VA — June 16, 2026: The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) is proud to announce that Kate Luster, Director of Rock County (WI) Human Services, has been selected as the recipient of the 2026 APHSA Excellence Award for Local Member, recognizing her courageous leadership and transformative contributions to improving outcomes for children and families through community partnership, prevention, and human-centered systems change.

The APHSA Excellence Award for Local Members honors outstanding individuals and agencies that have made exceptional contributions to the human services sector. Presented annually, the award recognizes exemplary innovation, creativity, and commitment to improving outcomes for children and families while advancing APHSA's vision of thriving communities built on human potential. The award was presented during the [APHSA National Human Services Summit](#), held June 14–17, 2026, in Arlington, Virginia.

Throughout her tenure as Director of Rock County Human Services, Luster has challenged traditional approaches to child welfare and championed a new model rooted in dignity, trust, and authentic partnership with families. Her leadership reflects a belief that lasting change happens when communities are empowered to help design the systems intended to serve them. Reflecting on the recognition, Luster shared:

“I am sincerely grateful to APHSA for this honor. The work that contributed to this recognition has been the most meaningful of my career. What began with the opportunity to listen to a group of brave and resilient parents who had experienced the child welfare system—and who were willing to tell us where we had fallen short—has become the foundation of a transformed system, co-designed with those most impacted by it. I am equally grateful to the child welfare professionals who approached this work with humility, courage, and integrity, embracing difficult truths and committing themselves to meaningful change on behalf of the families they serve. I hope this recognition shines a light on these families, whose courage, honesty, and insights continue to help us better support families to stay safely together in Rock County.”

Luster has been the driving force behind *Rock Families First*, a groundbreaking systems transformation movement that reimagined how Rock County partners with children, families, and communities. Central to this work was a co-design process that brought together Black parents from Beloit and Child Protective Services staff to collaboratively identify solutions and shape a new vision for family well-being. Rather than imposing changes on the community, Luster

intentionally shifted power to families with lived experience, inviting them to define what safety, support, and success should look like.

Through *Rock Families First*, Luster demonstrated how communities can co-create solutions that build on family strengths and support the full realization of human potential. Her leadership was marked by a willingness to confront difficult truths and build trust through accountability. As part of the initiative, Luster publicly acknowledged harm caused by previous child welfare practices and offered a direct apology to affected families—an act that helped establish a foundation for reconciliation, transparency, and partnership.

Under Luster's leadership, Rock County has achieved significant improvements in child and family well-being while maintaining child safety. As of June 2025, the county experienced a 58 percent reduction in the number of children in out-of-home care, a 53 percent reduction in residential care placements, and a 79 percent reduction in reentries to care within one year. Community-initiated requests for support increased by 165 percent, reflecting growing trust in the system, while child safety outcomes remained stable. These results are directly connected to Luster's commitment to prevention, upstream investment, and community-driven solutions.

Luster also invested deeply in organizational culture and leadership development, strengthening workforce readiness and aligning leadership around a shared vision centered on family well-being. By creating stronger connections between frontline staff and executive leadership and fostering a culture of continuous learning, she helped position Rock County for sustained transformation.

Colleagues and community members alike describe Luster as a leader who listens deeply, embraces accountability, and remains steadfast in her commitment to doing what is right for children and families—even when the work is difficult. Her willingness to share power, center lived expertise, and remain focused on keeping families safely together has positioned Rock County as a model for communities across the country.

The APHSA Excellence Award for Local Members recognizes leaders who move beyond traditional service delivery to create lasting change through innovation, community partnership, and a steadfast commitment to human potential. Through her visionary leadership and unwavering dedication to families, Kate Luster exemplifies the spirit and purpose of this award. APHSA congratulates Kate Luster on this well-deserved recognition and thanks her for her extraordinary contributions to strengthening human services systems and improving outcomes for children, families, and communities.

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About APHSA

The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) supports leaders from state, county, and city human services agencies to advance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities nationwide. As the premier bipartisan membership association for public human services, they work with their members to generate pragmatic solutions grounded in lived experience. Visit aphsa.org to learn more.

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