



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

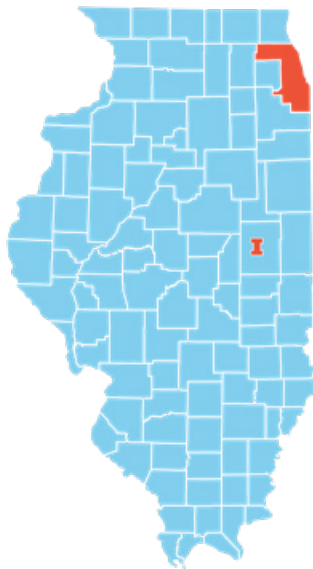


Serving Cook County
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Willene Buffett
County Extension Director



A message from the county director

Throughout the extension system's existence, nationally, state, and locally, we have been committed to being in the communities as employees. Although societal issues have increased and changed, Extension's overarching mission remains to develop educational programs, extend knowledge, and build partnerships to support people, communities, and their environments.

We, the staff, are committed to the core values of Extension. The value of credibility, collaboration, inclusivity, and learning is paramount for our existence this past year, 2024, and will continue to be in 2025.

In reading this report for 2024, the educators, coordinators, community workers, office support, volunteers, council members, and administrator team members demonstrated exceptional excellence in learning and marketing relevant programs in this county.

In 2024, we conducted 2,400 educational sessions for 53,000 Cook County residents.

Extension-supported gardens addressed food access by growing and donating 23,000 lbs. of fresh produce to local community food pantries.

Our 4-H, Master Naturalist, and Master Gardener volunteers donated 44,200 hours of their time, positively impacting the lives of youth in our communities, enhancing and preserving the county's natural resources, and working to maintain a safe food supply that is accessible to all.

Throughout this report, you will see the measurable impact of program outreach in the following strategic priorities for Cook County citizens and residents. This year's focus has been on Health, Food & Agriculture, the Economy, and Partnerships for adults and youth.

Thank you for your continued support of Cook County Extension and its programs. Together, we can continue to extend knowledge and make a difference in the lives and communities of our residents.

Willene Buffett
County Extension Director

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



Food and Agriculture

Maintain a safe and accessible food, fibers, and biofuel supply. Support the coordination and capacity building necessary for producing and maintaining economically viable, safe, equitable, culturally responsive, and resilient food, feed, fiber, and bioenergy systems in Illinois.



2,346

attendees in all programs last year



101

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered



50

Gardens supported by Extension staff and volunteers



22,970 lbs.

volume of produce donated to local communities



\$40,656

Value of donated food



479

Master Gardener volunteers



32,234

Volunteer hours donated



\$1,088,235

Value of volunteer hours



105,774

Information services provided by Master Gardeners



249

Expert consultations related to food



Extension staff with MUFTP students at field day

Partnership with Kane County expands Master Urban Farmer Training Program's reach

Illinois Extension in Cook and Kane counties partnered to bring Cook County's Master Urban Farmer Training program to a new audience. Over the years, demand for this program has increased as more people have become invested in growing their own food and helping others to achieve food security. Partnering with Kane County Extension allowed us to enhance course content and made it possible to accept more aspiring urban farmers into the program. This year, we were able to train a record high 44 students, including 12 from Kane County. Equally important, the added staff increased our ability to meet the individual needs of students in understanding the systems they can use to grow, harvest, plan, market, and finance an urban farm.

While all students enter the class with food growing experience, most have never worked on a farm. Students report that the class "has been very helpful... when it comes to having the proper mindset for crop production."





Cook County Compost Initiative expands Compost Ambassador training

In a continuing effort to increase awareness and knowledge of proper composting techniques in an urban environment, Illinois Extension offered the second iteration of Compost Ambassador to 40 participants in Cook and Lake counties.

The program offered six weekly virtual modules and an in-person workshop on composting. Participants also received tools and equipment to get them started with their personal “composting style” at the conclusion of the training.

After the training, more than half of survey respondents indicated they were highly likely to:

- Do not put yard waste in the trash bin.
- Develop a compost use plan.
- Start composting at home.
- Use finished compost on my garden/farm.
- Educate my friends and/or neighbors about compost.
- Promote opportunities to participate in composting with others.
- Conduct a seed germination bioassay with my compost.
- Adjust my normal compost usage rate based on compost quality and need.

A goal of Extension’s Compost Ambassador program is to pave the way for the broad acceptance of and adoption of municipal compost collection efforts.



Compost demonstration set up at Extension’s urban ag demo farm.

Extension staff demonstrates how to check for compost maturity at the Compost Ambassador workshop



WITS WORKOUT

USDA award fuels brain health education for older adults

Illinois Extension and a research team from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Chicago campuses were selected as recipients of a USDA Rural Health and Safety Education Award for their project, “Building Community Capacity to Facilitate Healthy Behavior Education for Older Adults in Rural Illinois.” A Cook County Extension educator co-wrote the curriculum being utilized and lent their expertise to the project.

