



UW-MADISON EXTENSION

# Plarn Mats Service Project

## Activity Plan

### Goal:

Using plastic grocery bags instead of yarn, youth will work together to create a crocheted mat to be used for warmth and comfort by people who have no shelter.

### Life Skills:

- Community Service
- Concern for Others
- Wise Use of Resources

### Grade Levels

All ages

### Length of

### Experience:

- Cutting Loops (5<sup>th</sup> grade or older)—15-20 minutes
- Making Plarn (Kindergarten or older—15-20 minutes)
- Crocheting—4-6 hours for experienced crocheters

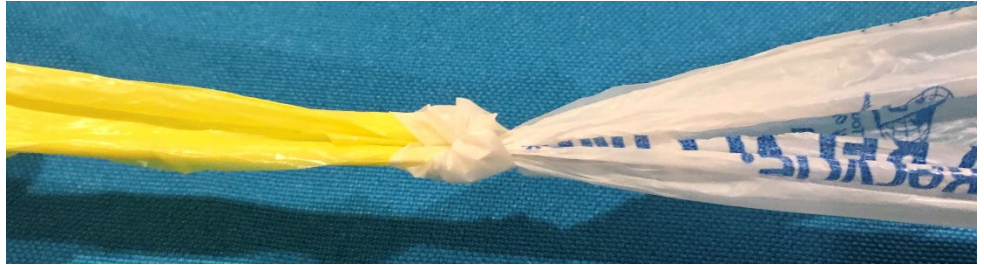
### Supplies Needed for

#### One Mat:

- 600-800 clean plastic grocery bags
- Ruler
- Scissors or rolling cutter and quilting mat
- Size Q crochet hook

### Do Ahead:

- Learn more about homelessness in your state and local area. Have resources ready for youth participants who may be experiencing homelessness. See Homelessness in Wisconsin resources at the end of this lesson.
- Plan for your donation.
- Sort through bags to make sure they are clean, dry, and whole.



## BACKGROUND

About one trillion single-use plastic bags are used every day in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the average household takes home about 1500 plastic grocery bags per year.<sup>2</sup> Some get reused. Others are recycled. However, most plastic bags are thrown in the trash or become litter, polluting the land and waterways.

How could youth reuse plastic bags to make something useful? Youth can cut plastic shopping bags into loops to make “plarn,” or plastic yarn. Then, using the plarn, they can crochet large mats. Some individuals who experience homelessness use the mats as cushions or blankets.

In Wisconsin, nearly 5000 people do not have homes. Individuals and families can experience challenges that lead to homelessness. Also, larger societal problems—such as housing issues, low-wage jobs, and public attitudes about homelessness—can make it harder for those experiencing homelessness. Many individuals and families are in shelters, but a small percentage are unsheltered.<sup>3</sup>

## ACTIVITY PLANS

### Planning Your Donation

Before starting to make plarn mats, youth should decide where and how they will make donations. It is possible to donate bags, plarn, or completed mats.

1. **Identify a local organization that provides homeless services.**
  - Search online for “plarn mats” and the name of your state; or
  - Check with service agencies, churches, or other homeless supports
2. **Contact the organization.** Explain the plarn mats project. Then ask:
  - Do your clients experiencing homelessness want plarn mats? If so, do you have a way to get mats to people who need them?
  - Do you have a plarn mat-making effort? If yes, how many mats are needed? What special instructions do you have for donations?
3. **If the organization does not have a plarn mat project, help the youth make a choice.** Some organizations do not have capacity to support a plarn mats project. Encourage the youth to consider—
  - Finding a regional or state plarn mats project they can support.
  - Asking the local organization if youth can help with a different need.

### Donations in Wisconsin

If your local community doesn't have a mat-making project, consider donating to Mercy Mats of West Allis. Over the last several years, the organization has made hundreds of plarn mats for people in Wisconsin who are experiencing homelessness. They can accept 1) plarn balls made with plastic loops that are 3-inch width, or 2) complete plarn mats made with 3-inch plarn that are 3x6 feet. Mail donations to: Mercy Mats, 1240 East Elm Road, Oak Creek, WI 53154.

