

Cook County Extension Council Meeting
Thursday, March 20, 2025
Solutions for Care
7222 W. Cermak Rd.
North Riverside, IL 60546
10:00 AM

Extension President Richard Juarez called the meeting to order at 10:16 a.m. on March 20, 2025.

Attendees:

Council Members:

Richard Juarez, Geri Redd, Mary Harkenrider, Eric Meredith (Zoom), and Monique James

Staff:

Leonard Parker, Michael Neil, Aida Peralta, Willene Buffett (Zoom), Molly Hofer (Zoom), Alisa Nash (Zoom), Rainah Falk (Zoom), Dominique Cobbs (Zoom), Veronica Aranda (Zoom), Sophia Ottomanelli (Zoom), and James McCombs (Zoom)

I. WELCOME:

- Everyone introduced themselves.

II. Approval of Previous Minutes

- The minutes of the September 19, 2024, meeting were unanimously approved.
- The minutes of the December 19, 2024, meeting were unanimously approved.

I. County Director Updates (video 11:10 – 23:12)

Some of the White House executive orders do not presently affect Cook County Extension. Cook County's two federally funded programs are not affected: Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed). Cook County Initiative (CCI) funding has sufficient funding to maintain and sustain staffing, program outreach, and facilities.

Civil Service positions are being filled. Open positions will be filled after completing the interviewing process.

Submitted a business concept plan looking at future Illinois Extension positions, which has been approved by Dr. Shelly Nickols-Richardson, the Associate Dean and Director, and the Finance Director. Dr. Shelley is leaving her position but will continue as the Finance Director, who is retiring.

County Directors will continue with the environmental summit "Storm Management" in September 2025, at the Chicago Botanical Garden for community members prone to flooding. Keep an eye out for the official invitation.

II. Old Business (23:18)

A. Unit needs assessment update (Rainah)

- Launched in February 2025 and mailed information to assist with promoting the survey in the community. Staff are promoting the information to their community organizations.
- Currently have 250 responses to the survey, mostly 35 and older, and female. Lacking responses from the age group of 18-34 and men.
- (Willene) Rainah is completing her master's degree at ISU – has been a reliable source in assisting Willene and Cook County Extension. Want to make sure our programs are relevant to the populations of Cook County.

B. Extension Strategic Plan needs assessment update (29:30)

- The Unit 6 Coordinators and Educators shared their findings with a PowerPoint presentation. Campus administration is aware that Cook County is conducting its own additional needs assessment to identify the issues, interests, and educational needs of the communities we serve.
- Sophia Ottomanelli presented the strategic priorities Unit 6 will focus on and the goal of each strategic priority.
- James McCombs presented the framework for the unit needs assessment to align with the 2025-2028 unit plan of work with Extension's externally facing strategic priorities.
- Dominique Cobbs presented why we will use the framework for our needs assessment. Must be completed by September 30, 2025. It will rely on our key stakeholders and partners rather than the community surveys.
- Molly Hofer presented Extension's Program Planning Cycle. Cook County is able to launch its formal needs assessment, which can begin any time after ambassador orientation.
- Alisa Nash presented how assessments will be conducted and interface with each other without duplication.
 - i. (46:38) Richard Juarez asked what challenges are being faced other than getting participants to provide feedback through surveys?
 1. Alisa Nash responded that they need to determine the best method to retrieve stakeholders' feedback, whether it's through panel discussions, face-to-face, or written communication. Alisa believes in-person discussions are best because one can receive feedback through verbal delivery of responses.
 2. Mary Harkenrider is impressed with the findings and agrees with Alisa's in-person beliefs.
 - a. Veronica will share the PowerPoint slides with the attendees.
 - b. Council members are willing to help expand the Extension coordinators and educators' lists of contacts by facilitating meetings with organizations Extension staff would like to connect with.
 - c. Molly Hofer commented that this will help Extension move forward with gaining partnerships with organizations.