The group will collaborate with partner organizations to facilitate the delivery of a program called Wits Workout to older adults across rural parts of Illinois. They will also develop and pilot a culturally tailored Spanish version of Wits Workout with Spanish-speaking older adults in targeted communities.

Wits Workout is a peer-reviewed, interactive brain health curriculum developed by Illinois Extension. It is designed in a leader-led format so volunteers or other community leaders can facilitate Wits Workout sessions. The facilitator guide consists of interactive pen-and-paper activities and short educational narratives on health topics that address cognitive health. Wits Workout helps bring older adults together to increase their socialization and intellectual engagement, which are lifestyle contributors to brain health.





Youth learn about self-care while making all-natural body scrubs.

Maximize health equity and access and support health promotion.

Advance health equity, healthcare access, disease prevention, chronic illness management support, childhood wellness, and health promotion through integrated education, community partnerships, and systemic organizational changes.



31,160

attendees in all programs last year



1,857

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered

INEP Community Partnerships



34

K-12 Schools



78

Agencies, Community Centers, Early Childhood Centers, or Emergency Food Sites



556

Nutrition education classes



41

PSE changes adopted by partner organizations



Slowing down and finding balance: Illinois teens discover Calm in Chaos

In a world where teens face mounting pressure from school, social media, family expectations, and the uncertainty of the future, a new wellness program emerged to offer them a chance to slow down, find balance, and learn healthy ways to manage stress. Illinois Extension created “Finding Calm in Chaos,” designed to help teens embrace mindfulness, creativity, and connection as tools for reducing stress.



Participants learn about healthy ways to manage stress

The program began with teens writing letters to themselves, expressing their feelings and hopes. These letters were returned at the end, allowing for reflection on their progress. Activities included playing Uno, which taught patience, concentration, and teamwork in a low-pressure environment. Laughter and lighthearted competition helped teens forget their worries.

Another favorite activity was Body Scrub Making, where teens created all-natural scrubs using essential oils. This tactile experience emphasized the benefits of self-care routines. Slime-making also proved therapeutic, with the hands-on process fostering mindfulness and creativity.

Throughout the program, teens learned breathing exercises, journaling techniques, and other mindfulness practices. The combination of playful activities and relaxation techniques created a supportive community, helping teens feel less alone.

By the end, teens felt empowered with new coping strategies. “Finding Calm in Chaos” demonstrated that even in stressful moments, teens can find peace by embracing the present and connecting with others.



Extension enhances community health and food access in Berwyn

In Berwyn, Illinois Extension works diligently to build relationships and create educational and healthy food access opportunities. At the Ebenezer Christian Reform Church pantry, the team met Maria, a single mother, and shared nutritional information, recipes, and food samples through their Eat.Move. Save booth. Over time, Maria developed trust with the staff and showed interest in healthier choices for her family.

Extension's efforts go beyond education. They connect families like Maria's to suitable programs, such as the Catch Kids Club for her children and the Create Better Health program for Maria. They also partner with local schools; one of Maria's children participates in the Illinois Junior Chef program at Lincoln Middle School.

Extension is committed to long-term food access solutions. A new community garden at St. Michael's All Angels Church grows culturally familiar produce like corn, tomatoes, peppers, and onions, providing fresh food and strengthening local partnerships. Managed by community members and resident asylum seekers, the garden fosters unity and shared responsibility.

With donations from partners like NextDoor and Good Food is Good Medicine, the community has resources like refrigerators and small appliances to store fresh produce and prepare shared meals. These efforts significantly impact families like Maria's, enhancing nutrition, food security, and community support.



Brighton Park community resident receiving their certificate.

Community mentors come together for racial healing

The American Public Health Association recognizes racism as a public health crisis because it undeniably shapes access to resources, services, and opportunities that are critical to sustaining good health and well-being. Racial healing promotes socio-emotional health and well-being and can be a step toward achieving racial equity by fostering understanding, empathy, and collective action to dismantle systemic racism.

Communities affected by racism can find value in racial healing circles, as these gatherings foster a deeper comprehension of racial traumas and personal experiences while also equipping individuals with strategies to navigate and address daily instances of racial bias.

Illinois Extension facilitated the first Racial Healing Circle/ Circulo de Sanación Racial for Spanish-speaking community residents. Twelve members of the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council who serve as community organizers participated in the program. These women also represent seven neighborhood schools and serve as parent patrols for a violence prevention initiative.

Following the program, participants reported increased comfort in discussing racism and a heightened appreciation for the importance of their individual racial healing. Most of the women expressed their intention to apply the insights gained from the program to enhance their ongoing racial healing and overall well-being and share their acquired knowledge with others.



Participants discuss and reflect on the 5 stages of grief.





From seeds to success: Illinois Extension's Cultivate Calm initiative takes root

A community initiative is transforming the lives of its youth in Maywood. Illinois Extension's "Cultivate Calm" program aims to empower middle and high school students through the therapeutic practice of gardening. This innovative program combines hands-on gardening activities with educational sessions on vital community health topics.

