



# Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

University of Illinois Extension

Serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties

**2025 YEAR IN REVIEW**





Patty Wiegers is a 4-H volunteer and Extension Council member. She was one of the 4-H Show judges at the Mason 4-H Show. Extension Council members are typically involved in a variety of ways.

*Photo by Joli Pierson*

## Extension Council

Sue Beeney, Pekin

Shundell Broomfield, Peoria

Hector Corona, Lewistown

Janine Donahue, Morton

Kim Dunnigan, Fiatt

Melissa Gilson, Havana

Emily Rogier, Pekin

Dinah VanDelinder, Topeka

Patty Wiegers, Lewistown

# UNIT AT A GLANCE

## The Strategy

### Guiding Principle

Lifelong learning. Lifelong impact.

### Mission

Develop educational programs, extend knowledge, and build partnerships to support people, communities, and their environments as part of the state's land grant institution.

### Vision

To adapt research-based knowledge into accessible forms so that every person we serve will experience and recognize a positive impact from our work.

### Process

Direct Education  
Facilitated Engagement

Experiential Learning  
Collaborative Outreach

### Scope

Agriculture  
Horticulture  
Natural Resources

Nutrition & Wellness  
4-H Youth Development  
Community & Economic Dev.

### Financial Report

| REVENUES   | \$2.84 Million | EXPENDITURES | \$2.84 Million |
|------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Federal    | 32.0%          | Personnel    | 77.9%          |
| State      | 15.9%          | Programming  | 11.4%          |
| University | 24.2%          | Equipment    | 0.1%           |
| Local      | 20.1%          | Overhead     | 10.6%          |
| Other      | 7.9%           |              |                |

*Fiscal Year 2025*

## The People



**35 Staff**



**1,008 Volunteers**



**216 Partners**



## Director's Comments

### Servant leadership skills seen through staff, volunteers, and stakeholders

One of the big reasons I have enjoyed working in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties over the years is that I have had the opportunity to interact with many servant-minded people. Whether I'm talking about local officials, program partners, volunteers, staff, families, or individuals, they almost always seem driven to improve themselves, their neighbors, and their communities through giving of

their time and resources to serve others. The servant attitude I see in others is one of the big factors that makes me excited to come to work each day.

One quote I like to use when I talk about servant leadership is from Harry Truman, who said, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." As you look through the pages of this report this year, you will

see many names and photos of people who either practice or are developing servant leadership skills. Thank you to all the servant-minded souls out there, and thank you for your support of U of I Extension.

With your help, our success in serving our local communities multiplies. I am ever grateful,

Earl Allen  
County Director

## The Methods



### 109,000 Online Followers and Website Hits

*social media, blogs, and website reach*



### 210 Media Pieces

*TV, news releases, newsletters, radio, and blog articles*



### 91,000 People at Programs

*37% by Staff 63% by Volunteers*

# Local communities gain awareness of state funding sources

No matter the size of the community, there are always projects that need to be addressed. And many times, those projects are also in need of funding sources. A recent meeting facilitated by University of Illinois Extension helped community leaders connect with three state funding sources.

"As I work with our local government leaders, a common situation that comes up is the fact that many communities are not aware of all the state's grant programs," explained Richard Proffer, community and economic development educator. "I wanted to plan an event where rural town leaders could learn about the grant opportunities in an approachable format and take away practical information to help their communities."

On February 18, the Rural Town Leader Funding meeting included presenters from the three largest state funding organizations: Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, and Illinois Office of Broadband. Nineteen rural community leaders representing eight towns and organizations, ranging from Bath to Canton, attended.

The presentations were tailored to the rural community audience to increase the practical takeaways for the leaders. Focused on the rural community audience, DCEO's North Central Regional Managers, Lauren Gibson and Mark Adams, presented information on loans, grants, tax credits, incentives, workforce development programs, grocery store incentives, and small business development programs.

Matthew Swaine, CEJA grants manager, explained how the energy transition community grant came about and who could qualify (everyone in the room qualified, yet very few knew about it); the grant is based on the closing of coal mines and plants and is designed to ease the resulting economic stress.

Lead for America Fellow Abi Amstutz-Spencer represented Illinois Office of Broadband. She talked about the state's broadband programs along with her community work.

Bath Village Trustee Merritt Pratt shared with Proffer, "Why did we not know this before today?"

