



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

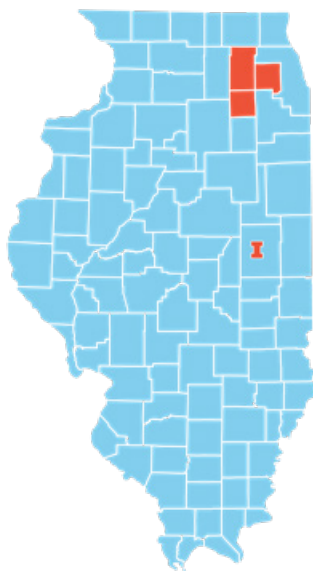


Serving DuPage, Kane, and Kendall Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Deanna Roby-Vorgias
County Director



From lifecycle to lifelong impact

2024 was a big year for cicadas and for Illinois Extension, and the two have more in common than you'd think.

Periodical cicadas are among the longest-lived insects on the planet, spending much of their 13 or 17 years right under our feet. Like this natural phenomenon, Extension has been embedded in Illinois communities for many lifecycles.

While their above-ground life is short, these cicadas make a lasting impact on those around them. Extension also works to make a moment of education grow into a chorus of positive change, whether it's encouraging young leaders through 4-H, protecting our environment with Master Gardener and Master Naturalist efforts, or creating healthy habits through nutrition education.

Cicadas were not the only thing to emerge in 2024. Illinois Extension announced a new strategic plan to benefit the people and address priority needs of Illinois. Our focus remains on food and agriculture, economy, community,

environment, and health. Our ever-evolving work is made possible through a vast network of experts and partnerships, discovery, technology, and workforce excellence.

Just as cicadas gain nourishment in roots, Extension's strength lies in our deep, sustained presence in local communities and our connection to the University. Throughout our 100-plus years, Illinois Extension has responded to diverse challenges and changing needs by building relationships and delivering research-backed programs.

Our goal is to provide Lifelong Learning for Lifelong Impact. We look forward to bringing this strategic plan to life here in DuPage, Kane, and Kendall counties throughout the next year, decade, and beyond.

Deanna Roby-Vorgias
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Periodic cicadas emerged in Illinois in 2024.

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



From grass to treasure



Water warriors dig into rain garden project

Sprawling suburban communities contain countless driveways, parking lots, roofs, and multi-lane roads. In Illinois, most of the stormwater runoff from these areas flows into local waterways, impacting the Mississippi River all the way to the Gulf.

To increase awareness and provide real-world action, Extension offered the Purdue Rainscaping Education Program in May. For the hands-on portion of training, the students and Extension staff built a rain garden at the Kane County office in St. Charles.

When rainfall and snowmelt flow off hard, impervious surfaces like parking lots, they enter waterways through storm drains and ditches. As little as 10% of impervious cover in a watershed can harm lakes and rivers, according to the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy. The more runoff, the larger the chance of flooding and pollution.

Rainscaping redirects stormwater to be absorbed by native plants instead, reducing localized flooding, improving water quality, and providing habitat for wildlife. This combination of sustainable landscape design and management practices can be used in residential settings or small-scale public spaces. However, careful site selection and good planning are essential to a successful rain garden project.

About 20 people participated in the certification program in May, spending hours in training before transforming a grassy area between parking lots into a home for native plants, pollinators, and even amphibians. The sloped space — bounded by a drainage ditch — was chosen to help mitigate stormwater flow from the fairgrounds and Extension office while also

Program participants learn hands-on as they convert a stormwater runoff into a water-filtering garden along the busy Randall Road corridor.

improving the appearance of the space visible from busy Randall Road. Native species selected were from Midwest Groundcovers, a local nursery that also donated a number of plants for the project.

“A rain garden is not a wetland,” said program participant Bob Herrmann. “It is an area that captures rain runoff, allowing it to penetrate the subsoil within a 24-hour period. We learned there are several zones in a rain garden, from the dryer outside edges to the lower wetter areas, and we learned what type of plants can best be planted throughout the rain garden.”

All of the participants reported that they learned to select the right plants for the right places, plus 100% also said they plan to use the information outside of the class. An impressive 82% plan to work on a rainscaping project at home or in their community, and 68% report that they will actively educate others, increasing awareness and the chance that others will act. The garden, which bloomed through summer into fall, also will be used for future educational efforts with Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, 4-H youth, and the general public.

Water is a valuable natural resource.

Rainscaping is a method many homeowners can use to capture rain water as opposed to allowing it to run directly into our sewers and streams.

