

Unit Needs Assessment Report



Serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union Counties
LIFELONG LEARNING. LIFELONG IMPACT.





2025 Unit Needs Assessment Report

Purpose of the needs assessment

The 2025 Unit Needs Assessment Report reflects intentional alignment with the University of Illinois Extension Strategic Plan and its eight Strategic Priorities. Input gathered from key informants in each priority area helps identify local needs within the context of statewide goals. The resulting top five issues represent the most pressing challenges and opportunities facing the unit's communities. Corresponding strategies outline how the unit will address these issues while advancing Extension's mission and ensuring consistency with statewide organizational priorities.

Engaging key informants

To dig deeper into community needs, Extension staff worked with unit council members and staff to pick key informants. These informants are people who know the community's needs, resources, and concerns. This helped ensure that the most relevant and meaningful issues were identified by people who understand the local context.

Surveying broader communities

To include voices beyond the key informant interviews, a Qualtrics survey was sent. Community members could answer questions about what they need, what is missing, or what could be improved in their area. This survey helped reach more people, even if they couldn't participate in an interview, and brought more diverse viewpoints into the assessment.

Bringing it all together

By combining these two efforts, Extension created a detailed needs assessment report to help Extension's unit that serves Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties align its three-year planning (2026-2028) with the state-level vision while also responding to the specific local needs of the communities. To do this, the report is structured into two parts:

Extension-wide signature initiatives

The first page of each section previews the statewide initiatives—the signature priorities identified by Extension. These include themes like economy, community, environment, food and agriculture, health, and technology and discovery. Each initiative is described at the state level, including their goals, strategic focus, and anticipated outcomes. This gives the broader vision and context for where Extension as a whole is headed.

Local findings and proposed actions

The second page of each section shifts into what the local Extension unit has learned through interviews, surveys, and data review. Each signature initiative shows the needs and gaps specific to Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties that residents and key informants have identified as most pressing. Then, the report outlines how the local unit will address those needs through programs, partnerships, and resource allocation.

By following this roadmap, the report helps readers understand what is expected at the statewide level and the local community's needs so the proposed plan of work is clearly tied to the big picture and the grassroots priorities.



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

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



Community



Economy



Environment



Food and Agriculture



Health



Partnerships



Technology and Discovery



Workforce Excellence

Unit ambassadors engaging the community

To ensure that the voices of local residents guided the planning process, the unit's plan of work ambassadors gathered information that shaped this report. These ambassadors served as trusted liaisons, representing both Extension and their communities. They were trained to conduct outreach, facilitate conversations, and document input in ways that captured authentic community perspectives. By working side-by-side with community members, the ambassadors established a transparent process where everyone's insight could be valued.

Gathering input through interviews

Ambassadors collaborated with unit council members and staff to identify and interview key informants—individuals with deep knowledge of community challenges and strengths. These interviews provided context that raw data alone could not offer. Leaders, educators, nonprofit directors, and long-time residents shared firsthand accounts of the issues facing families, youth, and organizations. The ambassadors carefully recorded these discussions, ensuring that the findings reflected the lived experiences of people across the counties Extension serves.

Reaching broader audiences

Recognizing that not every voice could be captured in an interview, the ambassadors also distributed a community-wide Qualtrics survey. The survey offered a convenient way for people to provide input, and the ambassadors encouraged participation through personal invitations, local events, and social media outreach. Together, these efforts ensured that the assessment was inclusive and representative.

Analyzing data sources

In addition to interviews and surveys, the ambassadors worked with staff to review existing second and third-level data. This included demographic reports, public health statistics, education outcomes, and economic development indicators. By blending these data sources with the qualitative feedback from community members, the ambassadors helped Extension create a holistic picture of local needs. This multi-layered approach strengthened the validity of the findings and provided a balanced view of both opportunities and challenges.

Summary of top needs

Through this comprehensive process, three overarching needs rose to the top as priorities for future programming.



Youth Development

In youth development, there is a critical need for expanded mental health support and resources for young people.



Environment

In environment, communities emphasized the importance of addressing habitat loss and educating residents about conservation practices.



Community and Economic Development

Within community and economic development, stakeholders identified the need for stronger workforce development pathways, especially in the skilled trades and technology sectors.