The program kicked off with an engaging workshop that introduced the participants to the calming effects of gardening. They learned how interacting with plants could reduce anxiety, uplift their mood, and enhance overall mental well-being. Each week, students eagerly gathered to plant, cultivate, and harvest a variety of vegetables and edible and aromatic herbs. They also used red wigglers to boost plant growth and foster a connection to nature.

Program discussions covered essential health topics such as healthy eating, the importance of physical activity, and effective coping strategies. At the end of the series, each participant received their own Zen garden to help manage stress.

The program was highly successful, with many young people reporting a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Tending to my plant helps me clear my mind.
I feel more in control, and it's like a therapy session without the pressure.

Program Participant

Through Cultivate Calm, youth discovered that nurturing plants also meant nurturing themselves. The program demonstrated that with the right tools and guidance, young people could flourish in ways they never imagined.



Students working with plants for their garden

Chicago Park District and Extension team up to promote healthy eating

SOURCE: Meghan O'Boyle

The Greater Chicago Food Depository states that 1-in-4 Cook County children are at risk of hunger. This is especially true in the summer when many youth lack access to regular school meals.

To combat this, the Chicago Park District, Illinois Extension, and University of Illinois Chicago offered nutrition education classes to Chicago Park District summer day camp participants across the city. Throughout the summer, the program provided nutritious lunches to over 20,000 campers at more than 200 park locations.

Extension and its partners guide campers in one-on-one meal and snack preparation sessions taught practical nutrition education that campers can replicate at home, fostering healthy eating habits. The program has proven particularly impactful in Black and Latino neighborhoods with historically high poverty and food insecurity rates.

Throughout the week, campers prepare meals they can enjoy at the park and recreate with their families. They also learn healthy recipes and how to prepare nutritious snacks and meals using affordable ingredients. Over a week of sessions at Homan Square Park, campers made Banana Splits, Quesadillas, Ham and Pineapple Sandwiches, and Smoothies. At the end of the week, participants receive a certificate, a water bottle, and Extension's Illinois Junior Chef cookbook.

Through the USDA program, the Chicago Park District, Extension, and UIC provide meals and promote nutrition literacy at over 200 day camps citywide.





Illinois Extension provides overdose education and naloxone in Cook County

Opioid overdoses claimed the lives of 1,821 Cook County residents in 2023 and resulted in the loss of a loved one, friend, and community member. Illinois Extension partnered with libraries, park districts, and schools throughout Cook County to deliver education to 128 residents on statistics surrounding opioid overdoses, how to respond to an opioid overdose, and how to use life-saving naloxone. Extension also distributed 164 boxes of naloxone for free. The education and naloxone given allow residents to respond effectively to an opioid overdose situation and potentially save a life. One resident stated, “Now, I can help some people if they are in this situation.”



Extension educator explaining the program and its impact.



Using the Forest Preserves of Cook County to promote nature as medicine

Mental health is an important component of achieving holistic health, but studies show that Cook County adults suffered from an increased rate of poor mental health over the last few years. Poor mental health can lead to depression and anxiety. However, utilizing Cook County’s numerous forest preserves, Illinois Extension is promoting nature as medicine by conducting Nature Wellness Walks. Mindfulness and meditation practices in natural settings can reduce stress, depression, and social isolation. Thirty-one residents participated in the walks, with 96% reporting reduced stress and anxiety levels. One participant stated, “Such great activities that really helped focus my mind and spirit!”



Extension educators and participants at Linne Woods

Social service providers learn how to put “self” back into self-care

Mental health practitioners are not exempt from the effects of stress and burnout caused by their professions. Studies show that mental health professionals who engaged in self-care had lower stress levels and enjoyed a greater sense of well-being. Other benefits included better job performance, higher job satisfaction, and a better quality of life.

Even small acts of self-care in daily life can have meaningful effects. Mindful self-care can enhance mental, emotional, and physical health by managing stress, lowering the risk of illness, and improving sleep quality, concentration, and energy.

Through experiential learning, participants learned low and no-cost, research-driven strategies for practicing mindful self-care in personal and professional settings. Such tools reduce financial and time barriers to stress management. Individual reflection and group discussion on identity and intersectionality provided the opportunity to understand how oppression maintains inequalities related to self-care.

The workshop, adapted from conference presentations in 2023, reached 157 individuals. Participants were social service staff who serve refugees, immigrants, domestic violence survivors, students, and families. In the post-workshop evaluation, one participant shared, “Self-care is a practice directly connected to spiritual, mental, and physical health. I’m thinking about how to demonstrate and practice self-care in community meetings and the workplace.”



Self-care materials used in the workshop. Photo: Rebecca Griffith





Economy

Grow a prosperous economy through lifelong learning and development.

Fostering a resilient and future-ready workforce through delivering educational programs and promoting lifelong learning.