Bob Herrmann



NEW ROLE GROWS CONNECTIONS TO FARMERS AND FOOD

From raising animals to vegetable production, Illinois Extension strives to help farms thrive. In 2024, Alexis Barnes joined the local food systems and small farms team to specifically support local food production in Kane County and neighboring DuPage and Kendall counties. A native of Bartlett, Barnes is no stranger to the Chicagoland area. “I became part of Extension because I love helping the community. I am excited to be serving the area I was born and raised in.” As she helps growers address concerns about their systems, her goal is to build lasting connections to positively influence operations and community access to local food. Barnes holds a master’s degree in plant science from South Dakota State University, where she focused on specialty crops, cover crop and living mulch integration, and food accessibility. A county grant from the USDA Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production program helped make the new position possible.



GARDENERS SHARE SKILLS AND SCIENCE WITH YOUTH

The Junior Master Gardener program launched in 2024, meeting two hours weekly in spring and summer to explore a broad range of horticulture-related concepts, vocabulary, and skills through fun, hands-on experiences with Master Gardeners. “We did things like dissect plants while learning about their anatomy and reproduction, complete experiments to learn about ideal soil composition, and observe evidence of insect damage to hypothesize about the type of insect that visited the plant,” said Master Gardener and 4-H volunteer Anne Herrmann. The juniors also designed their own small plots at the Kane County demonstration garden, presented their work at an Idea Garden open house, and even grew vegetables for the food pantry. “It is important to offer young people opportunities to contribute to the larger good and experience a sense of purpose and community.”



MASTER NATURALIST WILD ABOUT SNAKES

Extension-trained volunteer Linda Heuser goes out of her way to find something many people avoid — snakes. “On one of the monitoring days, we caught and recorded data from 35 snakes. This was a record number for the route in a single day. It was a very rewarding experience!” Native snakes help control populations of rodents and insects and serve as prey for other animals, maintaining the food web and biodiversity. Heuser, who volunteers at the Morton Arboretum, also helps remove invasive species, facilitates prescribed burns, collects and cleans seed, and leads the ultrasonic bat monitoring program. She also checks chloride levels in bodies of water for the Conservation Foundation. “All of these activities are important to keep natural areas protected and to ensure we are doing as much as possible to keep them healthy. I am so grateful to be part of the Master Naturalist group and to have been able to learn from the great educators in the program.”



VOLUNTEERS CONVERT CONCRETE TO COMFORT

At the Kendall County Health Department, Master Gardeners transformed empty concrete barriers into welcoming mini-gardens. The large cylinders were installed as part of a building safety measure; now, they serve that function and provide additional benefits. “As we were potting the plants, employees were leaving work for the day. It was so nice to see the smiles on their faces,” said volunteer Dawn Ramey, who helped design the project with low-maintenance plants to tolerate dry soil and full sun. “They will add beauty to the front of the building and may even draw a butterfly or two.” Plus, the smiles of the health department staff will be joined by those of visitors who come in for important services. “There is so much to love about the Master Gardener program! There are opportunities to learn more about nature, to meet and learn from other Master Gardeners, as well as to provide education, seeds, and plants to the community.”



Program participants enjoyed lessons and take-home packages with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Super summer support



SNAP-Ed connects community need to donor

For some families, summertime brings freedom and fun, but for others, it means scrimping to handle extra childcare and grocery expenses. To help fight this battle, Advocate Health donated fresh produce for more than 150 families participating in SNAP-Ed's Illinois Junior Chef, Teen Cuisine, and Catch summer programs in DuPage County.

During the six-week period, fresh food donations elevated in-person lessons and went home with local families. According to Nancy Chatterjee, Support Services Coordinator, West Suburban Food Pantry, the program supported struggling families who were facing weeks without school-sponsored daily breakfasts and lunches.

"Summer is often a difficult time for families experiencing food insecurity," Chatterjee said. "Having additional groceries allowed them to fill the gap of the extra food needed with the children home during the day and provided healthy, fresh options for meals and snacks to growing children."

When a need arose, Advocate acted fast, providing bananas, carrots, apples, tomatoes, broccoli, bell peppers, and cucumbers for the weekly interactive sessions serving areas such as Addison, Lombard, Willowbrook, and Woodridge.

"We understand that the needs in the community are great and that providing food alone is not enough," said Community Health Director Elvis Munoz of Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital. "Health education packaged with access to healthy foods is our way of making a strong impact and real difference."



As grocery costs have increased, access to healthy food has become more challenging. In addition, many older youth or teens may be home alone over the summer, needing to feed themselves and their siblings within limited means.