Together, these needs provide clear direction on how Extension can respond to the challenges facing Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties



Learn more about Extension's Strategic Plan
extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning



Community



Supporting strong, resilient youth, families, and communities

The community initiative stands as a cornerstone of Extension's commitment to fostering vibrant, enduring connections across the state. Its guiding strategic priority—support strong and resilient youth, families, and communities—reflects a concerted effort to strengthen civic engagement, volunteerism, and leadership through finely tuned, research-informed programming.

Building leadership through programs and partnerships

At the heart of this initiative is a signature emphasis on enhancing resilience through targeted programs that develop leadership capacity and civic participation among diverse audiences. Illinois Extension plans to comprehensively catalog existing curricula in civic engagement, volunteerism, and leadership—then innovate and adapt them to meet modern needs in areas like recruitment, diversity, equity, inclusion, access, strategic planning, and impact reporting.



A data-informed and inclusive approach

To ensure relevance and equity, the initiative includes a rigorous needs assessment and actively involves community stakeholders—ranging from local businesses to policymakers. This will help identify gaps in current programming, highlight opportunities for new volunteer or leadership offerings, and ensure that both internal operations and external outreach are efficient and inclusive.

Measuring success through engagement and growth

Success will be gauged through outcome-driven measures such as the number and type of programs launched (new, revised, or archived), the volume of participants, and the percentage of people reporting increased leadership skills. It will also track retention and recruitment of volunteers, organizational reach, and how communities leverage new leadership capacities or resources, amplifying the real-world impact of this initiative.

Questions asked of key informants

- What are the key strengths and assets of your community that we can build upon?
- What is one of the most pressing issues in your community? The issue could be impacting youth, families, or a community organization.
- How do community members express needs to you, your organization, or within your community?
- What are the most pressing issues your organization faces?
- In what areas does your community need to build greater capacity?
- Are there any emerging trends or issues in your community that we should be aware of?
- Importance/value of partners? In what ways do you collaborate with them?
- What steps are you taking to become a more resilient community? Where do you need help?

Top five issues identified

1. Affordable housing shortages and homelessness
2. Youth engagement and lack of safe recreational spaces
3. Poverty, housing, and food insecurity
4. Transportation barriers limiting access to services
5. Low engagement in community development and volunteerism

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can help address these community issues by leveraging its strong foundation in education, youth development, and partnership building within Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Extension can continue to expand its role in mental health awareness through programs in schools and community organizations, while supporting housing and poverty-related challenges by connecting families to nutrition education, financial literacy, and workforce readiness programs. Extension can also use its trusted local presence to help communities overcome transportation barriers by bringing services, trainings, and mobile outreach directly to rural areas. By training local leaders in grant writing and community leadership skills, Extension can build long-term capacity and ensure that local communities are prepared to access resources and implement sustainable solutions. Through these efforts, Extension can strengthen community resilience while supporting equitable access to services and opportunities.

Plan of work

Extension is committed to strengthening the resilience of local youth, families, and communities by addressing the most pressing needs identified in the assessment—mental health challenges, poverty, transportation barriers, and limited leadership capacity.

Guided by its purpose to foster strong and resilient communities, Extension will connect residents with community partners offering mental health awareness support, connect families to nutrition education and financial literacy resources, and deliver services directly into rural areas through mobile outreach.

Just as importantly, Extension will invest in developing civic engagement, volunteerism, and grant-writing skills among local leaders, equipping them to access resources and create sustainable solutions. Through these efforts, Extension will cultivate collaboration, empower emerging leaders, and ensure that families across Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties have equitable opportunities to thrive.

Measure of success

To address community needs, Extension strives to meet the following goals for program year 2026 through program year 2028:

- Increase the opportunities for youth mental health programs, by connecting youth with community partners
- Increase the number of families reached with nutrition/financial literacy education
- Increase the number of mobile outreach sessions in rural communities
- Increase the number of local leaders trained in civic engagement/volunteerism
- Increase the number of participants trained in grant writing
- Increase the percentage of program participants reporting increased leadership skills
- Increase the number of new or sustained community partnerships



Community
extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/community



Economy



Growing opportunity through lifelong learning

The economy initiative embodies Extension's commitment to building a prosperous, resilient economy by investing in its greatest resource—people. Anchored in the strategic goal to grow a prosperous economy through lifelong learning and development, this initiative recognizes that sustained economic vitality depends on the workforce's ability to adapt, learn, and thrive throughout its career journey.