"You were right, Richard, we did not know what we were missing out on," stated Jerad Schier, Manito Village Trustee.

There were attendees from outside Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties who were referred by one of the state agencies. Also, Economic Development and Infrastructure Project Leader Mark Slover, representing State Representative Travis Weaver, was in attendance.



Abi Amstutz-Spencer, Lead for America fellow, represented Illinois Office of Broadband at the Rural Town Leader Funding meeting held in Fulton County. State funding organizations presented to 19 attendees with the goal of increasing awareness of funding sources.

*Photo by Richard Proffer*

## Shaping Responsible Digital Citizens: Digital Navigator leads online safety presentation to students

The digital age is full of online spaces in which children increasingly interact. And, as technology develops rapidly, there's a huge learning curve for staying safe and navigating privacy and security concerns. Abi Amstutz-Spencer, an ACC AmeriCorps member and Digital Navigator fellow with Extension, presented to the 300 students at Illini Central Grade, Middle and High Schools in Mason City about online safety topics ranging from password management to cyberbullying.

"The goal isn't to ignore technology," Abi remarked, "it's about learning our options to keep ourselves connected safely so we use technology in ways that make our lives better." Abi presented a similar presentation to the Havana TANF group.



Students in University of Illinois' Sustainability and Rural Tourism course worked with City of Elmwood Economic Development Director Amy Davis and Illinois Extension Community and Economic Development Educator Richard Proffer on an iRural Tourism project.

## Elmwood gears up for increased tourism with Illinois Extension

Elmwood is a small town in west-central Peoria County, with a population close to 2,000 people. It has a wealth of cultural arts and natural assets that attract tourists. Students in the Sustainability and Rural Tourism course in the University of Illinois Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism worked with Elmwood city officials and Extension on a mutually beneficial project.

Amy Davis, Elmwood economic development director, and Richard Proffer, community and economic development educator, collaborated on a project aimed at enhancing the city's tourism efforts and the overall economy. They partnered with Dr. Sharon Zou and her U of I rural tourism class to catalog current tourism assets, gather key informant information, and propose new tourism ideas.

Elmwood is the home of the American sculptor Lorado Taft. Thanks to its many trails that wander through green spaces, water areas, and urban areas, it has a strong running culture. The town will soon be home to a cultural center offering classes, exhibits, and productions. Plus, the city has the Strawberry Festival and the Fall Festival.

The student team compiled the data and presented their findings and new ideas to city leaders. The City of Elmwood is now working on implementing tourism ideas generated from this project.

Proffer, a member of National Extension Tourism Network, continues to work with Elmwood Economic Development Committee on further idea development and execution.



Manito community leaders and residents were invited to participate in one of two community meetings to help shape the village's future. Over 40 people were involved in the Revive and Thrive meetings and are helping make community improvements.

*Photo by Richard Proffer*

## Manito Revive & Thrive community meetings helped launch improvements

The Manito Revive and Thrive Community Meetings were a catalyst for the village's new strategic plan. Local leaders collaborated with Richard Proffer, community and economic development educator, to develop goals, mission and vision statements, and to plan the community meetings.

"We heard feedback from over 40 people during the two community meetings," commented Proffer. "The community members were given the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns, as well as connect with other Manito citizens."

"I loved getting to talk to my community and feeling we all could make a change," wrote one participant on their final program feedback form.

Following the community meetings, the city established three project areas: business development, tourism, and infrastructure. Those sub-groups established priorities such as bringing in a grocery store, beautifying the main highway through town, updating city ordinances, and dealing with vacant and abandoned buildings.

"Already this year the town has made improvements to beautification by placing large heavy flowerpots and hanging colorful banners along Manito Road," Proffer explained. "Future work involves beautification of the new lake."

## BUILDING A TRAUMA INFORMED FOOD PANTRY TRAINING

In October, Food Pantry Network – Heart of Illinois, in collaboration with OSF Strive, SNAP-Ed, and Tazewell County Health Department, co-developed and presented “Building a Trauma-Informed Food Pantry” training designed to help pantries create welcoming, dignified, and supportive environments for guests. The Beyond the Meal resource suite was introduced, which includes shelf nudges, educational flipbooks, vitamin and nutrient cheat sheets, posters, and flyers centered around brain-boosting foods. This initiative reflects a growing movement to see food pantries not just as sources of nourishment but as safe, healing-centered spaces that support the whole person through empathy, education, and community connection.



## AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM AT HOLY FAMILY PARISH SCHOOL

Julie Dantone, SNAP-Ed instructor, has worked with Holy Family Parish School, located between Sterling and Gale Avenues in Peoria, for several years. Her SNAP-Ed Catch Kids Club and Organ Wise Guys lessons, offered during the after-school program, cater to students of all ages, and the older kids often assist the younger ones with tasks. The Catch Kids Club includes exercise, an easy-to-make snack, and a nutrition lesson. "One day, I took extra supplies and the kids helped me make extra goodie bags of Gorp Snack Mix, that I distributed at my Eat. Move. Save. booth at a food pantry," Julie explained. "The children said they like helping others."

The K-2 kids enjoy Organ Wise Guys puppets and connect with the characters such as The Kidney Brothers and Calci M. Bone.

## ILLINOIS JUNIOR CHEF AT SOUTH SIDE MISSION

South Side Mission's brand new portable kitchens were "christened" by the Illinois Junior Chef program this summer. Students got hands-on experience cooking at their own stations while receiving live instruction from SNAP-Ed staff, with Chris Cungtion, SSM Youth Ministry Supervisor, serving as the lead coordinator. Students practiced important kitchen skills, including measuring, knife safety, cutting techniques, cooking safety, food safety, and proper hand washing. They also learned about healthy eating using MyPlate while participating in fun games, exercise, and nutrition lessons that kept everyone active and engaged. This program inspired confidence, teamwork, and lifelong healthy habits.



## SNAP-EDUCATION STATS

### PARTICIPANTS: 95% YOUTH AND 5% ADULTS

5,566 direct education

7,434 contacts at 259 educational booths

**RACE:** 30% white, 46% black, 1% other and 23% prefer not to respond

**ETHNICITY:** 16% identified as Hispanic

### POLICY, SYSTEMS, AND ENVIRONMENT IMPACT:

28 coalitions | 12 led by Extension staff

171 changes adopted ~ 157,000 potential impacts

\$101,700 raised by grants or donations to partners

### PARTNERS: 164 unique organizations

84 direct education | 106 policy, systems, and environment

34 layering direct education and PSE | 173 in coalitions



## Mobile markets bring quality produce

Beginning in January 2025, the Central Illinois Children's Health Initiative (CICHI), a multi-sector partnership, came together to improve the health of children and their caregivers by making the nutritious choice the easier choice. Through food and nutrition education and increased access to fresh, high-quality foods, CICHI takes a community-centered approach, bringing resources directly to the places where families naturally gather. Their vision is a one-stop model that integrates food access, education, and support services — maximizing convenience, engagement, and long-term impact.

The team co-designed a mobile market model with site partners and community members. CJ Harvest on-the-go partnered with Hy-Vee to provide low to no-cost, high-quality vegetables, fruits, dairy, and grains. In addition, thanks to support from community partners, other needed resources like hygiene and cleaning supplies have been available at no cost to families. The market served four Head Start locations a month and two afterschool sites across Peoria and East Peoria with mobile markets scheduled through May 2026. Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed is on-site to offer samples and nutrition information. Additionally, some of the SNAP-Ed classes for youth have been provided at the sites.

Within the first month of the market, the SNAP-Ed team experienced a great success from pairing education and access. One of the after-school sites attended Illinois Junior Chef the week before

their first market. At Illinois Junior Chef, the kids experienced hands-on learning opportunities, that built their kitchen skills, recipe literacy, and kitchen safety, while also learning about our food groups and the importance of having a balanced plate. The following week, youth attended the first market with their caregivers and helped make food choices for their families. One young boy, Jack, was thrilled to put his cooking skills to use and choose healthy foods for his family. Jack sampled the vegetable pasta salad, grabbed every available recipe, and spoke with our SNAP-Ed team about how he was helping in the kitchen. Then Jack and his caregiver shopped through the market. Jack actively chose foods, grabbed a bag of baby carrots, and talked about his plans to help with food preparation at home. When their shopping was done, Jack and his caregiver left the market smiling, arms full of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The CICHI team and its work originated from the Partnership for a Healthy Community HEAL Food System Partners coalition. The major partners supporting the CICHI initiative are the following: OSF (funder), CJ Harvest (market manager), Local Peoria Hy-Vee stores (market food), University of Illinois College of Medicine (research), University of Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed (community nutrition), Peoria City/County Health Department WIC (community nutrition), Bradley University intern (co-design lead), Peoria Area Food Pantry (food logistics), Tazewell County Health Department (consulting), Midwest Food Bank (supplies).