"This initiative has given our students hands-on experience in the kitchen, helping them build confidence in cooking and making healthier food choices," said Community Outreach Supervisor Allison Rodgers, Community Outreach Supervisor from The Community House. "By learning essential skills like knife safety, measuring ingredients, and reading recipes, they are developing lifelong habits that promote nutrition and self-sufficiency."

This successful collaboration would not have happened without several entities working together, added Munoz. "We are always looking to do more, and we understand that in order to do more, we have to partner with strong organizations such as University of Illinois Extension. The team engaged with the audience and established partnerships, getting directly to the needs. We supported the cause by covering the expenses, but three-fourths of the battle is having the staff to lead the education and finding the avenues to establish impact."



AURORA SCHOOL MOVES IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION WITH SNAP-ED

At Hill Elementary School in Aurora, the majority of students live within 1.5 miles, so each October, the school hosts a Walk and Roll to School Day to increase exercise and safety awareness. “You see kids walking and talking to other kids they don’t see inside school, and it’s also a family and community experience,” said Juron Marshall, crossing guard. “Everyone greets each other, parents talk to other parents and other kids, parents connect with their own children.” The school reports an increase in families and students who walk to school since implementing the annual special day. Students sign a banner to show their commitment to exercise, and the SNAP-Ed team provides nutrition education. “This helps students make healthy decisions while they are still young to encourage good habits in the future,” said Principal Beth Smith. “Additionally, these programs support students being ready to learn each day by increasing energy and overall health.”



4-H AND YMCA PARTNER TO HELP KIDS LEVEL UP

The Summer Slide is not as fun as it sounds; it refers to the decline in academic skills students may experience over summer break. In Plano, the 4-H team partnered with Fox Valley YMCA to offer two educational lessons a week to about 200 youth from Kindergarten to seventh grade. Campers made slime, created rollercoasters, explored sharks, visited with rabbits, pressed fossils, made paper constellations, and more – all while practicing STEM-related skills and unknowingly becoming better prepared for the next school year. “Our campers enjoyed a summer full of educational activities provided by 4-H,” the Y posted on social media. “We are so grateful for this partnership and the enrichment it provides!” One camper even recognized a 4-H staff member at the Kane County 4-H Fair. “Come meet my parents!” the student exclaimed. It seemed fitting for them to connect after a summer of fun, hands-on learning at an event highlighting 4-H.



POWERHOUSE PROGRAMS INTERSECT AT LOCAL PANTRY

Extension offers the unique ability to offer community partners educational expertise and volunteer power throughout the seasons. At the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry, visitors may find Master Gardeners leading activities in the garden during the growing season or SNAP-Education staff teaching nutrition lessons indoors or out. In 2024, the garden yielded more than 900 pounds of fresh produce for the pantry, saving the organization money and providing clients with fresh produce to take home. “The support comes in many ways,” said Program Director Eddie Galvan. “University of Illinois Extension hosts different morning classes such as Healthy Cents and gardening sessions. The community is always excited to sit and learn, so the partnership is vital. I like to hear the client’s feedback about how they have implemented the new skills or recipes at home.”



SNAP-ED HELPS DELIVER EDUCATION AND FRESH FOOD

WeGo Together for Kids brings food where it is needed most with support from SNAP-Education. Timberlake Mobile Rx delivers food to where many at-risk families live in West Chicago, making nutritious options more accessible. “Healthy, fresh food is a luxury to some of our families,” said Director of WeGo Together for Kids Molly Beck Dean. “The Mobile Rx supplies pounds upon pounds of produce, meat, dairy, and other items for each family.” SNAP-Ed staff provide recipes that use the same foods people receive each month and are on-site to help at distributions. Extension also coordinates the pick up of excess food for a local food pantry. In August and September, they recovered 1,255 pounds of food that may otherwise have been discarded. As part of the grant, Dean said they also promote physical activity for families. “We are hoping these things will help build healthy habits in our kiddos and turn the trend of obesity.”





Jaiden Mahler earned the top honor for showmanship at the Illinois State Fair.

Project Mastery



Kendall 4-H'er named top showman in state

Since the age of 3, Jaiden Mahler has been working with and showing the big three: cattle, sheep, and swine. In August, all the years of hard work paid off when the 10-year member of 4-H beat out 59 other top livestock exhibitors at the Illinois State Fair for the title of 2024 Overall Master Showman.

This prestigious annual competition invites qualifying 4-H members ages 14 and up to display their showmanship skills with beef, sheep, and swine. They are judged on their ability to handle each animal, knowledge of the species and animal husbandry, and on overall showmanship skills.

“Master showmanship can be very intimidating prior to the actual event,” Mahler said. “Leading up to the contest, I was the most nervous I had been in a long time. I knew how badly I wanted to win, and I knew this year would be my last chance.”

