



Community Partner Welcome Packet

INTRODUCTION

Illinois Equitable Access Towards Sustainable Systems (IL-EATS), funded by LFPA

Illinois Equitable Access Towards Sustainable Systems (IL-EATS) is an opportunity to unite Illinoisans invested in building a resilient food system and create a collaborative network of food system support. IL-EATS is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service's (AMS) Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program. The program is authorized by the American Rescue Plan as part of the "Build Back Better" initiative and was established to strengthen statewide food systems over two years. Funding must be used to buy food from growers/producers and distribute it at no cost to underserved communities. All states are eligible to receive this funding. Illinois is receiving \$28 million and is committed to sourcing 100% of products from socially disadvantaged growers/producers and encouraging the distribution of culturally responsive foods.

Funds in the state will be received by the Illinois Department of Agriculture and distributed by the Illinois Department of Human Services. Technical support is provided by the University of Illinois Extension.

Website: <https://go.illinois.edu/il-eats>

The primary goals of IL-EATS are:

- To support local and socially disadvantaged growers/producers by expanding the economic opportunities to get their products to markets
- To broaden partnerships with growers/producers and the food distribution community to ensure the distribution of fresh foods to underserved communities

Benefits for community partners participating in IL-EATS

- Receiving high-quality, fresh food for the clients you serve at no cost
- Technical assistance
- Networking opportunities with local food system partners
- Connecting local eaters with farmers in their community
- Food safety training



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IL-EATS Program Support

The University of Illinois Extension is providing resources, education opportunities, and technical assistance for community partners in the program. If you have questions, comments, or requests for technical assistance, please reach out at uie-lfpa@illinois.edu.

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IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL FOOD

It is crucial to recognize local food's profound importance in addressing food insecurity and fostering community resilience. Local food systems offer numerous benefits directly impacting Illinoisans and their communities. Sourcing food locally promotes food security by reducing dependency on distant supply chains, which are vulnerable to disruptions. By supporting local farmers and producers, we ensure a more consistent supply of fresh, nutritious food and bolster the local economy, creating jobs and strengthening community ties. By advocating for and investing time in local food initiatives like IL-EATS, your organization will play a pivotal role in building more resilient communities where everyone can access healthy, locally sourced food options.

FOOD SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

Growers, producers, and food handlers, including lead agencies and community partners, need to meet minimum food safety standards for the project and are expected to continually maintain best practices for food safety throughout the program and beyond. All growers and producers must follow state and federal requirements for their products. Additional food safety standards may be required depending on where the food is distributed.

By providing funds for the purchase of food through IL-EATS, IDOA, IDHS, and Illinois Extension are not guaranteeing that the product is safe for consumption. IDOA, IDHS, and Illinois Extension are not responsible for any injury that may result from food purchased and consumed through the IL-EATS program.



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Food Handler's Training

Sites that distribute IL-EATS food must have at least one employee who has completed a Food Handler's training, ServSafe, Food Service Sanitation Manager Certification, or Certified Food Protection Manager training. Extension will offer opportunities to take the Food Handler's training at no cost for sites that need this training. Trainings will be virtual and take approximately two hours. Information on Extension's current food safety training opportunities can be found on the [IL-EATS website](#). Upon completion, you will receive a three-year Food Handler certificate from the Illinois Department of Public Health and meet the food safety requirement to distribute food for IL-EATS. Alternatively, [at-your-own-pace modules](#) are short (30 minutes) and affordable (\$10). More information can be found on the [IDHS website](#). Please contact uie-lfpa@illinois.edu if cost is a barrier to receiving this certification.

Food Safety Guidelines

Organizations that distribute food are an essential part of the food safety system. Following basic food safety guidelines can help ensure your communities receive safe food. Some strategies include:

- Establishing a food safety policy
- Educating your donors and volunteers
- Accepting safe foods
- Accepting safe produce

While a high-level overview of food safety is provided in this guide, we suggest reviewing the "Promote Food Safety in Your Pantry" section of the [Safe and Healthy Food Pantries Project](#) for more information (Canto et al. 2015)

Accepting Safe Products

The Safe and Healthy Food Pantries project guide suggests the following tips to help ensure you offer safe products to your guests:

- Develop a relationship with your growers and producers and get to know their food safety practices
- Set standards for products gleaned from farmers' markets or local retailers
- Monitor products in your inventory and discard anything that becomes visibly rotten or spoiled
- If in doubt, throw it out! Never place potentially unsafe food products on the shelf
- Carefully inspect fresh produce and do not accept visibly rotten or spoiled produce

Additionally, the IL-EATS program has developed a Rejection Policy to ensure the foods received by our communities are high-quality.