Extension Master Gardener and Master Naturalist May Bach was one of several volunteers who assisted Horticulture Educator Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle with the Eco Explorers course as part of the DAPCEP program held at Bradley University.

*Photo by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle*

## Horticulture and natural resource focused STEM programs offered

In 2025, Extension staff delivered several different STEM programs for more than 55 youth and families, focused on hands-on science learning related to horticulture and natural resources.

### Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program

In the second year of providing courses in DAPCEP held at Bradley University, students in grades fourth through sixth explored botany, earth science, and ecology. The Green Thumbs course, held in February, and Eco Explorers, held in September, aimed to help students build foundational knowledge and confidence in STEM.

### Girls Excelling in Math and Science

A Biomes in a Bottle activity with the GEMS (Girls Excelling in Math and Science) shared information with girls in grades fifth through eighth about plant, soil, and water interactions.

### ACES Family Academy

A family-focused session at ACES Family Academy, where participants learned about growing herbs and the science of tea preparation. These programs fostered curiosity, interdisciplinary connections, and real-world applications for diverse audiences.

## Golden Garden Day—West Central Celebration, 50 years of Extension Master Gardener impact

In 2025, the Illinois Extension Master Gardeners celebrated 50 years of impact. Five regional events invited people from all over Illinois to join in looking back at the program and how it has grown since 1975. Extension staff and volunteers from the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell Unit hosted the West Central regional event. The event centered around what all EMGs love, being out in the garden and connecting with other nature-lovers.

Over 90 participants met at OSF St. Ann's Garden of Hope in July to start the Golden Garden Day—West Central Celebration. Mike Brooks, the garden manager and EMG, shared the history and impact of the garden with the group. Guests enjoyed exploring the three sections of the garden.

The celebration extended to Wildlife Prairie Park, where Master Gardener-led projects were a highlight. County Director Earl Allen and Regional Director Janice McCoy spoke to the group, thanked them for the work they do to positively impact communities in Illinois through education, giving gardens, pollinator support, and more.

The celebration ended with a chance to explore Wildlife Prairie Park and experience some of the Master Gardener-led projects on site.

The 4-H Learning Garden is both a productive and beautiful space where 4-H SPIN club members learn about growing fresh vegetables to enhance the diets of the park animals and use their creativity to create fun and educational garden art.

The Kim St John Butterfly Habitat is the largest native butterfly habitat in Illinois. Master Gardeners and Naturalists help to ensure that resources are available to support native butterflies in every stage of their life cycle.

Guided tours through the park highlighted the importance of wildlife sanctuaries, their role in conservation, and information on native tree identification. Volunteer-managed, native plant beds added splashes of color to the space, attracting guests and pollinators.

The 50-year celebration continued at the Illinois Extension Master Garden Annual Conference in September, as well as special events, and in social media program highlights.



Trudy Yazujian, Master Gardener from Tazewell County enjoyed the tours at Garden of Hope and Wildlife Prairie Park and networking during the Illinois Master Gardeners' 50th anniversary Golden Garden Days celebration.

*Photo by Anita Wilkinson*



## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: LEE MAKI

Lee Maki has been an integral part of the Extension Master Gardener program since he completed training in 2010. He has worked many hours on volunteer projects such as Wildlife Prairie Park, Washington Giving Garden, OLLI classes at Bradley University, and Clean Water Celebration. His joy of being a lifelong learner continued as he completed Master Naturalist training in 2012, became a certified facilitator in environmental ethics through Aldo Leopold Foundation, and received his advanced certificate in ecology. He has been honored with the Illinois Outstanding Master Gardener (2013) and Sustained Excellence (2019) awards. He was also part of two team awards in 2014 and 2015. He is pictured volunteering in the Book Corner at the 2025 little Gardener's Day in the demonstration garden at ICC.



