

## Celebrating Leadership in Public Service: WWIG Announces 2026 Award Recipients

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**Madison, WI** — Wisconsin Women in Government (WWIG) will recognize three exceptional leaders in public service, Lauren Lanza, Julie Ahren, and Samina “Sam” Grimes, at its [2026 Annual Scholarship & Recognition Gala](#), taking place on Wednesday, April 29, 2026, at Monona Terrace in Madison. From crisis response to child welfare to workforce development, their leadership is helping strengthen systems and improve lives statewide.

The evening will celebrate women making a meaningful impact across Wisconsin through leadership, service, and innovation in government and public service.

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The Rising Star Award will be presented to **Lauren Lanza, Crisis Coordinator with Waukesha County Health and Human Services**, in recognition of her leadership and impact in her career. Since beginning her public service work in 2016, Lanza has played a key role in transforming crisis response systems in Wisconsin. She helped launch Waukesha County’s embedded mental health clinician program within law enforcement, recognized with a statewide innovation award, and now oversees a Crisis Stabilization facility, a 24/7 crisis team, and multiple co-responder programs. Her leadership in integrating crisis response with 911 dispatch and the 988 Lifeline is helping reshape how communities respond to behavioral health emergencies.



The Legacy Award will be presented to **Julie Ahnen, Child Protective Services (CPS) Manager with the Dane County Department of Human Services**, honoring her more than four decades of service and lasting impact on child welfare systems. Ahnen has been a driving force in shifting child protective services toward preventative, family-centered approaches, helping reduce reliance on foster care while strengthening support for families. A leader in advancing equity, she has championed efforts to address racial disparities and improve accountability through data-driven decision-making. Her work implementing Family First Prevention Services Act standards and mentoring generations of social workers has left an enduring mark on public service in Wisconsin.



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## Virginia Hart Award

The 2025 Virginia Hart Award winner is **Samina Grimes with Department of Workforce Development**. Samina “Sam” Grimes is an exceptional public servant whose career embodies the dedication, compassion, and leadership celebrated by the Virginia Hart Award. Known for her unwavering integrity, warmth, and accountability, Sam consistently exceeds expectations, whether mentoring new staff, advancing innovative vocational rehabilitation programs, or supporting individuals and families with complex needs. Her broad professional experience, from counseling to benefits work to leading key initiatives like IPS and Project SEARCH, reflects her commitment to creating equitable, person-centered pathways to success. Beyond her formal roles, she has spent more than two decades caring for vulnerable individuals through her Adult Family Home, serving as a guardian, supporting community members in crisis, and offering guidance far beyond the bounds of her job. Sam's humanity, forward-thinking leadership, and lifelong dedication to uplifting others have made a profound and lasting impact across Wisconsin.



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“Lauren, Julie, and Sam represent the very best of public service,” said Emily Petersen, Board President of Wisconsin Women in Government. “Each of them is making a meaningful impact, strengthening systems, supporting families, and improving outcomes across Wisconsin. From crisis response to child welfare to workforce development, their leadership is helping shape stronger communities statewide, and we’re proud to recognize their work.”

The WWIG Annual Gala brings together professionals and public servants from across Wisconsin for an evening of networking, recognition, and celebration. The event includes heavy hors d'oeuvres, a cash bar, and a silent auction supporting WWIG scholarships and leadership development initiatives. WWIG is also honored to welcome Chief Justice Jill Karofsky of the Wisconsin Supreme Court as the evening’s keynote speaker.

Proceeds from the gala support WWIG scholarships and leadership development initiatives that empower and advance women across Wisconsin’s public sector.

To learn more or register, visit: [wiscwomeningovernment.org/events](https://wiscwomeningovernment.org/events)

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*Wisconsin Women in Government was founded in 1987 to celebrate and support talented women who choose a career in government service. Over the past 35 years, WWIG has awarded over \$1.2 million in scholarships to women pursuing careers in government service, including undergraduate scholarships. WWIG has also provided numerous networking, professional development, and leadership training opportunities for professional women.*

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