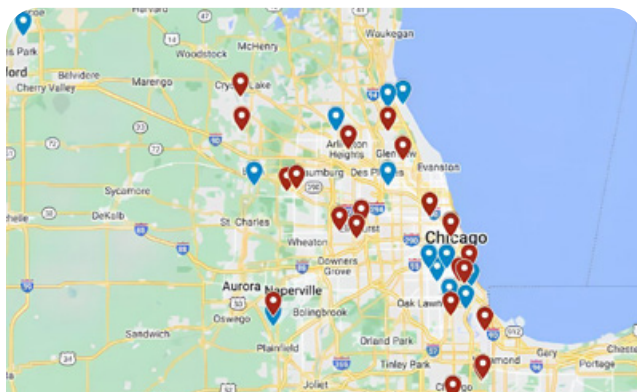
9,874

attendees in all programs last year



261

Educational sessions offered



Map of high school professional learning's reach.



Teachers embrace new methods to engage students in robust science learning

Illinois adopted the Next Generation Science Standards in 2014 to drive equity in science learning spaces. The NGSS outlines essential K to 12 science content and provides guidance for new instructional approaches based on the latest research in learning and cognition. Studies show that the uptake of these strategies is ongoing, and curriculum-specific professional learning (PL) is an effective tool for supporting teachers in increasing equity in science classrooms.

Illinois Extension hosted twenty-five high school teachers from fourteen schools for four days of intensive PL around OpenSciEd's high school biology, chemistry, and physics curriculum. To prepare for NGSS instructional shifts, teachers engaged in activities designed to highlight the standards-aligned features of these open-source, research-grounded materials.

By learning from a student perspective, teachers gain confidence in students' abilities to make sense of complex phenomena. Analyzing curriculum from a teacher's point of view, teachers built an understanding of the value of anchoring science learning in real-world phenomena and using student ideas to move learning forward.

On the last day, teachers facilitated an equitable discussion independently. OpenSciEd was new to 75% of participants, but all reported growth in their knowledge of the program, and over 90% agreed that it would result in improved learning for their students. Most even felt ready to take on another OpenSciEd unit in the future.



Teachers investigate how failures in the electrical grid can impact communities.



A Statement from Director of Science Alissa Berg and Science and Sustainability Education Coordinator Carla Shortino at K-8 District 65 in Evanston-Skokie

The professional learning series and support that the Illinois Extension team has designed and facilitated for D65 over the past three years has been an invaluable component of our professional learning model, which strives to align with the Characteristics of Effective Professional Development and the Carnegie report on the Transforming Teaching through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning. Their in-depth knowledge of the OpenSciEd instructional materials as writers and their professional learning model that centers immersion experiences where educators experience the instructional practices and lessons firsthand is crucial to supporting our educators' practice.

Common shifts to educator mindsets that we have heard as a result of these OpenSciEd sessions include:

An understanding of the coherent storyline approach:

- "I feel more comfortable with content and understanding how each lesson connects to the next."

A sense of the importance of shifting the heavy lifting/sensemaking to students:

- "I used to think I had to explicitly teach vocab. Now I think it's ok for students to gain understanding while they learn."
- "Now I think that I will be able to help students become involved and engaged in their Science learning by being more independent thinkers."

Greater knowledge of the embedded diverse learner and multilingual learner supports:

- "I used to think that I was not able to differentiate to support all of my students, but now I see that I am able to use various approaches — modeling with visuals, word wall, sentence fragments, and DQBs."

A greater sense of self-efficacy:

- "I now think this is doable!"
- "I used to think this was all very overwhelming; now I think I can navigate the scope and sequence of the teacher guide much better."

Extension has been an incredible partner that has tailored its support to our district's unique needs. For maximum impact on the classroom, leading sessions right before teachers are scheduled to teach units has supported stronger transfer of learning (due to limited science minutes, we cannot teach all OpenSciEd units and follow the full scope and sequence). They have also customized the regular 2-day session into one to make professional learning possible for our educators. We know two days is ideal, but one is better than none. Extension has been incredibly supportive, tailoring the afternoons of our sessions to meet our educator's specific needs. For example,

they've tailored the sessions to our diverse learner and multilingual learner educators by helping them dive deeper into the embedded supports during the storylining process. In other sessions, they've engaged our educators in sensemaking around the district's standards-based grading learning targets and had teachers delve into lessons and plan how to ensure students have the opportunity to explicitly learn, practice, receive feedback, and grow their understanding of these core three-dimensional performance expectations. In other sessions, educators have had the chance to work through challenging sensemaking activities to ensure they understand how to implement them, ensuring greater integrity in implementing the units.