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Rejection Policy

All goods provided by growers and producers of IL-EATS must be fresh, high-quality products that follow the minimum food safety standards outlined in the [Farmer Welcome Packet](#). Food purchased with IL-EATS funds cannot be food rescue quality or seconds. Any goods that do not comply with the quality and food safety standards of IL-EATS may be rejected by the receiving entity (lead agency or community partner). Determining whether goods comply with specifications is at the discretion of the primary receiving entities. For example, if a community partner receives products directly from a farmer, the decision to accept or reject the product is the responsibility of the community partner. Growers and producers will not receive payment for products that do not comply with the IL-EATS quality and food safety standards. If the product is rejected, the receiving entity (lead agency or community partner) must maintain a record of the rejection with information including farm name, date, type of product rejected, and the reason for rejection.

Acceptable reasons for rejection:

- Product is too warm (not transported or stored in proper temperatures)
- Product is moldy or deteriorating
- Product is stored in dirty or unsanitary containers
- Product is transported in dirty or unsanitary vehicles
- Product is in packaging that is dented, ripped, or rusted
- Product that the receiver has a reason to believe may compromise public health when consumed
- Product does not meet the labeling requirements as described above
- Product does not meet the minimum food safety requirements as described above

Storage

Temperature control of foods is essential to maintaining food safety. Harmful bacteria grow fastest between 41-135°F, a temperature range called the Danger Zone (MN Department of Health & MN Department of Agriculture 2019). Meat, poultry, fish, dairy, pre-cut produce, and pasteurized juice must be held at or below 41°F. Whole, uncut produce may be stored above 41°F as long as product quality is not compromised (IDPH 2023). If possible, cold storage is recommended to maintain maximum quality. Eggs may be held and sold at 45°F. It is recommended to store potatoes at room temperature.

Refrigerators should be between 32 and 41°F, and freezers should be set to -10°F or colder. Products that require cold storage should not be out of cold temperatures for more than 2 hours. Fresh-cut produce (peeled, sliced, or cut) must be refrigerated. Fresh fruits and vegetables should be stored in a cool area away from direct sunlight (Canto et al., 2015).



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Transportation

After receiving IL-EAT products, you may need to distribute the products to your communities further through models such as mobile markets or home delivery. During transportation, meat, poultry, fish, dairy, pre-cut produce, and pasteurized juice must be held at or below 41°F. Whole, uncut produce may be stored above 41°F as long as product quality is not compromised (IDPH 2023). Cold storage is recommended to maintain maximum quality.

An effectively insulated, hard-sided, cleanable cooler with sufficient ice or other cold-holding methods is allowed as an alternative to mechanical refrigeration. Dry ice or blue ice packs are recommended over loose or bagged ice. Any ice or water used to maintain cold temperatures must be of safe drinking quality. Mechanical refrigeration is not required (IDPH 2023). Additionally, you can strategically plan a delivery route to keep food from sitting out of refrigeration for too long (Canto et al. 2015).

If you cannot maintain proper temperatures, your lead agency may require alternative strategies, such as reducing the amount of product in a cooler, shortening your delivery route, or utilizing mechanical refrigeration (Marbleseed 2023 and IDPH 2023).

Vehicles

During transportation and delivery, food and food equipment must be protected from insects, flies, animals, dust and dirt, unnecessary handling, and other contamination (IDPH 2023). Delivery vehicles or equipment used for transportation must be kept clean. Vehicles must be inspected to ensure they are clean and in good working condition, including maintaining desired temperatures before transporting food. Fresh produce and other ready-to-eat food items should not mix with raw meats during loading, transportation, or delivery.

OPERATING PROCEDURES

Allowable Foods List

Foods purchased with IL-EATS funds must be grown and produced in Illinois and be minimally processed. Allowable foods include fruits and vegetables, grain products such as pasta and rice, meats, beans/legumes, and dairy products. Foods can be in various processing states (e.g., whole, cut, pureed, etc.) and forms (e.g., fresh, frozen, canned, dried, etc.). Foods that are significantly processed or prepared can NOT be purchased through IL-EATS. Examples include baked goods such as bread, prepackaged meals, and other prepared and pre-cooked items that come ready-to-eat and require no further preparation beyond heating (e.g., chicken nuggets, fish sticks, pre-made pizza, etc.).

The [Illinois Local Food Purchasing Assistance Allowable Foods List](#) contains a complete list of eligible products. If there is an item on this list that is requested by your community, let your lead agency know!



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They may be able to assist you in sourcing it directly from a local farmer. Email uie-lfpa@illinois.edu for questions related to this list.

