

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

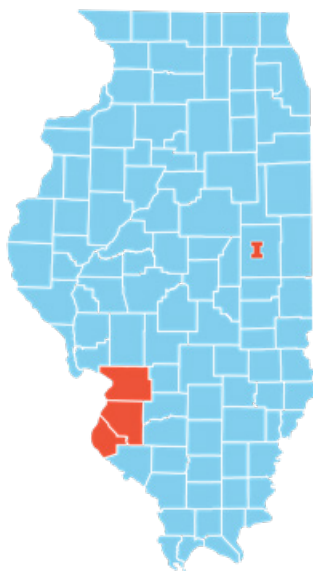


Serving Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





William Catalano
County Director



Changes

Changes are inevitable. They are constant—around us and within us. Changes in our community, family, work, and health create both challenges and opportunities. It is by responding to these changes that Extension’s purpose and impact are realized. The local staff of University of Illinois Extension diligently works to counter negative change and foster positive transformation.

As the county director for Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties, I witness the dedication of our amazing staff, volunteers, and partners, whose work touches so many aspects of our lives. Extension crosses virtually every boundary — social, economic, political, racial, and ethnic.

In 2024, changes in our operations and performance were overwhelmingly positive, as seen in the growth of our programming and partnerships. Educators, program coordinators, community workers, and administrative staff cohesively worked together to advance youth development, food and nutrition, agriculture, horticulture, and beyond. This dedication was recognized with awards for Karla Isaak, Nicole Hellon, and Kris Juelfs for their outstanding contributions.

Our partnerships are vital, whether we take the lead or provide support. In particular, our partnerships with county government play a crucial role in guiding and shaping our impact. We are grateful for these alliances and look forward to building on our progress in 2024.

A deeply personal change for me in 2024 was receiving the honor and responsibility of leading Extension’s planning and execution of the University of Illinois’s land-grant mission in these three remarkable counties. I could only accept this role because of the exceptional staff surrounding me — they are the true change-makers and the face of Extension.

As every year, this report is a celebration of the people who made it all happen. Too numerous to list and too tremendous to capture in words, I will simply say, thank you.

Once again, I ask that as you look through this annual report, you recognize that every bullet point, statistic, and picture — is evidence of lives changed — lives made better.

Sincerely and with gratitude,

William Catalano
Extension County Director
for Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension's programs, resources, knowledge, and dedicated staff that are responsive to eight strategic priorities:



Community



Economy



Environment



Food and Agriculture



Health



Partnerships



Technology and Discovery



Workforce Excellence

2024 Engagement

Extension leaders, staff, and stakeholders define priorities that create meaningful, mission-centered outcomes throughout the state:

730

Communities Served

805K+

Program Attendees

9.7M+

Webpage Views

22.4M+

Social Media Impressions

2.5M+

YouTube Impressions

547

Educational Sessions/Week
(28K+ Annually)

90

Online Courses Accessed by
12K+ People

12,484

Local Government Education
Webinar Reach

1,840

4-H Clubs

67,917

Fair Exhibits

20,339

Members

261,012

4-H Experiences

Partnerships

5,563

Program Volunteers

266

Community Gardens

2,922

School and Community Partners

\$15,735,213

Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$514,316

Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated

\$4.7M+

External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners



4-H Federation teens lead through service

Thirty teens actively engage in the 4-H Federation Club, focusing on leadership development and community service. They contributed to events that brought people together, including the Harvest Night dinner auction, the 4-H Achievement Program, 4-H shows, and the Southern Illinois Sheep Festival. Their dedication extends beyond event support. The teens also enhanced the Monroe County Fairgrounds and spent two evenings painting all the picnic tables, ensuring a welcoming space for families and visitors during the county fair. These efforts showcase their dedication to making a positive impact in their community but also fostered personal growth, preparing them for future leadership roles.



Teens from the 4-H Federation Club gave the Monroe County Fairgrounds a fresh look by painting all the picnic tables, creating a warm and inviting space for families to enjoy during the county fair.



4-H Teen Teachers empower youth through education

Eleven 4-H Teen Teachers made an impact leading and supporting various 4-H educational programs. They played key roles in events like Conservation Day, the WJHS Science Club, and the Butterfly Festival, fostering hands-on learning experiences for youth. Their most significant contribution came over the summer through a partnership with Ag in the Classroom. The Teen Teachers delivered five interactive sessions of AG in the Classroom lessons, reaching 115 children across four local learning centers. Additionally, they also assisted with Fair Tours at the Monroe County Fair. Through their dedication and leadership, the 4-H Teen Teachers empowered youth and strengthened the community, exemplifying the transformative power of education and service.



4-H Teen Teachers attend Conservation Day.