Fostering a workforce that's ready for tomorrow

At the heart of this effort is the signature initiative: Fostering a resilient and future-ready workforce through delivering educational programs and promoting lifelong learning. Extension aims to equip residents—whether they are entering the job market, returning to work, or advancing their professions—with the knowledge, credentials, and confidence they need to succeed.

Programs, partnerships, accessibility

To realize this vision, Extension will employ a comprehensive strategy. First, it will conduct environmental scans and gap analyses, building a strong foundation for informed program development. Then, it will refine or create curricula in areas like workforce development, financial wellness, and entrepreneurship—enabling audiences to navigate challenges

in business planning, marketing, and personnel management. The initiative also emphasizes modern delivery methods—updating educational platforms, building staff capacity, and promoting tools for credentialing, skills matching, and grant navigation. Additionally, equity and access are paramount. Extension will offer programming virtually, in person, and in multiple languages to reach audiences across Illinois.

Measuring progress through impact

Success will be tracked through meaningful metrics: the number of programs developed or modernized, the breadth and quality of partnerships; staff trained, credentials awarded, and participant satisfaction and achievement. Engagement with digital resources will also be monitored to ensure that Extension's offerings are truly accessible and effective.

Responding to diverse education and workforce needs

The rationale for this initiative is clear: the modern economy is rapidly evolving, driven by technological change, shifting labor markets, and the rise of new career paths. Many individuals across Illinois lack equitable access to continuing education, workforce support, and training. As a trusted, research-based provider with statewide reach, Extension is uniquely positioned to fill these gaps—with evidence-driven programs and a proven infrastructure for delivery.



Questions asked of key informants

- What are the primary workforce challenges and opportunities in your community?
- What types of job training or educational programs are most needed?
- What work are you doing on these issues, and who are you working with to address them?
- How can Extension programs better support economic growth and workforce development in your community?
- Which groups in the community are in most need of assistance?

Top five issues identified

1. High unemployment and lack of quality/stable jobs
2. Skills gaps and limited vocational training opportunities
3. Workforce development in trades and technology
4. Low wages and underemployment
5. Childcare and transportation barriers limiting employment

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can play a vital role in addressing these economic needs by leveraging its existing resources and partnerships throughout Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Through its 4-H youth development and adult education programs, Extension can expand workforce readiness training in trades, healthcare, and technology skills. Collaborating with Shawnee Community College and workforce agencies such as Shawnee Development Council, Extension can help design short, competency-based training opportunities that fill gaps in the local labor force. Childcare needs could be supported by connecting families to regional resources. Additionally, Extension's strong community presence allows it to serve as a trusted connector, linking older adults and displaced workers with digital literacy programs, resume workshops, and job-seeking skills. By strengthening communication, outreach, and collaboration with local partners, Extension can ensure that economic development initiatives are responsive to the unique needs of southern Illinois communities.

Plan of work

Extension will grow a prosperous and resilient economy by addressing local workforce shortages, childcare gaps, business pressures, and the needs of displaced or older workers. Guided by the partnership goal to advance lifelong learning and workforce readiness, Extension will encourage training in trades, healthcare, and technology skills through 4-H youth development and adult education programs, while collaborating with Shawnee Community College and workforce agencies to create short, competency-based learning opportunities.

Working with community partners, Extension will target workforce readiness and technology training for underemployed, displaced, and new workers. By serving as a connector across businesses, schools, and workforce partners, Extension will strengthen community capacity to adapt to economic change, ensuring equitable access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities across southern Illinois.

Measure of success

To address economy needs, Extension strives to meet the following goals for program year 2026 through program year 2028:

- Increase the number of workforce readiness trainings (trades, healthcare, technology) delivered
- Increase the number of participants completing short, competency-based programs
- Help community partners create a digital literacy space in the community.
- Increase the number of older adults/displaced workers completing digital literacy or re-entry workshops
- Increase the number of partnerships formed with workforce agencies, businesses, and schools
- Increase the percentage of participants reporting improved job readiness or workforce skills



Economy
extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/economy

Environment



Creating a sustainable future

The environment initiative stands at the forefront of Extension's strategic priorities, focused on the urgent need to sustain and restore natural resources across both private and public spaces. To address mounting environmental challenges—such as climate variability, habitat degradation, and ecosystem disruption—Extension has launched a signature initiative: Bolstering climate resilience through education and outreach for a sustainable future. Underpinning this initiative is a commitment to build internal capacity. This includes hiring a full-time statewide climate change specialist and establishing a Climate Change Action Team (CCAT) that unites specialists, campus researchers, and field educators across the state. Together, these teams will foster learning communities and embed climate-related content into ongoing programs, ensuring staff are equipped to guide outreach and public engagement effectively.