**Developed by:**

- Lily Schwartz, Club President of Pleasant Hill Go Getters 4-H Club
- Rachel Hart-Brinson, Eau Claire County 4-H Program Educator
- Monica Lobenstein, State Learning Resources Specialist
- Andrea Rippley, Jackson & Trempealeau Counties 4-H Program Educator

**Photo credits:**

- Rachel Hart-Brinson (cutting loops and making plarn steps)
- Donna Reimesch (completed mats)
- Beth Schwartz (crochet steps)

**Academic Standards:**

NCSS 5—Interactions between individuals, groups, and institutions

NCSS 7—How people organize for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

**Sources:**

- Fox 8 WGHP (2016). [How to Make a PLARN Bed Roll](https://youtu.be/yr_WHW_tGSE). [https://youtu.be/yr\\_WHW\\_tGSE](https://youtu.be/yr_WHW_tGSE)
- [Happy Hookers Crochet Club](https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Product-Service/The-Happy-Hookers-Crochet-Club-1410991302344990/). <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Product-Service/The-Happy-Hookers-Crochet-Club-1410991302344990/>
- [Hooking for the Homeless](https://www.facebook.com/HookingForTheHomeless/). <https://www.facebook.com/HookingForTheHomeless/>
- [Mats for a Mission](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1731479957104391/). <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1731479957104391/>
- Reimesch, Donna (2020). [Mercy Mats West Allis](https://www.facebook.com/MercyMatsWestAllis/). <https://www.facebook.com/MercyMatsWestAllis/>

**References**

- <sup>1</sup> Earth Day.org. [Green Cities Fact Sheet: How much disposable plastic we use](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania State University. [Tax the Plastic](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Kaeding, D. (2020). [HUD: About 4.5K People Were Homeless In Wisconsin In 2019](#). Wisconsin Public Radio.

**GROUP PROJECT**

The Plarn Mats Service Project is a club, group, or community project. All ages and abilities can help. It takes many hands to collect bags, flatten and cut bags, make plarn, and crochet mats. Each project activity has a separate handout so youth or adult project coordinators can get the instructions to the right people.

**INTRODUCE THE PROJECT**

Share some of the background information about plastic bags with youth participants. Ask them the following questions:

- What happens to plastic bags after people bring home their groceries or other purchased items? What happens to them at your house?

Next, share some background information about homelessness in the state. Then, ask:

- What are the differences in life between people who are experiencing homelessness and people who are not?
- How do you think it might feel to experience homelessness? (Encourage the youth to use feeling words, such as sad or scared.)

**What Youth Can Do to Help**

Tell the youth that if they know someone who is experiencing homelessness, help is available. Provide a handout for each youth participant with helpful phone numbers, websites, and/or shelter locations that they can use or share.

Explain that some people use plastic bags in a creative way to help people who don't have shelter. Ask older youth leaders who have been helping to plan the project to explain its steps and how everyone can get involved.

**PROJECT STEPS****Collecting Bags**

Plarn mats require lots and lots of bags. Here are a few ideas for how to collect plastic shopping bags for your project.

1. Ask club members and their families to donate bags. If they are able, ask them to cut the bags into strips and knot them together to create balls of plarn.
2. Ask your local grocery store if they will allow your club or group to have a collection box near the store entrance. Tell the store manager what the mats are for and which club you are from. Create a sign with your club name, why you are collecting bags, and include the 4-H clover!
3. Ask your county Extension office about a place to collect plastic bags.

When you have collected the bags, sort through them.

- Use clean bags. Discard dirty bags in a bag-recycling bin.
- Whole bags work best too. Holes in bags weaken the plarn.

Find handouts of instructions for Cutting Loops, Making Plarn, and Crocheting the Mat on the following pages.

## GROUP REFLECT AND APPLY

At the end of the project, ask the following questions. Encourage them to pair up with someone else to share their answers. Then, share responses together as a group.

- During this project, how did you help someone else in your club or group? How did someone else help you?
- How did it feel to help with part of a project that involved so many people?
- What other projects that take lots of people to complete could you be part of?
- What did you learn during the plarn mats project that could help you in other team projects?