Benaiah Bremer represents Madison County at the 4-H National Shooting Sports Competition

Benaiah Bremer, a dedicated member of the Staunton Road Rangers 4-H Shooting Sports Club in Madison County, proudly competed in the 4-H Nationals Shooting Sports Competition in Nebraska. Competing in trap, skeet, and sporting clays, Benaiah achieved his personal best in sporting clays and skeet. In trap, he celebrated a remarkable perfect score of 25/25 in one round, though he wished for a stronger overall performance. As part of the Illinois 4-H team, Benaiah's scores contributed to the team effort, but he also enjoyed shooting alongside a squad of 4-H participants from various states. Although they didn't place in the ribbons, the experience was unforgettable. Beyond the competition, Benaiah embraced the camaraderie of the event by trading pins with fellow 4-H members from across the country, creating connections and memories that will last a lifetime.



Madison County Staunton Road Rangers 4-H members Benaiah B., Ethan D., Ryan D., Ethan M., Joseph P., and Luke S. compete in the state 4-H Shotgun Competition!

Garrett Brandt selected as the 4-H Master Showmanship Champion

Garrett Brandt was selected as the 4-H Master Showmanship Champion at the Monroe County Fair. His skills earned him the honor of representing Monroe County at the Illinois State Fair Master Showmanship Contest. Additionally, Garrett was named the high point champion in the beef division, further showcasing his dedication and expertise.



Garrett Brandt proudly showcases his livestock at the Monroe County Fair!



Illinois 4-H hall of fame honorees transform communities through leadership and service

Three counties celebrated exceptional leaders as they were inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame at the Illinois State Fair. Each honoree exemplifies the 4-H spirit of dedication, mentorship, and community impact.

In Monroe County, Kevin Schreder earned his place in the Hall of Fame for his unwavering commitment to 4-H programs. As chair of the annual Harvest Night dinner auction, Kevin's efforts have significantly bolstered support for 4-H and other Extension initiatives, enriching opportunities for local youth.

St. Clair County honored Jenn Stoks, a dedicated leader of the Happy Herd 4-H Club for the past five years. Jenn takes pride in her members' hard work and personal growth. Reflecting on her journey, Jenn shared, "Community is a tricky thing to come by as a military spouse and homeschool educator. Being a 4-H volunteer has given my family and me a community to be a part of no matter where we may go."

In Madison County, Max and Tamsey Bremer, leaders of the Staunton Road Rangers Shooting Sports Club, received Hall of Fame honors. Max, a leader for six years, and Tamsey, a leader for three, have dedicated their time to developing youth skills in safety, discipline, and sportsmanship through shooting sports.

Max noted, "I love seeing youth develop the skills and judgment that come from 4-H, both in shooting sports and traditional activities. Their growth in maturity and confidence is inspiring."



Kevin Schreder from Monroe County is inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame at the Illinois State Fair.



Jenn Stoks from St. Clair County is inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame at the Illinois State Fair.

Max and Tamsey Bremer from Madison County are inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame at the Illinois State Fair.

Tamsey added, "It's a joy to see 4-H'ers grow as they learn discipline, focus, and safety while navigating success and failure. Over a decade in 4-H shooting sports with our own children, we've gained knowledge we now share to guide others."

These 4-H members demonstrate the profound influence of 4-H leadership, fostering growth and community connections that will last for generations.

Public Presentations:

A total of 4 exhibitors participated in the public presentations category.

Food Demonstrations:

6 participants showcased their skills in food demonstrations.

Horse Division:

7 exhibitors displayed their talents in the horse competition.

Show-A-Rama:

A total of 91 projects were presented at Show-A-Rama. Of these, 23 projects were selected for the State Fair, with an additional 3 projects named as alternates.

Horticulture & Crops:

6 exhibitors participated in the Horticulture & Crops category, with 1 exhibitor selected for the State Fair (though they did not attend).

Livestock Division:

130 exhibitors participated in the livestock category.

State Fair Results:

16 exhibitors represented 4-H at the State Fair, earning notable recognition:

- 3 Champions
- 2 Reserve Champions
- 2 Inspire Awards
- 9 Livestock Exhibitors

2024 Overall 4-H Show Overview



Illinois 4-H Alumni Award honors Amanda Marquardt's inspiring leadership

Amanda Marquardt is the first-ever recipient of the Illinois 4-H Alumni Award from Monroe County. Among only four honorees statewide, Amanda's recognition highlights her extraordinary dedication to youth development and her lasting impact on her community. In addition to her recognition, Amanda serves as a leader of the Moonlight Boys & Girls 4-H Club and the rabbit superintendent for the Monroe County Fair. Through these roles, she shares her knowledge and passion with participants, inspiring the next generation of 4-H members to grow, learn, and lead.



Amanda Marquardt proudly becomes Monroe County's first-ever recipient of the Illinois 4-H Alumni Award!



Fifth graders dive into nature and conservation during Conservation Day

Fifth-grade students embraced hands-on learning during Conservation Day at the Waterloo Sportsman's Club in Monroe County. The event is sponsored by the University of Illinois Extension, Monroe County Farm Bureau, Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Monroe County Agriculture in the Classroom. A total of 290 youth participated in several interactive learning stations. Participants explored topics like floods, forestry, geology, native bees, bird migration, renewable resources, soil health, water quality, erosion, and wildlife. This engaging program encouraged students to connect with the environment, sparking curiosity and promoting conservation awareness in a memorable outdoor setting.