Integrated outreach

The initiative also emphasizes integrated outreach, weaving climate education into existing curricula and platforms. Plans call for updating key Extension programs—such as Master Gardener and Master Naturalist—with climate-focused modules, creating peer-reviewed publications, and developing standardized institutional language and resources. The expansion of the climate stewards program is also central, broadening its reach with a focus on equity, accessibility, and local needs.



Strategic partnership for collaboration

Strategic partnerships are a major component of success. Extension will collaborate with statewide entities such as the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, and the State Climatologist's office, as well as regional and national partners—including USDA and the Midwest Climate Hub. By engaging with local governments, non-profit organizations, and the private sector, the initiative seeks to amplify its effectiveness while fostering a resilient environmental ecosystem supported by coordinated action.

A robust evaluation framework

Lastly, a robust evaluation framework will measure progress through key indicators: staffing milestones, program reach, learning community impact, updated curricula deployment, publication output, and participant understanding of climate action. Outcomes will be measured through increased knowledge, behavioral intent, equitable access, and improved local environmental practices—all aimed at empowering communities to adapt, mitigate, and build long-term resilience.

Questions asked of key informants

- What are the primary environmental challenges and educational opportunities in your community? Example of trash blasts.
- What are the emerging environmental issues that we need to pay more attention to?
- What are the emerging horticultural issues that we need to pay more attention to?
- What is the value that you find in partnering with others? Any particularly successful partnerships you want to highlight? Who are you working or partnering with to address these issues? Are there other partnerships or collaborations that could strengthen these opportunities?
- How can Extension programs better support more ecosystem resilience and environmental actions?
- Which groups in the community are in most need of assistance in addressing environmental issues

Top five issues identified

1. Invasive species
2. Soil and water quality degradation
3. Waste management and littering issues
4. Climate change impacts, including hotter weather and severe storms
5. Need for community environmental education and conservation awareness

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can address these environmental needs by strengthening hands-on, science-based education programs in Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Workshops and demonstration projects can help landowners, farmers, and community members better understand invasive species management, erosion control, and pollinator habitat establishment. Extension can serve as a bridge between agencies like the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Shawnee National Forest, and renewable energy developers through collaborative meetings to foster stronger communication. Digital outreach tools, including social media and reminder apps, can share clear, practical guides and timely updates. By engaging youth through environmental education and partnering with schools and civic groups, Extension can also help build a culture of stewardship in the next generation. These steps use existing resources while amplifying Extension's role as an educator and a connector in building environmental resilience across southern Illinois.

Plan of work

Extension will advance environmental resilience by addressing issues such as invasive species, declining soil health, habitat loss, and the need for stronger conservation education. Guided by the partnership goal to sustain and restore natural resources in both private and public spaces, Extension will expand hands-on, science-based programs, that are already part of its core mission, to teach landowners, farmers, and residents practical conservation practices, including erosion control, invasive species management, and pollinator habitat establishment.

Extension will also strengthen partnerships with agencies such as Natural Resources Conservation Services, Shawnee National Forest, and local governments to coordinate conservation efforts and ensure consistent communication. Through youth engagement in environmental programs, community workshops, and digital outreach, Extension will foster a culture of stewardship, equipping current and future generations with the knowledge and skills to protect and restore southern Illinois' natural resources.

Measure of success

To address environment needs, Extension strives to meet the following goals for program year 2026 through program year 2028:

- Increase the number of conservation and habitat workshops delivered
- Increase the number of landowners/farmers trained in invasive species and soil health practices
- Increase the number of acres impacted by conservation practices (pollinator habitat)
- Increase the number of youth engaged in environmental programs
- Increase the number of collaborative projects with agencies (Natural Resources Conservation Service, Shawnee National Forest, local governments)
- Increase the percentage of participants reporting increased knowledge of conservation practices



Environment
[extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/
environment](https://extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/environment)



Food and Agriculture



Securing equitable access to food, fibers, and bioenergy

The food and agriculture initiative emphasizes ensuring that all Illinois residents benefit from a safe, accessible, and resilient supply of food, fibers, and biofuel. As highlighted in the statewide plan, this priority recognizes the critical role of agriculture in our economy, communities, and daily lives.