Cultural Foods

The Illinois food system serves consumers from many different backgrounds and cultures. Culinary traditions, customs, and preferences are nuanced and rich with a sense of place and identity that is impossible to capture in a summary. Food preferences within a culture may vary significantly by individual, age, religion, region, or the length of time the person has lived in the United States.

Illinois is committed to using IL-EATS funds to provide culturally responsive foods to underserved communities. The [Cultural Food Guide](#) includes a list of culturally requested foods in different regions within Illinois. The guide is based on limited data and does not adequately capture the cultural diversity of Illinois. Thus, it is meant to be a starting point for the intentional procurement of cultural foods. We strongly encourage you to gather additional input directly from the communities you serve. If you're interested in meeting the demand for local foods, have a conversation with your lead agency about commonly requested cultural foods that you may be able to receive from local farmers.

Reducing Food Waste

Reducing food waste requires a multifaceted approach that includes efficient inventory management, strategic partnerships with local suppliers, and staff training on proper handling techniques. By closely monitoring inventory levels and expiration dates, food distributors can redistribute surplus items before they spoil, clean, and sort donated produce to ensure quality and establish connections with donors to receive excess products. Education campaigns for staff, volunteers, and clients promote effective food handling practices and creative utilization of ingredients, while innovative initiatives like food repurposing (such as turning extra products into meals), composting, and redistribution to community organizations further minimize waste and contribute to community resilience. Embracing these strategies maximizes the impact of resources and fosters a more sustainable and equitable food system for all. Below are some Illinois Extension resources that can support your food waste reduction efforts:

- [How to reduce food waste at home](#): Tips for reducing food waste when planning, preparing, and storing foods
- [Storing Food](#): Commonly asked refrigerator questions and understanding dates on food packages
- [Building a Culture of Composting](#): Composting information and the basics of getting started

Emphasizing Local Products

IL-EATS prioritizes bringing high-quality, fresh produce grown on local farms to underserved communities. You can help connect your clients with their local food systems in many ways. Some ideas include:



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- Creating recipe cards with locally grown/produced foods
- Facilitating food demos with locally grown/produced foods
- Hosting meet the farmer days for clients to meet the person who grew one of their products!
- Placing nudges or signage next to products that are locally sourced
- Featuring local farmers in newsletters, on posters, etc. (with their permission)

The IL-EATS team at Illinois Extension is developing resources such as nudges, posters, and more to help connect your communities with their local farmers. If you have a specific resource that you would like us to create, let us know at uie-lfpa@illinois.edu. The Nutrition and Wellness and SNAP-Ed Educators at your local Extension office may also be able to support these efforts.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

SNAP-Ed Educators

Have a food product your clients aren't familiar with? Need a recipe card for a local product? Want to host a cooking demo with a locally grown fruit or vegetable? Reach out to your local SNAP-Ed Educator! As an example of Extension support, an IL-EATS lead agency started distributing whole chickens from a local producer to their network. They connected with their SNAP-Ed Educator to develop a one-pager for their pantry clients describing how to break down and cook a whole chicken. For more information, check out the following resources:

- [Eat Move Save](#): Budget-friendly, nourishing recipes; information sheets on seasonal, Illinois-grown produce; cooking tips; and more!
- [Illinois Nutrition Education Programs](#): Provides an overview of the Illinois Nutrition Education Programs and how Extension can support your organization in improving the health of Illinois communities through healthy eating, physical activity, and improving access to healthy foods
- [SNAP-Ed Impact](#): Summarizes the positive impact of the community-based nutrition education offered for individuals and families who qualify for SNAP

Find Food Illinois

[Find Food Illinois](#) is an interactive map that lets you quickly find stores, retailers, and markets that accept SNAP/LINK or WIC coupons. Additionally, it shows DHS and WIC offices in your region where individuals can sign up for benefits.

County Health Rankings

[County Health Rankings](#) provides a snapshot of the health of your community, including information on health outcomes (poor or fair health, poor physical health days, etc.), healthy behaviors (adult smoking, adult obesity, food environment index, etc.), and social and economic factors (unemployment, children



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in poverty, single-parent households.). Data can be sorted by state, county, or zip code. The County Health Rankings are an invaluable resource for understanding some of the barriers your community may face.

Map the Meal Gap

[Map the Meal Gap](#) is a resource created by Feeding America that provides a user-friendly view of food insecurity across the entire United States. The map is broken up by state then by county and provides the latest information, including food insecurity rate, food insecurity population estimate, SNAP thresholds, additional money needed to meet food needs, and more.