Students dive into Geology with Commercial Agriculture Educator Nathan Johanning during Conservation Day!

Connecting youth to nature through Outdoor Adventures Camp

Illinois Extension hosted a week-long Outdoor Adventures Camp at the SIUE Gardens in Edwardsville, co-sponsored with Madison County CAREE. The camp brought together 12 enthusiastic campers from Madison and St. Clair counties, offering hands-on learning opportunities to explore the environment and outdoor resources. Each day was packed with engaging activities, including lessons about mammals, pollinators, trees, safety, and hiking. Campers gained practical knowledge while fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world. The week concluded with an exciting field trip to Pere Marquette State Park in Grafton. There, participants immersed themselves in nature through hiking and fishing, solidifying their connection to the environment and creating unforgettable memories. This impactful camp inspired curiosity, nurturing future stewards of our environment.



4-H youth explore the environment and enjoy hands-on learning at Outdoor Adventures Camp in the SIUE Gardens.

University of Illinois Extension sparks growth and creativity at Scott Air Force Base Youth Center

4-H programming at the Scott Air Force Base Youth Center has become a cornerstone for youth development, combining STEM innovation, life skills training, and creative exploration. University of Illinois Extension engaged youth and staff at Scott Air Force Base Youth Center in a variety of activities that combined education, creativity, and fun. Over the course of multiple sessions:



69

staff members participated in professional development, gaining valuable insights and skills to better support youth programming



131

youth explored activities such as STEM challenges, arts and crafts, and outdoor adventures





During the Mindful Me lesson at Prather Elementary, students created glitter-filled mindfulness jars to practice meditation as they watched the glitter gently settle.



Mindful Me empowers kindergarteners at Prather Elementary with tools for emotional well-being

The Mindful Me program transformed kindergarten classrooms across Prather Elementary School in Granite City. Through bi-monthly visits to 11 classrooms, the program reached 270 students, introducing them to mindfulness practices designed to enhance emotional well-being. Mindful Me, a state-supported 4-H signature program, includes 10 experiential learning activities that build critical skills such as goal management, self-awareness, time management, stress reduction, emotional regulation, and mindful eating.

Students focused on mood management and improving their ability to concentrate. They listened to the story *Moody Cow Meditates* by Kerry MacLean and created mindfulness jars filled with glitter. 4-H Metro Educator Elizabeth Levey encouraged children to view the glitter as negative thoughts and guided them in shaking the jars and practicing meditation while watching the glitter settle. Students also shared how the activity made them feel, with comments like, “I feel so calm,” and “This helps me meditate.”

Each lesson began with a prompt to reflect on previous sessions. In one classroom, a boy eagerly expressed, “We made those meditation jars. I used mine over the weekend when my brother was being mean to me. I went to my room to calm down and watched the glitter settle as I meditated. I felt so much better afterward.”

At the end of the program, every student received a mindfulness jar to take home. By dedicating time to teaching students how to use their jars effectively, the program empowered them to practice mindfulness techniques independently, equipping them with lifelong tools to enhance their emotional well-being and resilience.

Empowering futures: Ready 4 Work Program prepares students for success

At Gordon Bush Alternative Center in East St. Louis, students in grades 11 and 12 took a significant step toward their future through the Ready 4 Work program, offered as part of the Jobs for America’s Graduates elective class. University of Illinois Extension assisted a volunteer partner with facilitating the program, running from February to May 2024, which provided students with critical work-readiness skills and hands-on experiences, culminating in a series of mock interviews.

During the program, each student participated in one-on-one mock interviews. One student, determined to build her career, entered the mock interview eager to showcase her skills and preparation. She confidently discussed her dream of opening her own business as a cosmetologist, a goal she discovered through the program’s career exploration activities. “I initially wanted to become a certified nurse assistant, but after exploring various career paths and a presentation about cosmetology school, I realized that’s the right choice for me. I already do hair and can apply those skills as a cosmetologist,” she shared.

During the interview, she responded to questions with professionalism and enthusiasm, demonstrating a clear vision for her future. After receiving constructive feedback, she immediately worked to refine her answers, determined to excel.

The Ready 4 Work program not only provided students with practical experience but also helped them build confidence and identify pathways to success. For students at Gordon Bush Alternative Center, this initiative is a life-changing opportunity to prepare for meaningful careers and a brighter future.

4-H Metro Programming Impact Overview

771	196	123
Total Participants	Total Sessions Held	Total Hours

4-H continues to show resilience with:

996	7,703
4-H Club Memberships	4-H affiliations (4-H experiences)
71	827
4-H clubs	4-H unique members
2,456	
Fair Exhibits	



Pumpkin Field Day brings innovation to the fields

Illinois Extension teamed up with Eckert's Orchard in Belleville to host the highly anticipated Pumpkin Field Day. This hands-on, in-field event provided pumpkin growers and industry professionals with an opportunity to explore the latest advancements in pumpkin production.