Strategic partnerships

To address identified needs, Extension will forge new partnerships and bolster existing ones—including with public agencies, community organizations, and private sector stakeholders. These collaborations aim to remove barriers, align resources, and deliver targeted education and research outreach to build durable and equitable food systems.

Focused key action for lasting impact

The initiative outlines clear, actionable strategies:

- Enhance educational programs that support safe, sustainable, and tech-informed food and agricultural production
- Educate consumers and producers to increase healthy local food access and reduce waste
- Develop programming for local and regional aggregation, distribution, and food-waste recycling systems
- Offer farm business planning support, including entrepreneurship and succession resources
- Build and strengthen partnerships to support regional food production systems



Measuring success through outcome and inclusion

Extension will evaluate progress by tracking:

- The number and diversity of educational programs delivered
- Participant demographics (e.g., farmers, landowners, consumers) and their learning outcomes
- Engagement with digital resources and new materials created
- Growth in local partnerships and farmer peer learning networks
- Access and inclusion of youth—especially through 4-H programming and mentorship pathways

Why this matters

The food and agriculture sector drives one-fifth of Illinois' employment and contributes billions in revenue, yet faces challenges related to coordination, equity, and resilience. By leveraging its statewide reach, research-backed expertise, and community connections, Extension is deeply equipped to catalyze systems change, ensuring that agricultural practices and food systems are sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready.

Questions asked of key informants

- What are the main challenges related to food production, food safety, or food security in your community?
- What programs or initiatives are in place to support local farmers and food producers?
- How can we improve access to healthy and affordable food for all residents?
- What barriers do residents face in accessing fresh and nutritious food?
- How can we better support sustainable farming practices?
- What else needs to be done to further advance or better serve the food and agriculture industry?
- Who could benefit from more education or information on this issue who are not currently receiving it?
- Who are the key partners in your community that we should work with to address this issue?

Top five issues identified

1. Food insecurity and food deserts
2. High costs of food production and affordability challenges
3. Limited access to fresh produce in rural areas
4. Need for education on sustainable farming practices
5. Barriers for small farmers in market access and competitiveness

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can help address challenges by expanding its existing community food security and agricultural outreach programs in Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Through partnerships with Tri-State Food Bank, local food pantries, and healthcare systems, Extension can strengthen nutrition education and connect families with healthy food options. By increasing its visibility in rural areas, Extension can provide educational workshops on sustainable farming practices, food safety, and conservation-minded approaches that help farmers remain competitive while protecting resources. Extension can also play a role in supporting small grocers and farm-to-table efforts by offering business development training and linking local producers to food chain systems. Finally, Extension can leverage its trusted 4-H and family programming to provide youth and adults with education on healthy food choices and local agriculture, ensuring that the next generation is engaged in building resilient food systems across southern Illinois.

Plan of work

Extension will strengthen local food systems by addressing challenges such as limited grocery access in rural areas, food insecurity, transportation barriers, and the struggles of small grocers and farmers. Guided by the partnership goal to maintain a safe and accessible food supply, Extension will expand nutrition education and food security programs through partnerships with Tri-State Food Bank, local pantries, and healthcare providers, ensuring families have access to healthy food options.

Extension will also support local producers by offering workshops on sustainable farming, food safety, and conservation practices, while equipping small grocers and farm-to-table initiatives with business development and marketing tools. By connecting farmers to regional distribution systems and engaging youth and families in 4-H and community education, Extension will help build resilient food systems that are equitable, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of southern Illinois.

Measure of success

To address food and agriculture needs, Extension strives to meet the following goals for program year 2026 through program year 2028:

- Increase the number of families reached through nutrition education and food security programs
- Increase the number of partnerships with food banks, pantries, and healthcare providers
- Increase the number of workshops delivered on sustainable farming, food safety, and conservation practices
- Increase the number of small grocers or farm-to-table initiatives supported with business training
- Increase the number of farmers connected to regional distribution/aggregation systems
- Increase the number of youth/families engaged in 4-H or community food/agriculture programs
- Increase the percentage of participants reporting improved access to healthy food options



Food and Agriculture
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Health



Improved health knowledge and equity

Extension has identified health as a key statewide priority, rooted in the goal to maximize health equity, expand access to care, and promote overall wellness. This initiative recognizes that better health outcomes rely not just on medical advances, but also on reaching underserved populations, preventing disease, and fostering resilience across physical, emotional, social, occupational, and environmental dimensions.