- d. Extension staff will send current and potential organization partners to the council members.
- ii. Veronica reminded everyone that the unit survey is going out to individuals. Assessments are going to partners and stakeholders. Richard Juarez's question was for Rainah.
 1. Rainah responded that there currently aren't any challenges; they are just working towards increasing outreach to the key demographics they are trying to reach.

C. Updates from meetings with program teams (52:05)

- Council members who currently work with specific teams shared updates.
 - i. Geri Redd sits on the statewide council
 1. The needs discussed in this meeting were also mentioned in the statewide meeting.
 2. They received a \$10 million increase in budget to have sufficient funding for program and outreach needs.
 - a. Willene Buffett and other Extension directors have concerns about the IL Extension asking the state for large amounts of additional money. State legislators may get confused if Cook County and other counties are asking for additional funding when they have already increased the budget for the entire state. Legislators may decrease or eliminate funding because the entire state is receiving an additional \$10 million. The ask is enough to only gain one educator for each of the 27 counties. Why would a local government provide more money to a unit after already giving an increase to the entire state? Willene is open to meeting individually with each council member.
 - b. Mary asked Willene if she had received any questions about the state's requested increase. Willene has heard from two individuals and a state legislator who has been very vocal about the amount of money the university receives from the state. She and other county directors do not want to do anything that jeopardizes the funding they already receive. Willene asked Geri if Geri could share notes from that meeting with other council members. Willene's individual meetings will show in depth how the state's increase will be used outside of a county's local government, grants, and donations. This will help statewide council members better approach anyone regarding additional funding without jeopardizing current funding.
 - c. Geri responded to Willene that she wants to have an individual meeting for more understanding because Willene's concerns were not mentioned in Geri's previous statewide meeting.

- d. Leonard Parker mentioned that Cook County will need more funding because it is the largest county and will need to be able to meet more constituents, such as by having more staff.
- e. Mary received clarification that Cook County has the most to lose from the statewide \$10 million increase. She suggested more lobbying through internal statewide efforts (before contacting legislators) on how to properly explain the need for more resources to reach the public.
- f. Geri added that we need to learn how to reach those who approve increases such as this one, so Cook County does not lose funding.

III. New Business (01:10:00)

A. Extension Council recruitment and membership

- Leonard mentioned that last year's statewide review discussed the goal of having at most 15 members to the Cook County council, especially African-American males and Asian-American males. This will help balance the council in regard to representing the county's demographic population.
 - i. Richard asked Leonard to provide an onboarding or orientation packet to the council.
 - ii. Leonard will share that and other documents to assist the council with searching for additional members to apply.
 - iii. Aida mentioned there is a document that shows demographics of where people live around Cook County.
 - iv. Monique James will contact the NAACP for possible applicants.

B. Impact report update

- Michael Neil discussed the impact report submitted on March 7, which takes 30 days for the state office to review it. Hopes he will receive the finalized digital version within one month after the review. He will share with the council and print the reports for the unit.
 - i. The numbers were similar to last year. Cook County completed a lot of work in the gardens, finding people to contribute and donate to pantries, and conducted a lot of nutrition education and community health programs. Always want to expand our reach to new areas.
 - ii. Reaching a lot of people and bringing attention to urban farming through training and executing farming.
 - iii. Mary commented about farmers recently losing USDA funding. She will talk to Zack and Director Buffett about changes in distribution and what farmers are doing with their produce.
 - 1. Mike mentioned that an executive order was signed to decrease funding to the Department of Education, which will affect the funding we receive. Promoting Extension's importance should

provide more opportunities to serve the public who are negatively affected by the executive order.

C. Reschedule the June 19 meeting (it falls on a holiday) (01:19:16)

- A Doodle poll will be sent to reschedule the meeting to a different Thursday.
- Mary tentatively offered to meet at her location so attendees can view an urban farm.

IV. Announcements

N/A

V. The meeting was adjourned by Richard Juarez on March 20, 2025.