Without the support and tailored professional learning offered by Extension, our district would not have been able to implement such a robust PL model. The PL Extension lead for us has deepened our educators' knowledge, including general educators, special educators, and emergent bilingual educators, and our knowledge as district leaders (Director of Science Alissa Berg and Science and Sustainability Education Coordinator Carla Shortino). Now, when we lead the other components of our PL model, including district half-day PL cycles, professional learning communities, one-on-one coaching, and lesson study, we leverage and reinforce this same learning. Over the past few years, we've seen a significant increase in the integrity with which teachers are implementing the instructional materials (e.g., leaning into the scientist circles to ensure ample student sensemaking time, reducing the amount of supplementing teachers are doing with lessons that are "old favorites" but perhaps not aligned with the vision of NGSS, leveraging the OpenSciEd norms more consistently to ensure a more equitable learning environment for all students, particularly our most marginalized).

Without the support of Extension and their team, we would not have come as far as we have as a district over the past three years in terms of the quality of the science instruction and the depth of student learning we are seeing today.





Environment

Sustain and restore natural resources
in home and public spaces.

Bolstering climate resilience through education and outreach
for a sustainable future.



16,457

attendees in all programs last year



389

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions
offered



131

Master Naturalist volunteers



10,136

Volunteer hours donated



\$342,188

Value of services performed by volunteers



124

Expert consultations related to the environment



Jacob's Ladder is a colorful native plant

Building resilient landscapes throughout Cook County to connect corridors and combat climate change



Illinois Extension recognizes the need of residents looking to restore biodiversity on their land using native plants while creating a landscape design with curb appeal. Native plants have beautiful blooms, support wildlife, and tolerate drought and flood conditions, but home gardeners struggle to maintain them in a built landscape. That is where Extension's annual native landscape design workshop comes in. The workshop gained ground with 224 virtual lecture attendees in 2024. Of those 224, 78 attended part two of the workshop, where volunteer Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists coached individuals on their specific landscape projects.

Participants left the program with a preliminary native plant list and plan to jumpstart their projects. One participant said, "Thank you SO MUCH. My coach did a phenomenal job helping me narrow my focus! I am so grateful to have some specific plant choices to play with. I have a clear direction and even more inspiration to enjoy my pollinator garden project this Spring!" Other participants reported an increased knowledge of wildlife habitat, awareness of existing site conditions, and reduced water, chemical, and fertilizer use. 96% of survey respondents said they would install native plants after participation in this program. A few individuals proceeded to obtain certification through Extension's Conservation@Home program, a partnership with Forest Preserves of Cook County that recognizes members with yard certifications.



Butterfly weed is an excellent native plant addition to your yard



Master Naturalist program creates community leaders

KT Petersen, a Master Naturalist in Des Plaines, always had a passion for conservation-minded landscape and used her training from the Illinois Extension Master Naturalist and Conservation@Home programs to lead Go Green Des Plaines, an organization focused on creating more awareness of native gardens in the Des Plaines community. In partnership with Extension, Go Green Des Plaines hosted a native garden walk to showcase six conservation sites. The tour created an experience that brought together 150 people with a common purpose. Creating community leaders centered around natural resources is one of the goals of the Master Naturalist program.



Visitors of the Go Green Des Plaines Garden walk at one of the sites.



Master Naturalists lead nature walks in Chicago parks

Extension Master Naturalists demonstrated their expertise while leading nature walks at the Run for the Parks 5K in the Burnham Wildlife Corridor. They taught families about the flora and fauna in the area and displayed how Illinois Extension volunteers can be leaders in their community. This natural area depends on volunteers who monitor vegetation, collect native seeds, and remove invasive species.

In 2025, Illinois Extension and the Chicago Parks Foundation will launch a Master-Naturalist-led nature wellness walk series across Chicago. These nature walks will invite neighborhoods into their natural areas and welcome curiosity for their local environment.



Extension Master Naturalist teaches about trees in Chicago.

Partnerships expand to benefit all Cook County residents

Illinois Extension and Forest Preserves of Cook County forged a partnership in 2016. Since its inception, the collaboration has blossomed beyond benefiting natural resources to include improved food access and health equity for Cook County Residents. As a result of this partnership, Extension has:

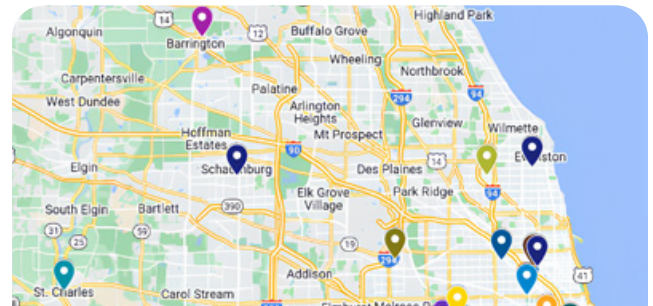
- Managed the Little Red Schoolhouse Food Donation Garden, resulting in 400 pounds of vegetables and herbs donated to local food pantries.
- Provided summer camp experiences at Sand Ridge Nature Center for 40 youth.
- Conducted wellness walks at Forest preserve sites for 31 participants.
- Participated in the Produce in the Preserves event, donating produce grown to communities in the Calumet region.