The event spotlighted current university research and featured a guided tour of field trials showcasing 80 unique pumpkin varieties and innovative pest management solutions. Attendees also engaged with industry experts at the vendor trade show.

The event drew more than 100 farmers and agricultural professionals from Illinois and neighboring states, fostering collaboration and equipping participants with valuable tools to enhance their operations.



Associate Dean and Director, along with Dean Bollero of University of Illinois Extension, join the Eckerts Family at Pumpkin Field Day in Belleville to support agricultural advancement!

Pond management workshop empowers landowners

Over 60 dedicated landowners gathered at the Baebler Educational Farm for the Pond Management Workshop, hosted by Illinois Extension in partnership with the farm.

Led by Eric Ratcliff, a local fisheries biologist from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the workshop provided practical insights into maintaining healthy, well-stocked ponds. Attendees braved the wet weather to gain valuable knowledge on topics like water quality, fish stocking, and overall pond care.

This impactful event underscored the commitment of Illinois Extension and its partners to support landowners in enhancing their pond ecosystems ensuring long-term environmental health.



More than 60 dedicated landowners gathered at the Baebler Educational Farm for the Pond Management Workshop, gaining valuable insights into pond care and conservation.





A nitrogen management trial on corn at the Baebler Educational Farm is paving the way for smarter, sustainable farming practices.



Local nitrogen rate trial supports sustainable corn production

Illinois Extension, in collaboration with the Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council and Pike Ag, LLC, is driving innovation in nitrogen management through a groundbreaking trial on the corn at The Baebler Educational Farm. This research tested six nitrogen rates, ranging from 0 to 250 pounds per acre, and replicated three times.

Following this fall's harvest, yield data revealed that the ideal nitrogen application rate falls between 150 and 200 pounds of nitrogen. This is a great local resource for farmers and contributes to statewide nutrient recommendation tools to understand how to manage nitrogen to both maximize yield but also reduce environmental impact.

Through partnerships like this, Illinois Extension continues to empower farmers with knowledge to enhance productivity and protect natural resources.



Cover crop research drives soil health innovation

Illinois Extension, in partnership with the SIU Belleville Research Center, is leading the way in advancing cover crop research and outreach. The team is conducting planting date trials on common cover crops for crop production as part of a statewide initiative led by Commercial Agriculture Educator Nathan Johanning. The Belleville site is one of five locations participating in this Illinois Soybean Association-supported project, now in its second year.



Advancing cover crop research: The SIU Belleville Research Center hosts planting date trials. The Belleville site is one of five locations participating in this statewide initiative.

Research findings are shared through impactful events, including the annual SIU Belleville Research Center Field Day, held on the second Thursday of July, which, this year, attracted over 150 farmers eager to learn about conservation practices. Additionally, two cover crop field trainings hosted in August brought another 80 participants to the center for hands-on learning opportunities.

Through these efforts, Illinois Extension and its partners are equipping farmers with the tools and knowledge to improve soil health, protect the environment, and strengthen agricultural sustainability. With ongoing research projects underway, more innovative solutions are on the horizon.

134

Educational sessions

4,503

Program attendance

2,573

Participants

AAB/NREE Program Impact

717

Expert consultations

22

Extension-supported gardens

25,101 lbs.
produce donated



Eliza stands in an experimental prairie plot at the University of Wisconsin Arlington Research Station, where she is surveying pollinator diversity pre- and post-heifer grazing (June 2024).



Eliza Pessereau joins Illinois Extension to expand education for gardeners

Illinois Extension welcomed Eliza Pessereau as the new horticulture educator in August, bringing her expertise to Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties. Eliza grew up in the wine country of northern California but has been in the Midwest for the past eight years. She has experience working in school gardens and with small-scale farmers in West Africa. Eliza recently received her master’s degree in Agroecology and Entomology from University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she conducted research on the use of winter camelina as a flowering cover crop to support native pollinators on agricultural land.

In her first months with Illinois Extension, Eliza conducted a 12-question horticulture needs assessment, which gathered input from 118 residents across Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties. Of the responses, 47% came from Madison County, 30% from St. Clair, and 23% from Monroe. Eliza distributed the survey to volunteers and the public through emails, newsletters, monthly press releases, social media posts, and tabling at local farmers’ markets. Most respondents identified as home gardeners or Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists, with the majority growing plants in their home gardens or indoors.

The needs assessment shows that residents are most interested in learning about vegetable gardening, landscaping with native plants, composting, and pollinators and beneficial insects. Eliza plans to focus horticultural programming on these topics in 2025, drawing on her entomology background and community gardening experience. She aims to create in-person educational programs that will make vegetable gardening more accessible to residents without access to their own growing space by focusing on growing in community gardens, in containers, and on balconies. Eliza would also like to support residents in creating and maintaining their own native pollinator gardens by holding native garden design workshops with Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists and by distributing resources on proper bee hotel care.