## EXPLORE MORE

- What else could your club or group do to support those experiencing homelessness? Ask a local homeless support organization what they need. Then, think about how youth can help.
- Volunteer in person at a local shelter or service organization for homelessness. What might you learn by working directly with these services?
- Television often shows homelessness as people living on the street. However, that is not true for most people who experience homelessness. So, where do most of them live? How is homelessness different in rural, suburban, and urban areas? Why do people, including families with children, lose their homes? What individual and societal factors contribute to homelessness? What other questions do you have about the topic? Use the internet and community organizations to learn more. Then, practice public speaking by sharing what you learned with your club and community.
- Explore career opportunities related to this project, including learning a craft or trade, environmental science, social work, and more.
- Making plarn is a great way to reuse plastic shopping bags.
  - Let's get creative. What else could you make with plarn?
  - Let's go green. What could you do to help your community reduce use of plastic shopping bags?

## HOMELESSNESS IN WISCONSIN

Dear Project Leaders,

Have resources ready to share with youth participants. Let them know that it is okay to ask for help if they or someone they know are experiencing homelessness. Make yourself available to talk. You do not need to be an expert to help connect youth or families to organizations that can provide support. Start here:

- Reach out to your local School Social Worker or other school district homeless services coordinator.
- [The 12 Biggest Myths about Homelessness in America](https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2019/september/HomelessQandA.html), New York University—  
<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2019/september/HomelessQandA.html>
- Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
  - [Homeless Services](https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/homeless)—<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/homeless>
  - [Support for Families Experiencing Homelessness](https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/providers/homelessness)—  
<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/providers/homelessness>
- U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness
  - [Wisconsin Homelessness Statistics](https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/wi/) - <https://www.usich.gov/homelessness-statistics/wi/>
- Homeless Shelter Directory
  - [Wisconsin Homeless Shelters and Social Services](https://www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/wisconsin.html)—  
<https://www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/wisconsin.html>

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UW-MADISON EXTENSION

# Plarn Mats—Cutting the Loops

## Instructions Handout

### Goal:

Using plastic grocery bags instead of yarn, youth will work together to create a crocheted mat to be used for warmth and comfort by people who have no shelter.

### Life Skills:

- Community Service
- Concern for Others
- Wise Use of Resources

### Grade Levels:

Grade 3 or higher

### Length of

### Experience:

- Cutting Loops—15-20 minutes

### Supplies:

- 600-800 clean plastic grocery bags
- Ruler
- Scissors or rotary cutter and quilting mat

### Do Ahead:

- Collect the bags.
- Sort bags to make sure they are clean, dry, and whole.
- Discard dirty bags.

### Developed by:

- Lily Schwartz, Youth Leader and Club Member with Pleasant Hill Go Getters 4-H Club
- Rachel Hart-Brinson, Eau Claire County 4-H Program Educator
- Monica Lobenstein, State Learning Resources Specialist
- Andrea Rippley, Jackson & Trempealeau Counties 4-H Program Educator

### Photo credits:

- Rachel Hart-Brinson



Set up an open space to lay out and cut your bags. If you have lots of different bags, sort them into similar sizes. Follow the instructions below, or watch the [Cutting Plastic Bags to Make Plarn video](#)—\_\_\_\_\_.

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

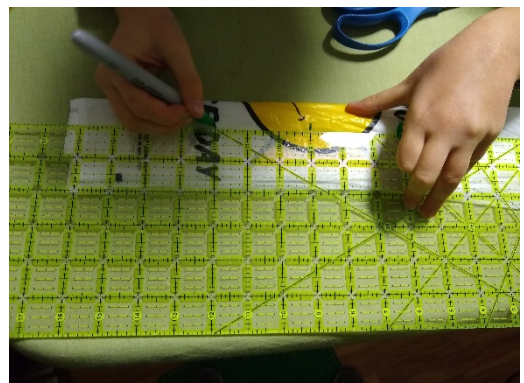
1. Make a stack of three (3) or four (4) bags and roll them, starting with the long side.