Visitors of Produce in the Preserves engaging with Extension staff.

Extension's Seed Swap Map promotes biodiversity and community in Chicagoland

Annually, Cook County Extension compiles a list of Chicagoland Area Seed Swaps. We support many of these seed swaps with seed saving and viability fact sheets, pest ID cards, and other educational resources to promote biodiversity and food sovereignty. Our 2024 seed swap map received over 45,000 views. Seed swaps are an excellent way for gardeners to try new varieties, find unique heirloom seeds, preserve diverse plant genetics, and build community.



Map of Chicagoland Seed Swap Locations



Extension in the News



EXTENSION REWARDS EMPLOYEE EXCELLENCE AND COMMITMENT TO ITS MISSION

Cook County, SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker Ana Garcia wins an Extension Individual Excellence Award. Ana excels at building and maintaining strong partnerships. Her ability to align collaborator goals with Extension's mission has strengthened relationships and opened doors to new opportunities. Ana is known for her dedication to mastering complex concepts and tackling challenges. As a team player, she motivates and supports her colleagues, fostering a positive and encouraging environment. Her commitment to community connections and teamwork makes her an invaluable asset in advancing Extension's mission.



ILLINOIS NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMS TEAM MEMBERS RECOGNIZED AT EXTENSION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Extension nutrition education staff work diligently to provide free, easy solutions that improve the health of families and communities. The following Cook County staff were recognized for their excellence during this year's annual conference:

- Linda Aceves, **Rookie of the Year** (excellence in programming during first two years).
- Mario A. Puente Rebollar, **Individual Excellence in Outstanding Programming** (excellence in direct education programming).
- Linda Aceves, Mark Aceves, Garry Carter, Shanda Felder, Tania Hernandez, Mario A. Puente Rebollar, Brianna Ringo, **Team Effort Award** (team excellence).
- Elena Tellez, **Walking on Sunshine Award** (an individual who demonstrates a positive attitude).



Extension educator talks about the environmental benefits of plant-based diets

ILLINOIS EXTENSION DISCUSSES THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF DIET CHOICES ON NBC 5 EVENING NEWS

Community Health Educator Leilah Siegel was interviewed by NBC 5 evening news as part of a week-long health and wellness series on the potential benefits of adopting a plant-based diet. After publishing a blog article on plant-based diets, Siegel was contacted by NBC 5 Health and Wellness reporter Lauren Petty to talk about the human diet's role in the health of the environment. During the interview, Siegel discussed the research-informed benefits of plant-based eating, which include healthier soil, cleaner air, and increased human health. The interview was conducted at Illinois Extension's South Suburban Cook Urban Agriculture Demonstration and Research Farm in Matteson.





Cook County Master Gardeners win Teamwork Award

The Illinois Extension Master Gardener program serving Cook County received the State Master Gardener Teamwork Award for its efforts with the Virtual Native Plant Design Workshops. Over the past four years, nearly 500 individuals have participated in the annual workshops. A team of 38 Master Gardeners provided one-on-one coaching to participants and helped them with their landscape projects. Survey respondents were pleased, with 86% giving an excellent rating on the quality of the coaching sessions.



Award recipients with the director of Extension



Empowering Educators: enhancing trauma-informed practices to foster healthier school communities

Cook County Extension educator presented 'Fostering Teacher & Student Self-Regulation Skills: Recognizing & Responding to Trauma in Pre-K to 12 Schools' at the National Health Outreach and Engagement Conference. The presentation highlighted the significant benefits of educating Pre-K to 12 teachers on trauma recognition and response. By equipping teachers with these skills, the program supports Extension professionals in their mission to promote healthy behaviors and improve overall community health. The initiative aims to create healthier communities through enhanced communication and education, ensuring that trauma-informed practices are effectively implemented and sustained in schools.



Extension staff work to advance inclusivity and research through learning communities

Illinois Extension staff seek to better understand their communities and how best to serve them. After attending an Indigenous Perspectives on Conservation course at the Morton Arboretum, staff discussed applying the course content to their work, such as including Indigenous speakers in Master Naturalists' training and emphasizing representation in content design. Cook County staff delved deeper into Extension's history around access and inclusion by reading "Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice through Cooperative Extension." Six staff members regularly meet to integrate the book's teachings into their work with Cook County communities.



Future Master Naturalists explore the outdoors.

Addressing health disparities through the Health Rocks Initiative

Illinois Extension's Health Rocks initiative addresses youth substance abuse. Data from the Illinois Youth Survey shows a rise in e-cigarette use among eighth to twelfth graders. Additionally, Chicago reported over 500 opioid-related overdose deaths in the first half of 2020, a 55% increase from 2019.

Health Rocks offers culturally relevant health education and helps to provide equitable access to health education for marginalized communities.

