



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 18, 2026

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Monarchs Make an Impact Inside and Outside Institutions

Residents raise monarchs, find peace with nature

Madison, Wis. – Residents at Redgranite Correctional Institution (RGCI) are raising monarch butterflies and following their paths as they migrate from the facility to Mexico. Launched in 2025, the Refuge for Growth, Change and Inspiration Monarch Program includes a dedicated monarch butterfly habitat enclosure, pollinator gardens throughout the institution’s property, and tagged butterflies that will fly thousands of miles to their overwintering habitat in Mexico.

RGCI Recreation Leader Carrie Jahnke started the program last year after exploring options to add to its list of programs that appeal to the less active population at the institution, including bird watching, card making, flower arrangements, and chair yoga programs.

“I was looking for something that wasn’t focused on sports and would work well for residents who may have mobility concerns,” Jahnke said. Twenty residents participate in the program, which is held once a year from June to September.

Participants are divided into groups of five, and each group is assigned a day of the week to care for the butterflies. They do various tasks including data collection, cleaning leaves, replenishing leaves, and checking eggs and caterpillars. Jahnke provides videos and other additional learning to the participants every Wednesday.

The residents find it peaceful and relaxing to work with the monarchs. It also gives them a way to give back to their communities and connect with their families on something they can do both inside and outside the facility.

“Residents really enjoy learning about the flowers needed for monarchs and the horticulture part of the program,” Jahnke added.

Success leads to permanent monarch habitat

Working closely with two conservation organizations — Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin (NRFW) and Monarch Watch — the program has grown in capacity. Jahnke received 100 larvae this year from Monarch Watch, up from 60 larvae in 2025.

“Monarch butterfly populations have been declining for years, and it's wonderful that RGCI is getting involved with efforts to conserve them. We need as many Wisconsinites as possible to learn about monarchs and do their part to help them thrive,” said Shelly Torkelson, communications director at NRFW.

RGCI raises three generations of monarchs in a program cycle. The first two generations of butterflies only live for a few weeks with the sole purpose of reproducing. The third generation doesn't reproduce therefore has enough energy to migrate to Mexico.

In 2025, Jahnke used a small outdoor space on facility grounds to raise the monarchs. Due to its success last year, RGCI was approved for a grant from NRFW to build a dedicated structure to raise the monarchs.

This structure includes two rearing cabinets: one for the larvae stage and one for the caterpillar stage. Once they become butterflies, they are moved from the rearing cabinet to the open-air space inside the structure that has milkweed and monarch-friendly flowers. This allows the butterflies to build strength before they are released into the wild. They typically stay in this area for two to three days before being released.

RGCI landscapers also invested time and resources into helping the monarchs by learning which flowers were monarch-friendly and planting those around the facility's grounds.

Nathan Lecker, a resident of RGCI and current participant of the monarch program, joined the program because he liked raising monarchs with his family as a child. “I enjoy being part of this program and being able to give back to the community,” he added. “We can make a big impact from the inside [of the institution].”

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