The college teen said that she prepared for each species both physically and mentally. She studied animal anatomy, market prices, interesting facts, and more while also caring for and working with animals. However, she said she couldn’t have done it alone.

“It takes a team,” she said. “While the contestants are running around from barn to barn, there is a behind-the-scenes team getting their animals prepped and brought up to the show ring and bringing any materials they may need.”

I have been around 4-H and FFA my whole life. I think the biggest thing I will take with me will be that if you put the work in and set goals, it will pay off in the end.

Jaiden Mahler, 10-year 4-H member

She also credited her parents, Chad and Natalie Mahler, ag teachers and mentors, and industry professionals for sharing their knowledge.

“I worked with different breeders and industry professionals to see what I could improve upon,” she said. “With both of my parents being ag teachers, I have been surrounded by industry professionals since I was little. I have always learned by watching, and I think that is part of why I have such a strong drive.”

Mahler is majoring in agricultural education and ag business at Joliet Junior College. She said she’s grateful to have ended her 4-H career reaching by her longtime goal.

“I’m going to miss the families the most,” she said. “I have gotten very close to several of the families in Kendall County, as well as other counties. I think of a lot of the other kids, like my brothers and sisters; I know I will still see them around, but it will be different not being in the show ring with them.”



SWINE PROJECT RETURNS TO DUPAGE FAIR

For the first time in 10 years, DuPage County 4-H members showed swine at the DuPage County Fair in Wheaton. Although in a highly developed and suburbanized area, Fischer Farms 4-H Club in Bensenville aims to help suburban youth learn about farm animals and caring for them. Fischer Farm, part of the Bensenville Park District, is one of the oldest remaining homesteads in the county and serves as an educational working farm. Christine Shiel, Fischer Farm manager and 4-H volunteer, thought it would be great to get five to seven kids in this new club but was surprised to have 26 kids join, ages 5 to teens. “Without this 4-H club in place, the kids would never have the opportunity to raise livestock, and without Fischer Farm, folks in this highly urbanized county would not get to see any farm animals up close.” The 4-H members are building important life skills, such as tracking expenses, doing chores, and caring for other living things, from rabbits and chickens to goats and pigs.



4-H TEEN TEACHERS RACK UP ASTRONOMICAL EXPERIENCES

Local 4-H Teen Science Ambassadors learned directly from University of Illinois astronomy experts and viewed the eclipse through solar-safe telescopes as part of the Illinois 4-H “Total Eclipse of the Park” event at MTN Dew Park in Marion. The 4-H teen teachers also shared 4-H STEM experiences and activities as event-goers waited for the unobstructed full solar eclipse in southern Illinois. Overall, the summer was eventful for Science Ambassadors, as these 4-H teens also had the opportunity to tour Yerkes Observatory in Williams Bay, Wisconsin. Locally, members presented five coding workshops on Python and Apple’s Swift coding language in Aurora and Glendale Heights; they also reached more than 100 youth with internet safety education, utilizing iPads provided by a grant from Apple and an award for digital literacy from AT&T.



YOUTH-LED EFFORT UPGRADES POULTRY BARN

Inspired by the Illinois State Fair, 4-H’er Madisyn Glenn decided to take charge upgrading the barn at her county fairgrounds. She wanted 4-H’ers to be able to take pride in their project showcase and, more importantly, keep their animals safe and healthy while at the fair. She collected donations — like saw horses, plywood, tar paper, and paint — from local businesses and recruited fellow 4-H members to prep and paint them and to set the new displays for the fair. “I love being a part of 4-H because I get to learn something new every time I do a project or get involved in a new opportunity. The best part is getting to share my projects with the public and seeing the little kids’ faces light up when they get to pet or hold a chicken.” The youth-led effort also showed appreciation for 4-H volunteer Beth Lohrey, who leads the poultry club and show in Kendall County.



4-H TAPS INTO IMAGINATION WITH THEATRE ARTS

As our world becomes more interconnected, the arts play a vital role in fostering creativity, understanding, and self-expression, especially for young people. With this in mind, 4-H offered multiple theatre arts opportunities in DuPage, Kane, and Kendall counties through “Set the Stage” mini-camps for ages 8 to 12 and “Budding Actors” workshops for Cloverbud ages 5 to 7. Older participants worked on becoming characters, using their voice and emotions, scene work, and improvisation. The budding actors focused on age-appropriate games to express themselves and learn. Nearly 40 youth tapped into their imagination and built confidence, communication, and collaboration skills. Post-program surveys showed that parents reported that youth enjoyed the games and making new friends. One parent added, “She had a lot of fun in a nice, supportive environment.”