2. If your bag has handles, cut off the handles so that you have a straight edge along the top.



3. Measure your bag and mark with a sharpie (or simply cut as you measure) strips about three (3) inches wide.



4. Continue to cut until you reach the bottom. Throw the bottom section away, since it will not make a loop.

With scissors:



With rotary cutter:



5. You will need a lot of loops! When you unfold the loops, you will have circles of plastic bag.



### Cutting Tips:

- A pair of sharp scissors or a quilting pad and rotary cutter work well. Be careful when cutting with sharp blades.
- The bottom of some bags is wider than other bags. Try to waste as little as you can.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What did you do to help with the plarn mats project?
- What went well about the part(s) that you helped with?
- What was challenging or difficult?
- What does this project mean to you? Why is it important to help with projects like this?



UW-MADISON EXTENSION

# Plarn Mats—Making Plarn

## Instructions Handout

### Goal:

Using plastic grocery bags instead of yarn, youth will work together to create a crocheted mat to be used for warmth and comfort by people who have no shelter.

### Life Skills:

- Community Service
- Concern for Others
- Wise Use of Resources

### Grade Levels:

All ages

### Length of

### Experience:

- Making Plarn—15-20 minutes

### Supplies:

- Plastic bag loops

### Do Ahead:

- Make sure you have plenty of pre-cut loops.

### Developed by:

- Lily Schwartz, Youth Leader and Club Member with Pleasant Hill Go Getters 4-H Club
- Rachel Hart-Brinson, Eau Claire County 4-H Program Educator
- Monica Lobenstein, State Learning Resources Specialist
- Andrea Rippley, Jackson & Trempealeau Counties 4-H Program Educator

### Photo credits:

- Rachel Hart-Brinson



Now it is time to connect the strips to make “**plarn**,” a combination of the words, “plastic” and “yarn.” Photos with written instructions for this step are provided below for both left-handed and right-handed youth, or watch the [Making Plarn from Plastic Bag Loops video](https://youtu.be/Me9Jy_hbH30)—[https://youtu.be/Me9Jy\\_hbH30](https://youtu.be/Me9Jy_hbH30).

## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

### ← Left-Handed (LH)

### Right-Handed (RH) →

1.

**LH Instructions:** Take two plastic loops. Lay the first one on the table to your right so that it is stretched out into an oval. Lay the second so that its right side overlaps the first loop's left side.



2.

**LH:** Reach into the middle of the second loop with your left hand and lift up the left side of the first loop.



**RH:** Reach into the middle of the second loop with your right hand and lift up the right side of the first loop.



**LH:** Grab the right side of the second loop with your left hand. With your right hand, grab the first loop.



**RH:** Grab the left side of the second loop with your right hand. With your left hand, grab the first loop.



4.

**Both LH & RH:** Pull your hands away from each other to tighten the knot you have created.



5. Repeat the steps to add more loops to your plarn and make really long strands.

### Plarn-Making Tip:

Plarn does not tangle like yarn so you can just store it in a plastic bag.

### Connecting Two Lengths of Plarn:

If you want to connect two lengths of plarn in different plastic bags, lay the two end loops on the table, overlapping as before. Reach into the middle. Lift up the bottom loop. Grab the bag of plarn and bring the whole bag through the loop. Pull the two loops to tighten the knot.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What did you do to help with the plarn mats project?
- What went well about the part(s) that you helped with?
- What was challenging or difficult?
- What does this project mean to you? Why is it important to help with projects like this?



UW-MADISON EXTENSION

# Plarn Mats—Crocheting the Mat

## Instructions Handout

### Goal:

Using plastic grocery bags instead of yarn, youth will work together to create a crocheted mat to be used for warmth and comfort by people who have no shelter.