At the core of this initiative is the signature focus: Advancing health equity, healthcare access, disease prevention, chronic illness management support, childhood wellness, and health promotion through integrated education, community partnerships, and systemic organizational changes. Extension will prioritize holistic, inclusive approaches that address health needs across the lifespan and across diverse communities.

Accessible, evidence-based programming

To make this vision a reality, Extension will develop and deliver accessible, evidence-based programming through in-person and online formats. Emphasis will be placed on “One Health” concepts—acknowledging the complex relationship between human, animal, and environmental health. Educational strategies will bring together Extension staff and community partners to co-create programs that meet local needs in a flexible, culturally responsive manner.



Strategic collaborations

Strategic collaborations will be essential. Extension will act as a hub for health promotion, disease prevention, and chronic illness support, aligning with researchers, healthcare providers, and community groups to strengthen integrated care pathways. Programs will target underserved groups throughout Illinois, aiming to enhance quality of life, support social progress, fortify economic resilience, and ensure equitable allocation of resources.

Illinois faces pressing health challenges—including disparities in access, chronic disease burdens, and affordability gaps. By leveraging its statewide presence, scientific expertise, and trusted reputation, Extension is uniquely positioned to bridge educational and health equity divides through strategic outreach and system-level partnerships.

Questions asked of key informants

- Are there populations of people underserved in the area of health in your community? What do you think they would need to engage in improving health or accessing education?
- What changes have you seen in the overall health of your community in the last few years?
- What are the key health issues that your organization is working on?
- What other partners are addressing this issue in your community?
- What are the barriers to addressing this issue locally?
- What else needs to be done to further advance or serve the community better?
- Share a success with the group.

Top five issues identified

1. Limited healthcare access and provider shortages
2. Mental health and substance abuse crises with limited services
3. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension
4. Transportation barriers to healthcare and healthy food
5. Affordable housing and childcare to support overall health

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can support community health by leveraging its programs in nutrition education, youth development, and workforce training in Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Extension can expand health literacy efforts through workshops on nutrition, mental health awareness, and chronic disease prevention, while also connecting residents to existing healthcare resources. Partnerships with Arrowleaf, Shawnee Community College, Southern Seven Health Department, and local hospitals can strengthen Extension's ability to address workforce shortages through pipeline programs that prepare students for health careers. Extension's strong community presence and digital platforms can also be used to reduce barriers such as childcare, broadband, and transportation by providing flexible, accessible educational opportunities. By collaborating with local partners and tailoring outreach to underserved populations, Extension can help improve health outcomes and build stronger, more resilient communities.

A transition period

Extension has led one of the largest SNAP-Ed programs in the country, under the brand Eat.Move.Save., for over 30 years. In this capacity, Extension has acted as a hub to map agrifood systems in communities across the state. Through this work, Extension has identified gaps and developed programs, action plans, partnerships, nutrition education, and interventions based on system elements that drive food insecurity in each local community.

In late July 2025, the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign announced it will end a successful Extension-led program impacting food security and health for one million residents annually, affecting nearly 2,000 statewide partnerships, and cutting over 200 jobs — more than one-quarter of Illinois Extension's workforce. The move is in response to the elimination of federal funding for a program called SNAP-Education, which provides nutrition education for people eligible for SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps and branded as Link in Illinois).

The loss of funding for SNAP-Ed has created a period of significant transition. Extension remains proud of the long history of providing nutrition and physical activity programming in local communities. While direct education nutrition programming will no longer be offered, Extension will lean into existing partnerships that have been the foundation of the program's success. Through collaboration with local partners, Extension can help improve health outcomes and build stronger, more resilient communities.



Health
extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/health



Technology and Discovery



Bridging the divide with purposeful action

The technology and discovery initiative seeks to address the pressing need for digital access, equity, and literacy across Illinois. Positioned as a strategic priority to integrate research, technology, and engagement to close opportunity gaps and build capacity, this initiative underscores Extension's commitment to ensuring that all Illinois residents—whether rural, urban, or underserved—can fully participate in an increasingly digital world.