Food Dignity

Creating a welcoming environment for individuals experiencing food insecurity is necessary to reduce social barriers and stigmas they might face when visiting a food distribution site. The following resources have more information:

- [Creating a Dignified and Welcoming Environment in Food Pantries](#): A variety of recommendations for creating a more welcoming experience at your site through small changes in wait times, the shopping experience, the foods you offer, and more
- [Food Dignity - An Equity Movement](#): Resources including a toolkit on normalizing conversations about nutrition security, a nutrient security screening tool, and a curriculum for breaking down the complexities of food equity in the context of your work and organization

CHANGE LOG

- 4/25/2024: Following feedback of Lead Agency Onboarding Meeting 3
 - Food safety refrigeration requirements updated to allow transportation and storage of whole, uncut produce at temperatures above 41°F as long as quality is not compromised. Exceptions were removed from the document as they were redundant.
 - Rejection policy language updated to reflect that the primary receiving entity is responsible for deciding whether to accept or reject the product



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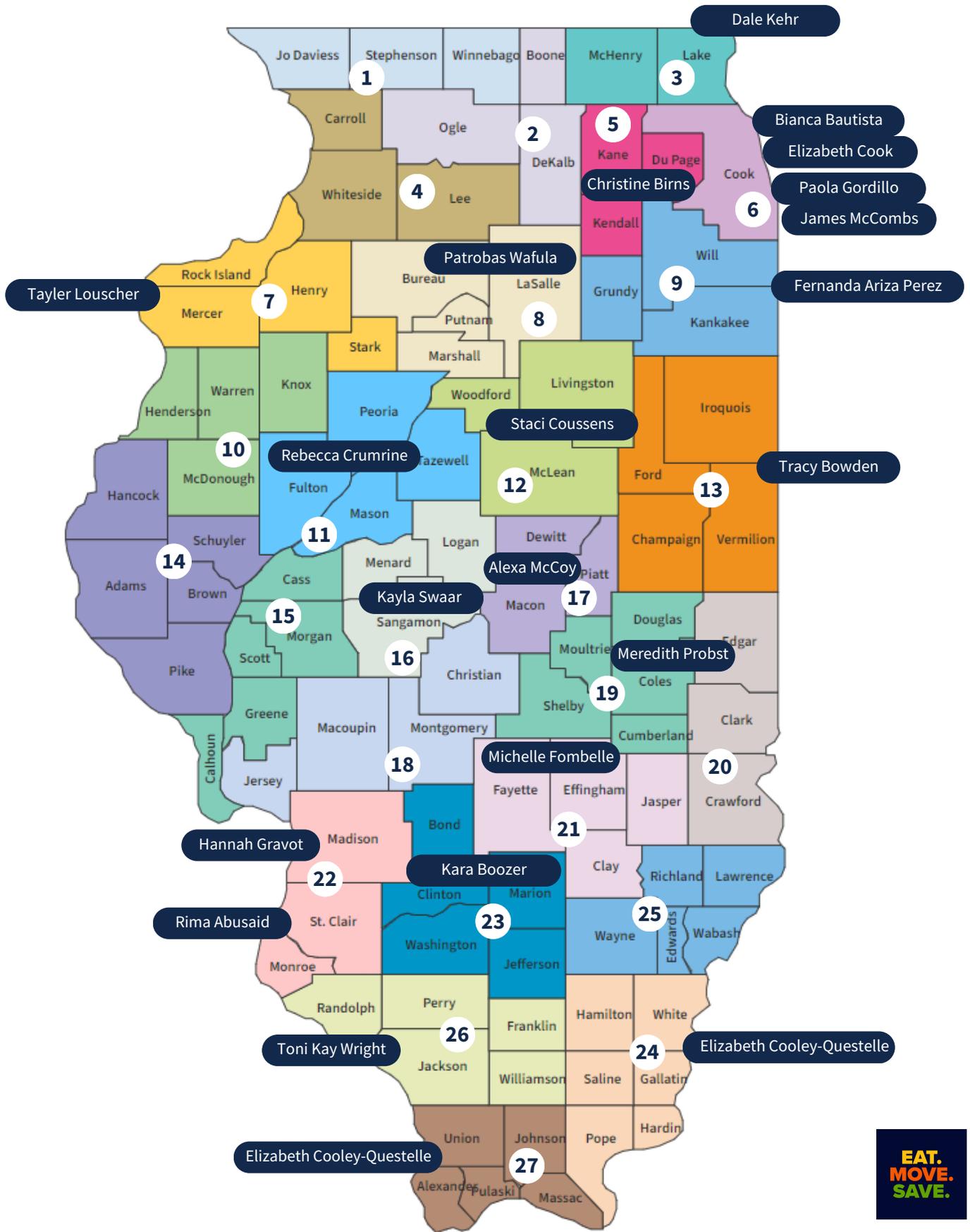
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Find SNAP-Ed Staff in Your Local Area





Contact Your Local SNAP-Ed Educator

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