### Life Skills:

- Community Service
- Concern for Others
- Wise Use of Resources

### Grade Levels:

All ages

### Length of

### Experience:

- Crocheting—4-6 hours for experienced crocheters

### Supplies:

- Many bags of pre-made plarn
- Size Q crochet hook

### Do Ahead:

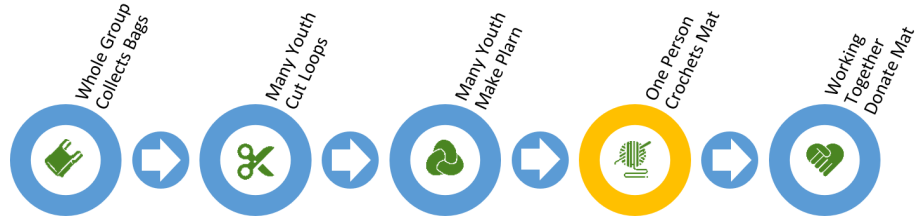
- Make plarn.

### Developed by:

- Lily Schwartz, Youth Leader and Club Member with Pleasant Hill Go Getters 4-H Club
- Rachel Hart-Brinson, Eau Claire County 4-H Program Educator
- Monica Lobenstein, State Learning Resources Specialist
- Andrea Rippley, Jackson & Trempealeau Counties 4-H Program Educator

### Photo credits:

- Donna Reimesch (images of completed mats)
- Beth Schwartz (images of crochet steps)



When you have the plarn, you are ready to begin crocheting. All you will need is a size Q crochet hook (17-15.75mm) and lots and lots of plarn. Some people use an N hook. Experiment to see what works best for you to get used to the differences of working with plarn instead of fiber yarn. Let's get started!

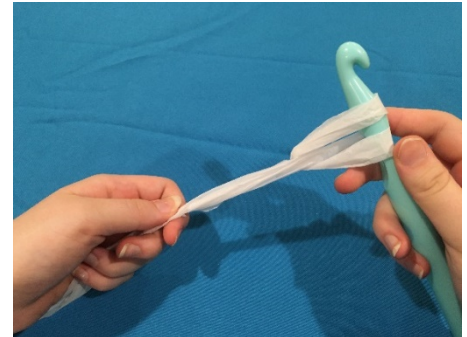
**Note:** The written instructions are for right-handed crochet. You could also watch one of the following How to Crochet for Beginners videos:

- [Right Hand](https://youtu.be/uqQWpTOx22c) (<https://youtu.be/uqQWpTOx22c>)
- [Left Hand](https://youtu.be/5uf-2NZZOT4) (<https://youtu.be/5uf-2NZZOT4>)

## START TO CROCHET—CHAINING

### Create a Slip Knot

Hold the end of the plarn strand and place your hand inside the first loop. Your hand should be at the end of the loop. With your hand still inside the loop pinch the first knot (using the hand inside the loop) and don't let go. Use your other hand to pull the top of the loop over your hand (while still holding the first knot). Do not pull it tight. You should then see a "lasso," this is the slip knot. Insert the crochet hook through the knot. Pull it loosely around the hook (pull the long strand of plarn coming from the bag).



1. Grasp the long end of the plarn coming from your bag so you are making a fist. The plarn should be in the middle of your fist. Point your pointer finger out and wrap it around your finger.



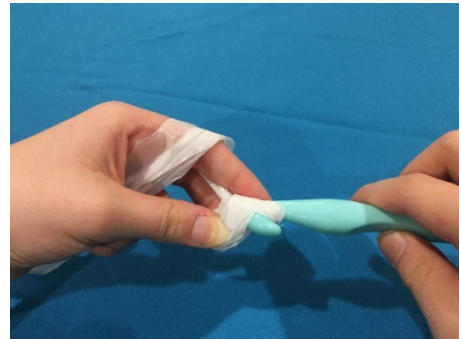
2. To begin creating a chain, or **chaining**, use the middle finger and thumb of your left hand to hold the bottom of the slip knot on the hook. Place the crochet hook in front of the strand wrapped around your finger.