Expanding digital inclusion

Advancing digital access, equity, and literacy through education and training among Illinois audiences highlights Extension's dual focus on empowering individuals and strengthening institutions. From introductory digital skills to advanced topics like AI and quantum computing, Extension meets learners where they are through responsive programming tailored to schools, libraries, faith-based groups, industries, and community organizations.

Strategic investments in access, equity, and literacy

Extension will drive three interconnecting approaches to address technology and discovery:

- Digital access, by coordinating with the community and economic development program to build strategic partnerships and assess local needs.

- Digital equity, by helping communities identify funding opportunities and supporting efforts to increase access, adoption, and connectivity infrastructure.
- Digital literacy, through awareness campaigns and training in essential technologies—from internet safety and productivity tools to data analysis and cutting-edge digital platforms. Staff development and distribution of hardware and software are key components of this strategy.

Measuring success

Extension will track increased broadband awareness and adoption, technical assistance to organizations, availability of digital equipment, improvements in digital skills, and measurable impacts on participants' quality of life. Further, it will ensure equitable engagement by analyzing program reach across populations such as aging adults, language learners, low-income households, veterans, and those living in rural or underserved urban areas.

Empowering community resilience

By advancing digital access, equity, and literacy, the initiative aims to reduce opportunity gaps and build community capacity. Participants develop confidence in technology use, improve digital problem-solving, and engage more fully in education and workforce opportunities. Ultimately, the initiative supports lifelong learning, economic adaptability, and societal resilience in an increasingly technology-driven world—a fitting response to modern challenges.

Questions asked of key informants

- What local factors are currently driving technology advancements or innovation in your organization, industry, or community?
- Are there any emerging technologies you believe are significant to your work that you or other populations do not have access to?
- What challenges or barriers do you see to the adoption of new discoveries and technologies?
- Can you share a specific example of how innovative technology has impacted (either positively or negatively) your life, work, or industry?
- How do you measure the success or impact of tech advancements or digital access?
- How do you envision partnerships between Extension and the tech industry working or shaping innovation and discovery?

Top five issues identified

1. Lack of broadband and reliable internet access
2. High costs of technology infrastructure and funding gaps
3. Digital literacy gaps among youth and adults
4. Limited training in emerging technologies for workforce readiness
5. Limited access to technology for agriculture and small businesses

How Extension can address the needs

Extension can address these technology challenges by expanding its digital literacy, STEM, and workforce development initiatives in Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Extension can build on existing 4-H STEM programs to introduce youth to emerging technologies like virtual reality, 3D printing, and coding, while also supporting adult learners with workshops on digital skills, career readiness, and online tools. By collaborating with schools, regional innovation centers, and broadband providers, Extension can help bridge the digital divide in rural areas. Extension educators can also serve as trusted facilitators, helping communities understand the importance of technology adoption and assisting families and small businesses in applying digital tools to improve their livelihoods. Through resource sharing and strong partnerships, Extension can ensure southern Illinois remains competitive in an increasingly technology-driven world.

Plan of work

Extension will bridge the digital divide by addressing limited broadband access, high infrastructure costs, and gaps in digital literacy that affect families, small businesses, and schools across southern Illinois. Guided by the partnership goal to integrate research, technology, and engagement to close opportunity gaps, Extension will expand digital literacy and STEM education through 4-H programs introducing youth to coding, 3D printing, and emerging technologies, while providing adults with practical training in online tools, internet safety, and career readiness.

Extension will also work with schools, innovation centers, and broadband providers to strengthen community infrastructure and increase adoption of digital technologies. By serving as a trusted connector and educator, Extension will ensure that residents, businesses, and organizations have equitable access to technology resources that enhance learning, workforce opportunities, and community resilience.

Measure of success

To address technology and discovery needs, Extension strives to meet the following goals for program year 2026 through program year 2028:

- Increase the number of digital literacy workshops delivered for adults
- Increase the number of youth engaged in 4-H STEM/digital programs (coding, 3D printing, virtual reality)
- Increase the number of small businesses/families supported with digital readiness training
- Increase the number of community partnerships with schools, broadband providers, and innovation centers
- Increase the percentage of participants reporting improved digital skills and confidence
- Increase broadband awareness and adoption among target communities



Technology and Discovery
[extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning/
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Shawnee Community College

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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.

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.