To enhance outreach, Extension trained 12 Spanish speakers to deliver the curriculum. The program has been successfully implemented in local schools and a summer camp and has helped participants adopt healthier lifestyles and reduce substance use.



Leading the way to healthy living



Community

Support strong and resilient youth, families, and communities.

Building more resilient youth, families, and community organizations across the state through greater civic engagement, volunteerism, and leadership.



2,728

attendees in community programs last year



8,639

4-H experiences



70%

minority youth engaged in 4-H



37%

Hispanic youth engaged in 4-H



1,824

volunteer hours donated



\$61,578

Value of services performed by volunteers



Extension staff and neighborhood volunteers work in Maywood Peace Garden



Extension staff help Hillside and Maywood youth design and plant local high school garden

Impactful Partnerships: Extension and community organizations foster youth engagement and environmental stewardship

Engaging youth in gardening and horticulture continues to play a vital role in fostering community involvement and environmental stewardship. Illinois Extension partnered with local government and community organizations to develop a robust combination of instruction, hands-on learning, and community-building that would have a lasting impact on local youth and their connection to the environment.

At Proviso West High School, students and teachers learned about the benefits of native plants and how they help the local environment and pollinators. Extension volunteers and staff worked closely with the school to teach students about garden design specifically aimed at supporting pollinators. Through workshops, garden workdays, and design consultations, students gained hands-on experience that deepened their understanding of horticulture and the environment.

The Maywood Peace Garden has also benefited from a long-standing partnership with Extension. This year, to enrich the garden's biodiversity, Extension volunteers collaborated with community members, youth scouts, high school students, and Loyola Medical School interns to conduct plant inventories and identify new plants for the space.

Additionally, 15 students participated in Cultivating Calm, an Extension workshop where, through gardening, participants learn the importance of mindfulness and the therapeutic value of plants in promoting mental well-being.





A recipe for change: Extension brings lifelong skills to Chicago summer campers

Youth from low-income families often lack access to the information and tools necessary to prevent chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. To help address the issue, Illinois Extension partnered with the Chicago Park District to implement the Illinois Junior Chef curriculum across several communities on Chicago's North, West, and South sides.

Over six weeks, 700 youth and teens participated in a week-long immersive series. Through engaging hands-on lessons, participants were taught the principles of balanced eating using MyPlate guidelines. They also learned kitchen safety, food preparation techniques, and recipes like personal pizza and cowboy caviar.

A survey of participants in the program reveals a significant improvement in behavior due to the experience. Youth reported an 83% increase in healthier dietary habits, such as consuming more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. 57% increased physical activity, while 50% adopted safer food handling practices. Additionally, 43% gained confidence in preparing nutritious meals independently, and 23% became more open to trying new foods.

By empowering youth with lifelong skills, Extension equips them to combat chronic diseases and build healthier futures for themselves and their families, fostering stronger communities across Cook County.



Cooking up confidence: youth proudly present their healthy and tasty creations.



From prep to plate: Extension is ready to spark culinary creativity in youth.

Extension and local partners provide essential aid to Asylum-Seekers in Chicago

More than 44,000 asylum-seekers have arrived in Chicago since 2022, many without personal essentials such as toiletries and clothing. Shelters do their best, but the influx of new arrivals has placed additional strain on the limited supply of available resources.

Asylum-seekers do not have access to laundry services, and food is not guaranteed. Without donations, some families would not have other basic necessities that most of us take for granted.

Illinois Extension partnered with local organizations to collect and distribute clothes and toiletries, which included soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, diapers, feminine hygiene products, and more. Donations were distributed to families at a local event.



Cook County Compost Initiative expands outreach to community composters in Chicago

Illinois Extension's Cook County Compost Initiative team worked with six Chicago community gardens that composted food scraps from their communities, diverting 4,655 pounds (2.33 tons) of waste from Chicago area landfills. The pilot program engaged 150 community members who brought food scraps to be composted. Extension provided spring and fall educational workshops at El Paseo Community Garden. Over 20 garden compost leaders attended and received ongoing technical assistance and over \$500 in free compost testing. A workshop participant commented, "It was just really helpful to watch the demonstration of mixing the browns and greens. I have a much better understanding..."



Extension staff demonstrates mixing compost ingredients to a group of community gardeners in Chicago.



Bridging the STEM Gap: Extension's embryology program empowers 6,000 Cook County students

Many youth in Cook County have limited or no access to quality STEM education. This results in students, especially those from underserved and underrepresented communities, not receiving the science and technology foundation needed to compete in high school successfully. Additionally, without STEM activities, youth miss opportunities to develop and practice the critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, leadership, and self-management skills needed to be successful.

To help resolve this inequity, Illinois Extension offers the Incubation and Embryology program, a hands-on experience that teaches young people biology and the life cycle. Over 21 days, students receive a combination of prepared lessons and practical experience. Youth receive fertilized eggs and are responsible for preparing the incubator, turning eggs, testing eggs for fertility, and monitoring incubator moisture and temperature. After witnessing the wonder of birth, the young people cared for their newly hatched chicks until local farmers picked them up.