3. Then turn the hook so it's pointing down, catching the plarn behind it. This is called **yarning over**.



4. Carefully pull it through the loop already on the hook. This is your first stitch.

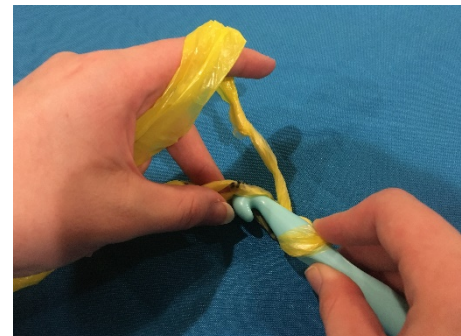


5. Continue doing this so you have a 35-stitch strand or chain. It should be about 33 inches in length.

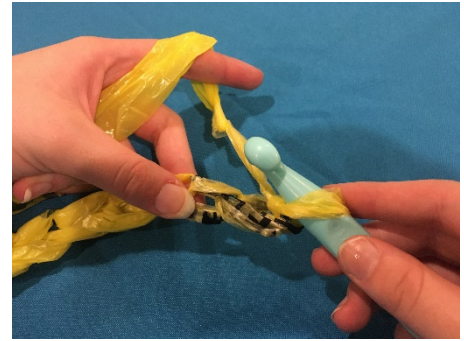


## Crochet the First Row

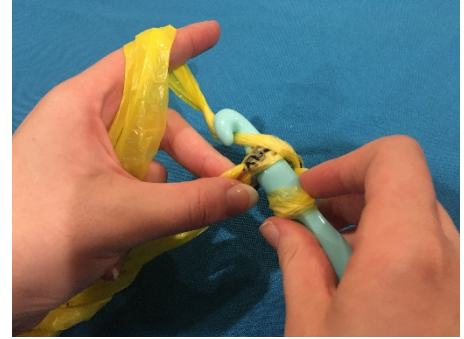
6. This project will be **single crocheted**. To begin crocheting, chain two (2) more times. Turn the hook so it is pointing toward the end of the chain. Then...



... count back two (2) stitches, not counting the stitch on the hook. Insert the hook in the second stitch.



7. Place the plarn so it is on top of the hook. Turn the hook so it is pointing downward, catching the plarn.



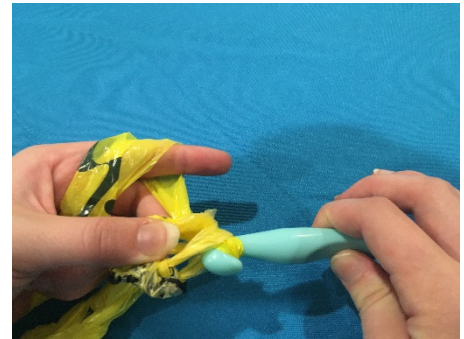
8. Slowly pull through just the first stitch on the hook. You should now have two (2) stitches on the hook.



9. Yarn over, and...



... pull through both of the stitches. Continue doing this in every chain stitch.



**Continue to Crochet**

When you get to the end of the row chain one. Then turn around so the rest of the row is now on your left. Continue single crocheting until the mat is six (6) feet long.

**Connecting More Plarn**

The [Making Plarn from Plastic Bag Loops video \(2:35\)](https://youtu.be/Me9Jy_hbH30?t=155)—[https://youtu.be/Me9Jy\\_hbH30?t=155](https://youtu.be/Me9Jy_hbH30?t=155)—shows how to connect more plarn, or follow the instructions here:

To connect two lengths of plarn in different plastic bags, lay the two loops on the table, overlapping as before. Reach into the middle. Lift up the bottom loop. Grab the bag of plarn and bring the whole bag through the loop. Pull the two loops to tighten the knot.

**Finish the Mat**

After you have crocheted the mat to about six feet in length, it is time **finish off**. This is very simple to do. If you have leftover plarn on the strand, untie it so there is just one (1) or two (2) loops left. Next, yarn over and pull through the bottom as if you are making another stitch. (Note: There should still be a loop on your hook from the previous stitch.) Instead of leaving the loop on the hook, pull it through the loop that is still on the hook. Gently pull to tighten the loop. Then, weave the end into the mat to hide the end.

**Congratulations!**

The mat is complete. Take a picture and send it to all those who helped collect and sort bags, cut loops, and make plarn. Then, the club or group can donate the mat!

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- What did you do to help with the plarn mats project?
- What went well about the part(s) that you helped with?
- What was challenging or difficult?
- What does this project mean to you? Why is it important to help with projects like this?