Additionally, Eliza has partnered with Willoughby Farms in Collinsville and Farm Bureau to create an urban agriculture demonstration garden in 2025. This initiative will highlight innovative techniques for growing produce and composting in urban environments, furthering Illinois Extension’s mission to educate and empower local gardeners.

What is your primary connection with horticulture?



	Amount	Source
●	41%	Home gardener
●	41%	Master Gardener / Master Naturalist
●	4%	Horticulture hobbyist
●	0%	Farmer
●	14%	Other



	Amount	Source
●	66.7%	Home gardener
●	14.8%	Master Gardener / Master Naturalist
●	3.7%	Horticulture hobbyist
●	11.1%	Farmer
●	3.7%	Other



	Amount	Source
●	45.7%	Home gardener
●	31.4%	Master Gardener / Master Naturalist
●	8.6%	Horticulture hobbyist
●	5.7%	Farmer
●	8.6%	Other



Master Gardeners, HSS, and 4-H Gardenbuds join forces to rejuvenate Extension community garden

Illinois Extension partnered with Master Gardeners to revitalize the garden beds at the Monroe County Annex, transforming it into a thriving space for learning and community connection. The team designed programming for youth ages 5 to 7 (Gardenbuds) and adults with developmental disabilities from Human Support Services. Their efforts have resulted in over 82 pounds of fresh produce and a hands-on environment for Extension programs.

The Gardenbuds program engages ten youth in monthly sessions with Master Gardeners and Illinois Extension staff, exploring activities like seed starting, planting, pollinating, harvesting, and cooking. They learn about weather and climate, pollinators, garden care, and cooking from the garden, building both curiosity and life skills.

Additionally, six HSS clients work in the garden weekly, observing seasonal changes and performing tasks like weeding, watering, and harvesting. The produce is used in creative activities like flower pressing and cooking dishes such as fried green tomatoes and veggie pizzas, fostering achievement and engagement.

Encouraged by the garden's success, the Master Gardeners plan to expand the space with more raised beds, and Illinois Extension is preparing a spring raised bed workshop, ensuring the garden continues to grow as a space for education, nourishment, and community connection.



Master Gardeners, HSS, and 4-H Gardenbuds joined forces to rejuvenate the garden beds at the Monroe County Annex in Waterloo! From planting to picking, these gardeners are growing together.

Open Gate Garden expands pollinator education in Drost Park

Master Gardeners at the Open Gate Garden in Drost Park, actively engage with weekly visitors, answering countless questions about pollinators and pollinator-friendly plants. To enhance awareness of the benefits pollinators bring to gardens, the volunteers spearheaded an initiative to enrich the garden's educational resources.

With funding from the Illinois Master Gardener Know More, Grow More program, the team planted additional native, pollinator-friendly plants, providing real-life examples for home gardeners looking to create pollinator habitats. They also installed an informational sign highlighting details about native pollinators common to the area and plants that can be grown as host plants throughout the seasons, offering visitors practical tips on supporting pollinators in their own landscapes.

Master Gardeners hosted two well-attended garden events, inviting community members to explore the space, interact with volunteers, and deepen their knowledge of pollinator gardening. Thanks to these efforts, pollinators remain a popular topic among park visitors, and the garden now serves as a dynamic educational hub showcasing the importance of pollinator-friendly gardening practices.



Master Gardeners installed a sign at Drost Park to showcase native pollinators and plants to inspire local gardeners.

Master Gardeners

95

Volunteers

6,067

Impact Hours

\$203,183

National Value of
Volunteer Time

Master Naturalists

42

Volunteers

3,280

Impact Hours

\$109,847

National Value of
Volunteer Time





Youth are mastering the art of using a peeler while prepping fresh carrots at Youth Cooking School.



Youth Cooking School empowers children with essential cooking skills

According to America's Health Rankings, 32.4% of children ages 10 to 17 are overweight or obese in Illinois, which ranks 27 among US states. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the prevalence of childhood obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s. A child who is obese is more likely to become obese as an adult, thus the importance of providing nutrition education and awareness to youth.

Youth Cooking School has become a reputable program that teaches food safety, nutrition, and basic cooking skills to children ages 8 to 13 in Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties. This past summer, 133 participants received 12 hours of education and hands-on training over four days. Seven sessions were offered. The Food Challenge, designed for youth 11 to 15 with some cooking experience, reached 26 youth.

Illinois Extension worked in partnership with several organizations, including Monroe County Home and Community Education Group, Monroe County Pork Producers, Monroe County Farm Bureau, Immanuel Lutheran Church in Waterloo, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Columbia, Hecker Community Center, and Madison County Farm Bureau to ensure the program's success.

Nutrition and Wellness Program Reach

1029

Participants

100

Sessions

186

Hours



Our young chefs are perfecting their pancake prep skills and cooking up something delicious.



Youth are getting creative and learning to make their own pizzas at Youth Cooking School.