## MASTER VOLUNTEER GARDEN STATS

**8 GIVING GARDENS**

23,600 pounds of produce donated to local food pantries

**21 OFFICIAL PROJECTS** that support pollinators



## SEED SAVING, SOWING, STARTING

2025 started strong for local gardeners with a winter sowing workshop that taught attendees how to start seed outside in the cold winter successfully. Then in the spring, we switched gears to teach people how to start seeds indoors using upcycled materials, soil blocks, and seed spirals. An herb seed starting workshop was also held.

Seed saving is a popular topic anytime nature lovers are together. Most garden tours and some outdoor educational programs naturally include seed-saving opportunities. A formal seed saving program happened in the fall at Mason State Tree Nursery. In October, the Autumn Abundance Seed Sharing program was held, in which volunteers brought seed from their homes to swap with each other.



## Hands-on herb workshops in Fulton

In 2025, Master Gardeners partnered with the Fulton County Farm Bureau to establish a new herb garden. This new herb garden enabled a series of hands-on workshops that demonstrated the growing and use of herbs in various ways.

The series launched in March when Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle taught a seed starting class focused on herbs. Participants experimented with soil blocks and seed spirals to start herbs for personal use while contributing to a new herb garden at the Fulton County Farm Bureau building. Workshop attendee Doris Simmons successfully started lemon balm and basil and donated them to the newly established herb garden.

Volunteers and Extension staff led other sessions on making herbal salts, syrup, butter, and teas, blending practical skills with culinary creativity. The series drew 95 participants. The workshops gave practical ways to incorporate herbs into everyday life. Plans include expanding the garden and bringing herb-focused programming across the unit.



### Master Volunteer Stats

#### 287 VOLUNTEERS

178 Master Gardeners  
109 Master Naturalists

#### 16,512 VOLUNTEER HOURS REPORTED

9,483 Master Gardeners  
7,029 Master Naturalists

#### 4,727 CONTINUING EDUCATION HOURS REPORTED

2,895 Master Gardeners  
1,832 Master Naturalists

#### \$575,000 VALUE TO COMMUNITIES

\$330,000 Master Gardeners  
\$245,000 Master Naturalists



Local Extension Master Naturalist Brent Fowler led several conservation farm tours highlighting his efforts to fight invasive species, promote biodiversity, and improve wildlife habitat on his McDonough County farm. Fowler is using his passion for environmental conservation along with his expertise in commercial agriculture to educate others about the environmental and financial benefits of conservation farming.

*Photo by Anita Wilkinson*



## **Farmer leads the way in environmental conservation efforts**

Commercial row-crop agriculture and environmental conservation are not mutually exclusive. While large-scale farming operations can sometimes have negative environmental impacts, many farmers are adopting sustainable practices that promote biodiversity and ecosystem health. McDonough County farmer and local Extension Master Naturalist Brent Fowler is leading the charge.

“Overhearing my dad talk about quail hunting, no longer possible due to their population decline, really struck a chord with me. I set out to change that,” explained Fowler. “Most of my stewardship activities involve prairie and field-to-forest border edges. I care for about 160 acres of prairie in about 30 small fields. Most of these prairie acres have been planted along field edges where the forest transitions to row crops—this creates excellent habitat and can actually be more profitable for the farm because row crops don’t yield well right up next to large trees.”

Not satisfied with simply making conservation-minded improvements on his land, Fowler is actively educating others about his efforts. After becoming a Master Naturalist in the local unit in 2022, Fowler began hosting farm tours. He shows visitors the various strategies he employs seasonally, including establishing spring/summer-blooming prairie plants, identifying fall colors of native shrubs, and how best to control invasive species.

In addition to the work on habitat restoration, Fowler is also incorporating regenerative agriculture practices in his row-crop acreage, including reduced tillage and cover crops. These practices work in tandem to reduce soil erosion and prevent nutrient loss in our streams and rivers.

“Ten years ago, we cautiously switched to no-till. Each step involved yield test after yield test to prove that it was more profitable,” Fowler said. “We are now almost exclusively no-till on our 3,500 acres of corn and soybeans, with half getting a cover crop.”

“Conservation farming is crucial for the long-term sustainability of our food production systems,” explained Tara Heath, commercial agriculture educator. “I’m excited to see him leading the way in implementing practices that benefit both the environment and the agricultural community.”