Over 6,000 young people from 200+ schools and youth-serving organizations had a great time gaining a deeper understanding of biology while honing critical social and emotional learning skills.



	Amount	Source
●	77%	Wages
●	12%	Operating Expenses
●	11%	Leases

Effective stewardship of the public finances has to be at the heart of everything we do.
UK Parliamentarian

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Willene Buffett
County Director

Laretha Mosby
Business Associate Unit
Operations

Brea Ferguson
Human Resource Associate
Intern

OFFICE SUPPORT

Robin Baird
EFNEP Associate

Cheryl Gates
Associate

Holly Payton
SNAP-Ed Associate

Erica Turner
Associate

Julianne Czubek
Associate

Evelyn Hernandez
Associate

Shannon Towers
Associate

EDUCATORS

Sherri Ambrose
EFNEP

Elizabeth Cook
SNAP-Ed

Nancy Kreith
Horticulture

Kathryn Pereira
Local Food Sys & Small Farms

Veronica Aranda
Community Health

Abigail Garofalo
Energy and Environ Steward

Sonia Lopez
Community Health

Latosha Reggans
4-H Youth Dev, Metro

Bianca Bautista
SNAP-Ed

Susan Gasper
STEM

Meghan McCleary
STEM

Leilah Siegel
Community Health

Gemini Bhalsod
Horticulture

Paola Gordillo
SNAP-Ed

James McCombs
SNAP-Ed

Marsha Turner-Reid
STEM

Aruna Budhram
EFNEP

Zachary Grant
Local Food Sys & Small Farms

Amy Morton
STEM

Constance Willis
Community Health

Dominique Cobbs
Community Health

Maria Gutierrez
4-H Youth Dev, Metro

Sophia Ottomanelli
Community Health

Alisa Nash
SNAP-Ed Program
Administrator

Michele Crawford
Community Health

Molly Hofer
Family Life

Leonard Parker
4-H Youth Dev, Metro

PROGRAM COORDINATORS

Chanita Anderson
4-H Youth Development

Margaret Burns-Westmeyer
Horticulture

Meg Marsan
Energy and Environ Steward

Michael Neil
Marketing and
Communications

Sarah Batka
Local Food Sys & Sm Farms

Elijah Holloman
4-H Youth Development

Elizabeth McDermott
Energy and Environ Steward

Aida Peralta
Family Life

COMMUNITY WORKERS

Amy Chow
SNAP-Ed

Lesly Gonzalez
EFNEP

Sandra Morales
EFNEP

Tiana Shorter
EFNEP

Angela Crawford
SNAP-Ed

Maria Guzman
SNAP-Ed

Rebecca Moreno
SNAP-Ed

Maria Soto
EFNEP

Martina Rivera Curry
EFNEP

Tania Aparicio Hernandez
EFNEP

Yahaira Garcia Perez
EFNEP

Elena Tellez
EFNEP

Shanda Felder
EFNEP

Faith Jeffries
EFNEP

Brianna Ringo
EFNEP

Alina Villa
EFNEP

Ana Garcia
SNAP-Ed

Alicia Mendoza
EFNEP

Mario Puente Rebollar
EFNEP

Teresa Villa
EFNEP

EXTENSION COUNCIL MEMBERS

Mary F. Harkenrider

Richard Juarez Sr.

Chera Parham

Dedra Ries

Monique James

Eric Meredith

Geri Redd

Mona Strahan

OFFICE INFORMATION

Cook County Extension Main Office

8751 S. Greenwood Avenue
Suite 112-122
Chicago, IL 60619
(773) 768-7779
Fax: (773) 768-4818
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4:30 PM

Cook County Extension North EFNEP

1140 N. Lamon Avenue
Floor 2
Chicago, IL 60651
(773) 287-8333
Fax: (773) 287-8335
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4:30 PM

Cook County Extension North Suburban

2800 River Road
Suite 240
Des Plaines, IL 60018
(847) 201-4176
Fax: (847) 201-4175
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4:30 PM

Cook County Extension South

8753 S. Greenwood Avenue
Suite 100
Chicago, IL 60619
(773) 233-2900
Fax: (773) 233-9183
Monday - Friday, 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM

Cook County Extension South EFNEP

8751 S. Greenwood Avenue
Suite 112-122
Chicago, IL 60619
(773) 768-7779
Fax: (773) 768-4818
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4:30 PM

Cook County Extension South Suburban

4747 Lincoln Mall Drive
Suite 601
Matteson, IL 60443
(708) 679-6889
Fax: (708) 679-6855
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4 PM

Cook County Extension West Suburban

2205 Enterprise Drive
Suites 501 and 525
Westchester, IL 60154
(708) 449-4320
Fax: (708) 492-1805
Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 4 PM

ONLINE



on.fb.me/cookcountyext



twitter.com/cookcountyext



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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.