Survey results highlight the program's significant impact. Before attending Youth Cooking School, only 13% of participants felt highly knowledgeable about food safety; this soared to 85% after the program. Similarly, confidence in making healthy food choices increased from 31% to 70%, and proficiency in knife skills rose from 46% to 87%.

These outcomes highlight the program's effectiveness in equipping youth with essential skills for healthier living and combating childhood obesity.



Student athletes are learning to prep protein bites in the Eat to Compete program.



Student-athletes fuel performance with “Eat to Compete” program

Adequate nutrition for young athletes is not only important for optimizing sports performance, but it is also critical for meeting growth and development requirements. With the growing demands on youth athletes and their bodies, Nutrition and Wellness Educator Kris Juelfs saw a need and desire for sports nutrition education. In collaboration with sports nutrition dietitians from the University of Illinois and the Illini Fuel program, Juelfs developed a science-based basic nutrition curriculum for high school athletes, including hands-on food preparation of healthy snacks.

In 2024, Juelfs delivered the program to 60 student-athletes in Monroe and St. Clair counties. According to survey results, 97% of participants reported an increase in sports nutrition knowledge, and 100% expressed that the program met their needs, provided useful information, and encouraged them to apply what they learned.

Students shared impactful takeaways:

- “Carbs are good!”
- “How to prioritize protein and eat certain things.”
- “The better you eat, the better you will perform.”
- “I like the recipes she shared because they were easy and convenient, and I will definitely be using them.”

Through this program, young athletes are gaining the knowledge and tools they need to fuel their success both on and off the field.



Diabetes support group empowers participants with education and community

Illinois Extension Nutrition and Wellness Educator Kris Juelfs is making a meaningful impact in her community by addressing the growing need for diabetes education and support. Data from the United States Diabetes Surveillance System reports an

increase in the prevalence of diabetes. In 2022, 10.7% of Illinois residents had been diagnosed with diabetes, which is above the national average of 8.4%. For individuals ages 65 to 74, that number increased to 23% and 25% for those over age 75.

Juelfs partnered with the Morrison-Talbott Library in Monroe County to launch a monthly Diabetes Support Group. Designed to reach adults over 60, the group provides an open and welcoming space for participants to access educational resources, share experiences, and navigate the challenges of living with diabetes. The group averages eight to ten attendees each month and remains open for new members.

Juelfs has also collaborated with a certified diabetes educator from Memorial Hospital Belleville in St. Clair County, who has been a guest speaker on two occasions. Feedback from the library underscores the program’s value:

“I wanted to send you a quick thank you for coming to our diabetes support group at Morrison-Talbott Library. You and Kris have really helped everyone better understand their diabetes, even if they were diagnosed several years ago. It amazes me how many are being treated by their primary care physicians with very little education about what’s happening with their bodies, how the medicine they’re taking works, and what products are available.”

Participants expressed the program’s positive impact in an end-of-year survey:

- “Yes, it has helped me be more conscious of my decisions about food.”
- “Yes, it has cleared up questions I had and has been very informative.”
- “Yes, educational tips from the educator and input from other attendees have been helpful.”

Through this support group, Illinois Extension is empowering individuals with diabetes to make informed decisions, improve their health, and find a sense of community.



Our diabetes support group enjoyed festive, diabetes-friendly appetizers at this year’s group holiday party.

Illinois Extension staff are hard at work setting up for the taste-testing event at the JJK FAN Center, bringing healthy eating to life for youth.



Illinois Extension teams up with Jackie Joyner-Kersee FAN Center to host a taste-test event, introducing youth to healthy eating

Research shows that limited exposure to healthy foods and a lack of nutrition education contribute to poor eating habits and related health issues in young people. At the Jackie Joyner-Kersee FAN Center, over 300 youth between the ages of 5 and 15 participate in the summer program, where they engage in various educational and recreational activities. Illinois Extension teamed up with JJK FAN to host a taste-testing event that introduced them to healthy eating in a fun and interactive way. 4-H Youth Development Metro Educator Elizabeth, JJK FAN Outreach Associate Laquitsha, and SNAP-Ed Educator Rima teamed up to serve a guacamole recipe prepared by the JJK FAN food service staff, topped with locally grown sweet corn.

There was an opportunity to walk around the event and chat with youth as they sampled the dish. Many were trying guacamole for the first time and expressed excitement over how delicious it

EFNEP Impact Overview

Youth Engagement:

26 groups, reaching a total of 525 youth.

Adult Engagement:

85 adults enrolled, with 40 successfully graduating (37%).

SNAP-Ed Impact Overview

125

nutrition education classes

575

nutrition education participants

139

policy, systems, and/or environment changes adapted by SNAP-Ed partner organizations



Youth at the JJK FAN Center are sampling Jackie Joyner-Kersee's tasty guacamole recipe for the first time.

was. One student said, "I have never had guacamole before, and it tastes really good!" Others enjoyed the addition of the sweet corn, noting how it added the perfect amount of sweetness to the guacamole, and some even came back for seconds.