# Farm drainage case study shows drain tile improves yield

Central Illinois crop production began in the mid-1800s as settlers started draining the swampy prairie land. They were not able to grow crops due to excess water in the soil. As drainage tile installation methods improved, more and more land was drained. Over time, however, original drainage systems can deteriorate, and new drainage technologies can offer added benefit. University of Illinois Extension Farm Business Management and Marketing Educator Kevin Brooks is conducting a farm drainage case study research project to help farmers and landowners make informed decisions on potential improvements to their aging drainage systems.

"If a field has excess water, we know plant roots are going to be affected and thus so will the potential yield," Brooks explained. "In this case study, I looked at data from nine farm fields, examining yield results before and after new tiles were installed (both large main tiles and the smaller lateral tiles) and comparing the case study farms against county averages."

The data comparison shows the study farms have substantially improved yields. "Corn averaged over 10 percent higher yields during the first three years following the drainage improvements. However, the fourth year resulted in improvements from 20 to 35 percent on corn. Ultimately, it seems that corn yield improvements are more substantial when higher levels of management are added to the equation, including finer adjustments to drainage and possibly tillage methods to improve soil health. This project continues to develop over time, aiming to draw more concrete conclusions, as the initial large increase was unexpected. What is apparent is that drainage can have a big positive impact on profitability."

Brooks checked the results against nearby fields. Though soybean yield improvements were slightly less dramatic, soybean yields in controlled check soybean fields didn't show as much consistency.

"The research continues as I analyze 25 years of yield data, as well as take into account the data



Installing drain tiles in a field comes with initial expense, but data shows that the improved crop yield can pay for the project in a short period of time. Kevin Brooks, Farm Business Manager and Marketing educator is working on a farm drainage case study to present the data representing local farm operations.

*Photo by Kevin Brooks*

we will get on future crop production," Brooks continued. "Other variables that come into play in a research study like this one include rainfall patterns and the timing of planting. We also need to dive more deeply into the local effect on area soybean fields not located in the watershed drained by the tile."

The results of this initial case study are similar to recent findings by Purdue University, with significant yield improvement in corn and a lesser impact in soybeans. This ongoing study will help landowners and farmers make informed decisions on investing in drainage tile in Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties.



Farm Coach Blog  
[go.illinois.edu/FarmCoachBlog](http://go.illinois.edu/FarmCoachBlog)



Some 4-H exhibits weigh more than others, but they all come with a good dose of work ethic and character development for our members. Kinley Martin, Peoria 4-H member, was among the 182 youth who participated in the summer-time favorite event, the Peoria County 4-H Show.

*Photo by Anita Wilkinson*

# 4-H Stats

## 5,792 YOUTH REACHED

- 1,086 in 4-H Clubs
- 1,837 in Extended Programs
- 2,280 in Short Programs
- 589 in One-day Programs



Fulton County Fair, 4-H Livestock Exhibits



Peoria 4-H Federation, Messy Games Night



4-H STEM Career Exploration Camp, site visit to U of I College of Medicine, Peoria



Delavan Aces Leader Duane Lessen at the Tazewell 4-H Show and Jr. Fair

## 81 CLUBS

- 38 Multi-project Clubs
- 21 Special Interest Clubs
- 22 Cloverbud Clubs

## 196 PROGRAMS

- 138 Extended Programs
- 46 Short Programs
- 12 One-day Programs

## 545 ADULT VOLUNTEERS

- 67 Multi-project Club Leaders
- 51 Special Interest Club Leaders
- 28 Cloverbud Leaders
- 112 Fair Superintendents
- 287 Program Volunteers



# Mason County 4-H Shooting Sports Club continues strong growth

In 2013, a passionate group of volunteers laid the foundation for one of Mason County's most respected 4-H special interest clubs: 4-H Shooting Sports. What began with a handful of volunteers, a few youth members, some borrowed equipment, and a vision for safe and responsible firearms education has since evolved into a program that has educated hundreds of youth, fostered lifelong skills, and built a strong sense of community.

"Our main goal was never just marksmanship," recalls one founding volunteer. "It was about teaching safety, responsibility, discipline, focus, and respect—all for firearms, the sport, and each other."

The club has more than doubled in size to 37 active youth. Since its beginnings, 29 volunteers have attended instructor certification, with nine current instructors in the disciplines of archery, air rifle/rifle, shotgun, air pistol/pistol, and hunting & wildlife. Three adults have become 4-H certified club coordinators, to assist with finances and logistics.