2024 Highlights



495

Extension volunteers



38,266

Volunteer hours



\$1,427,596

Value of volunteer hours



12,503

Educational program attendance



137

Local government leaders receiving resources

We like working with University of Illinois Extension office because of their reputation in the community and knowledge.

Denise Blaszyński, St. Charles Public Library

Nutrition Education



86

SNAP-Ed partnerships



296

Nutrition education classes

Horticulture and Environment



356

Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers



8,338

Pounds of produce donated



788

Help desk consultations

Youth Development



543

4-H Volunteers



14,252

4-H experiences



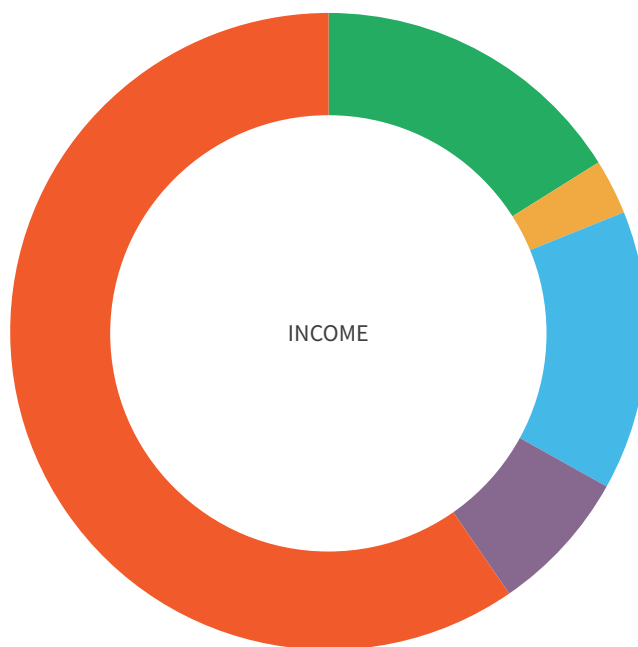
56.3%

Youth engaged who identify as a minority

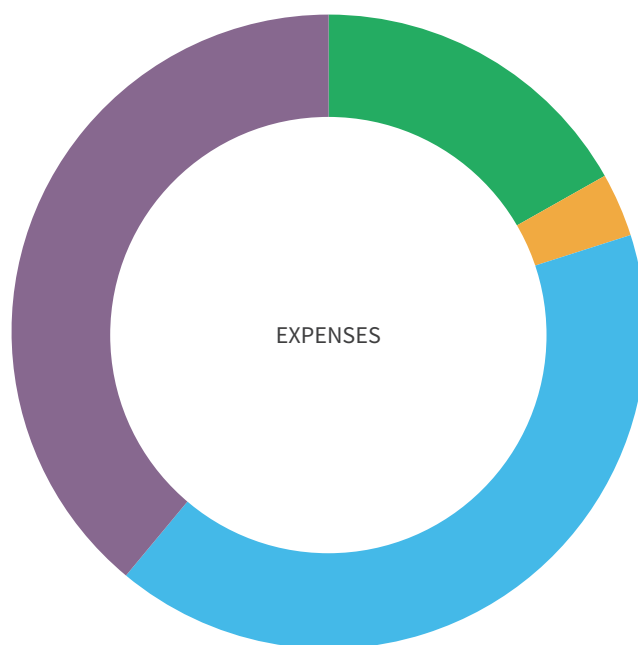
The volunteer aspect is wonderful and extremely critical to learning in a way that books and quizzes only touch upon — helping and producing something important for people other than for my own use is extremely gratifying.

Susan Kuczera, Master Gardener, Class of 2024

Financial Report



Amount	Source
16.1%	State
2.8%	Federal
14.2%	County
7.3%	Local donations
59.6%	SNAP-Ed program funding (Federal/State)



Amount	Source
16.84%	Office and operations
3.23%	Programs and supplies
41%	SNAP-Ed salaries and supplies
39%	Other staff salaries

STAFF 2024-2025

Deanna Roby-Vorgias
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Carrie Hubbard
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Nanette Long
Office Support Assistant

Melissa Schumaker
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Donna Nuger
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Community Outreach Workers

Krista Bagley

Jocelyn Briones Cid

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EXTENSION COUNCIL 2024

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Colleen Haas

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Elizabeth Melton*

Donna Plonczynski

Kendall County

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Matias Habib*

Kathleen Janick

Rhonda Oker

Laura Reppy

Emily Reppy*

Sydney Reppy*

**denotes youth member*

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Illinois Extension

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College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

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.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs are funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.