Youth Feedback:

78% loved the guacamole, 21% thought it was just okay, 1% disliked it

The event effectively addressed challenges by allowing youth to try a healthy recipe and become "official taste-testers," sparking enthusiasm and curiosity about healthy eating. This engaging experience not only introduced nutritious foods but also encouraged greater interest in making healthier food choices.

Jackie's Championship Guacamole Recipe

Ingredients:

- 2 Avocado
- 1 Red onion
- 1 Tomato
- Salt

Instructions:

1. Slice avocado in half, remove the pit, and scoop into a bowl
2. Mash avocado with a fork
3. Chop desired amount of onion
4. Chop desired amount of tomato
5. Add salt to taste
6. Stir ingredients together
7. Serve with tortilla chips



Tips for Perfect Guacamole:

- To pick a ripe avocado, feel for one that is slightly soft when you gently squeeze it.
- To keep the guacamole from browning, cover

Jackie Joyner-Kersee

A close-up of Jackie Joyner-Kersee's healthy guacamole recipe.



EFNEP Youth Cooking School sparks culinary creativity and healthy habits

Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program community outreach workers brought culinary excitement to youth in Madison and St. Clair counties for Youth Cooking School. Kids dove into the art of cooking, creating tasty dishes like salsa, barley jambalaya, and bok choy wrappers. From learning to chop fruits and veggies to tasting their delicious creations, the young chefs embraced every moment.

Beyond cooking, they gained essential nutrition tips, empowering them to make healthier choices at home. Through EFNEP's summer Youth Cooking School program, kids don't just learn about food; they apply their skills in real life, enhancing food safety, cooking techniques, and nutrition knowledge.



Rise-Up program empowers teens through culinary education

The Rise-Up camp, designed for teenage boys ages 15 to 17, equipped teens with essential cooking and nutritional skills to combat unhealthy eating habits and reliance on processed foods, key factors in preventing chronic illnesses.

Participants attended the EFNEP Summer Youth Cooking School, with one-third returning from the previous year, showing growth and interest. While preparing turkey meatloaf, they demonstrated food safety knowledge, recalling proper cooking temperatures and the importance of thermometers for storage.

Exploring vegan and vegetarian meals, teens skeptically prepared veggie ranch wraps with zucchini, tomatoes, carrots, and broccoli. To their surprise, many enjoyed the mix, opening the door to healthier choices.

The camp built confidence, improved cooking skills, and encouraged lifelong healthy habits, creating a lasting impact on participants and their communities.



Youth whipping up a nutritious omelette at Youth Cooking School and learning healthy cooking skills!



Teaching the Eating Smart and Moving More curriculum

EFNEP partnered with the Alton Salvation Army to address the community's need for adult nutrition education. Over seven weeks, about ten participants joined mid-day sessions, bringing diverse needs. By the program's end, attendees gained valuable nutrition knowledge and a renewed appreciation for healthy eating.

One participant's story shows the program's impact. The participant struggled with confidence in cooking after being told her food was unpleasant, leading her to rely on fast food. During sessions, she eagerly learned about seasoning, vegetable preparation, and cooking techniques. Midway, she proudly shared her success in preparing a class recipe, receiving praise at home. By the end, her confidence soared, and she embraced cooking as a path to healthier eating.

This transformation marked a personal and health victory, reflecting the program's success in empowering individuals with life-changing skills and fostering long-term wellness.



Celebrating success. Participants proudly display their graduation goodie bags alongside Community Outreach Worker Shaneise at the Alton Salvation Army.

Teaching the Choose Health, Food, Fun, and Fitness Curriculum at Roxana Library

Around 15 to 20 children participated in this after-school nutrition program, a mix of first-time learners and those familiar with MyPlate and basic nutrition concepts. The program introduced and reinforced healthy eating habits through engaging lessons and hands-on cooking activities.

By the end, the impact was clear as children shared stories and excitement about MyPlate and new vegetables. Their understanding of the five food groups deepened as they identified ingredients in recipes and assessed whether meals included a balanced variety of food groups.

A standout moment came when children eagerly examined recipes, identified food groups, and counted to ensure at least three were represented. Their enthusiasm showcased both their grasp of nutrition principles and their growing ability to make informed food choices.

This program equipped participants with the knowledge and confidence to explore healthy eating, fostering habits that promote lifelong wellness.





Partnering with St. Louis Area Foodbank to promote healthier food choices

Access to nutritious food is vital for community health, yet many food pantry clients face barriers to healthier eating. Poor nutrition contributes to chronic conditions like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

To address these challenges, SNAP-Ed partnered with the St. Louis Area Foodbank to implement the Foodbank Health and Nutrition Post Assessment as a tool for evaluating current practices and identifying opportunities to promote healthier food options. This year, efforts focused on revisiting and improving a nutrition policy to align with health goals. Technical assistance supported progress, action planning, and feedback collection from partner agencies to ensure continuous improvement.

The partnership is expanding outreach to culturally specific groups, like the Hispanic population, to provide appropriate nutrition resources. By promoting nutritious food donations and recognizing agencies that encourage healthy practices, SNAP-Ed and the food bank are transforming hunger relief into long-term wellness promotion.



The Foodbank Health and Nutrition Assessment meeting with St. Louis Area Foodbank to enhance nutrition and food access in the community.



Expanding healthy food access through the Metro East rotating farmer's market

Limited access to healthy food has long been a challenge in East St. Louis and Washington Park, contributing to health disparities like obesity and diabetes. To address these challenges, the Make Health Happen Coalition, supported by partners, launched the Metro East Rotating Farmers Market.

This initiative, led by Go International, Midwest Clean Food and Water Movement, Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation, Tiny Children's Garden in Washington Park, and the SNAP-Ed team, with East Side Health District providing critical assistance throughout the process aims to improve access to fresh produce.

The market rotates between four sites- Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation, Christian Activity Center Garden, Fairmont City

Library and Community Garden, and Tiny Children's Garden, reducing transportation barriers and promoting local economic growth.

After its launch, the market operated throughout the growing season. The coalition is now planning to expand outreach, improve impact, and invite more vendors, planting the seeds for healthier, more resilient communities.

Illinois Extension empowers school nutrition professionals at ABC's of School Nutrition Regional Learning Institute

SNAP-Ed teamed up with Nutrition and Wellness Educator Kris Juelfs to deliver professional development training for school nutrition professionals in Madison and St. Clair counties. Forty school food service staff members participated, gaining valuable insights into topics such as Share Tables, sodium reduction in school meals, strategies for healthier lunchrooms, semi-scratch cooking, and the latest updates from the Illinois State Board of Education.

Participants reported increased knowledge across all topics and shared plans to implement taste tests, incorporate low-sodium recipes, set up flavor stations, and pursue grant opportunities to improve their programs. This training empowered staff to make meaningful changes in school nutrition and meal offerings.

Metro East Food Pantry Coalition leads food drive to combat food insecurity

The Metro East Food Pantry Coalition organized a highly successful food drive, collecting over 600 pounds of nutritious food to support local food pantries in Madison and St. Clair counties. Through collaboration with the Illinois Extension 4-H and SNAP-Ed team, area food pantries, and support from the St. Louis Area Foodbank, the initiative demonstrated the community's strong commitment to tackling food insecurity and increasing access to healthy food options.

This collective effort highlighted the power of community partnerships in addressing the challenges of food insecurity, making a meaningful impact on the well-being of local families.



Youth gather at the rotating farmers market in East St. Louis, bringing fresh produce and healthy food options to the community.





Building a sustainable food pantry to serve the community with Clean Aquaponics

Clean Aquaponics is transforming access to fresh, healthy food in the community by establishing a food pantry powered by its on-site greenhouse. Recognizing the critical need to address health disparities like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, the organization set out to provide year-round produce for families in need.

The SNAP-Ed team actively partnered with Clean Aquaponics to bring this vision to life, offering technical assistance and building connections with local partners to secure essential resources like shelves and tables for the pantry setup. While the pantry is still in development, it has already started making an impact by distributing donations, including fresh produce grown directly in the garden.

So far, the pantry has supported approximately 50 families, providing them with access to healthy food during challenging times. As the project grows, efforts are underway to expand its capacity and formalize operations, ensuring its long-term sustainability and broader reach.

By working together to create a pantry rooted in fresh, local produce, this initiative is fostering healthier eating habits, addressing food insecurity, and building a sustainable resource for the community.

Driving impact: celebrating excellence in Extension

At the Extension Annual Conference, teams from across the state united to celebrate achievements, share knowledge, and inspire change in local communities. Karla Isaak, office support specialist, earned the Excellence and Innovation in Field-Based Office Support Award. Nicole Hellon, fiscal office support specialist, received the Individual Extension Excellence Award. Kris Juelfs, nutrition and wellness educator, was honored with the Youth Development Award for Youth Cooking School

by the Illinois Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. Their dedication strengthens Extension's mission and empowers the communities it serves.

Transforming communities through education and innovation

Illinois Extension leverages local, county, state, and federal funding to deliver impactful educational programming that strengthens communities across the state. With a mission to empower individuals and organizations to improve their lives and communities, Illinois Extension builds learning partnerships that put knowledge to work.

Every dollar invested in Illinois Extension translates into meaningful solutions that drive progress, foster resilience, and create a brighter future for all.



	Amount	Source
	4.9%	Illinois Department of Agriculture
	0.1%	Local partner donations
	31.8%	Madison and Monroe County Boards
	4.3%	Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair County Extension Education Foundations
	58.8%	Federal Funds



	Amount	Source
	8.6%	Program Expenses
	69.1%	Salaries
	13.5%	Utilities/Rent
	3.9%	Travel
	4.9%	4-H Awards



Youth in Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties explore healthy recipes, master kitchen tools, and learn to read nutrition labels — paving the way to healthier lifestyles.



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Illinois Extension Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair

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If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

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