Strong partnerships have been formed with Whitetails Unlimited, Illinois Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus, NRA Foundation, and Farm & Home Supply.

Over 50 youth have participated in the 4-H state-level competition, and four have represented Illinois at the National 4-H Shooting Sports Championships. Club archery instructor Ted Snider has served twice as the Illinois Recurve Archery Coach at nationals.

In 2024, an additional property access allowed for

the expansion of the shotgun and archery. The Spring 2025 session marked the newest expansion through a partnership with Havana High School trap shooting club.

Participants gain confidence, improve strength and hand-eye coordination, develop goal-setting, leadership, and mentoring skills, and learn responsibility. The club is a place where members learn values to last a lifetime.

## Welcome to the Real World program for after-school programs in Peoria

As part of the financial literacy program for Ready, Set, Go, Illinois Extension provided training on "Welcome to the Real World" for 20 after-school staff from both Annie Jo Gordon and Elise Ford Allen schools, as well as the first session of the program to 70 youth. After-school staff then implemented lessons on career exploration, making choices related to future independent living, and skills to manage their finances. The program concluded with a simulation involving local community partners which featured several stations with activities such as paying taxes, opening a savings account, purchasing insurance, and making lifestyle choices.

Youth learn about salary ranges for various careers and the differences in expenses related to choices in housing, transportation, food and clothing. The goal of this program is to help youth have a better understanding of career options for themselves, budgeting, and how their choices affect their future.

## NEW 4-H SPIN CLUBS IN TAZEWELL

This spring, Tazewell County 4-H welcomed two new Special Interest (SPIN) Clubs. The Junior Master Gardener SPIN Club was led by Master Gardeners Trudy Yazujian, Janine Donahue, and Ellen Denler, while the Junior Master Naturalist SPIN Club was led by Master Naturalist Brittany Chambers. Both clubs promoted environmental stewardship through hands-on, nature-based education. Interactive activities and games helped members learn about nature and their role in it. SPIN Clubs are just one way youth can get involved in the 4-H program. The variety of 4-H programs offer youth a safe place to learn skills and knowledge, develop positive character traits, and build friendships with youth of all ages.



## FULTON JUNIOR MASTER NATURALISTS PLANT OAK SAVANNA

Oak savannas once dotted the prairie. Today, these beautiful and unique ecosystems are among the most threatened in the world. But thanks to the 4-H Green Communities Tree Program, a new generation of young people is helping to bring them back to Fulton County. With funding from Illinois Forestry Development this spring, the Fulton County 4-H Junior Master Naturalist Club helped plant 25 oak trees at Wallace Park in Canton. This year is the first time Fulton County has participated in this statewide effort, which has successfully established 118 new oak savannas on public properties across 66 counties in just three years! Club leaders and Extension Master Naturalists Amanda Atchley and Jenny Beal led the project.

## PEORIA COUNTY DAIRY SPIN CLUB

There are some things that you can't learn from a book or in school. You need to experience it firsthand to understand the full scope, and farming is one of those things. In 2012, Peoria County's Dairy 4-H SPIN Club began and has taught youth of all ages life skills such as work ethics, responsibility, safety awareness, communication, problem-solving, caring for others as well as a better understanding of the agriculture industry and where our food comes from. Peoria County farmer and 4-H alum Fred Rosenbohm of Linden Hills Dairy Farm shares his love and knowledge of dairy farming with youth in the club. The majority of youth who participate in this special interest club are new to farming and livestock. This year, the club had nine members from three counties.



## 4-H CLOVER CLINIC TEEN LEADERS

This past February, 120 youth from Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell counties gathered for a day of hands-on learning at 4-H Clover Clinic, an event designed to introduce youth to various skills and interests. But behind the scenes, it's the dedicated team of teens who serve in leadership roles who bring the program to life. 4-H Clover Clinic offers a series of workshops led by knowledgeable instructors that cover topics such as paper quilling, kitchen science, woodworking, and needle felting. While these workshops provided engaging opportunities for younger members, the 15 teenage 4-H members serve as mentors and role models, encouraging and guiding younger 4-H members. Many of these teens once attended Clover Clinic as participants and now enjoy giving back to the program that helped spark their own interests.



# Volunteer Jamey Harp memorial dedicated at fair



Jamey Harp was a 34-year Mason County 4-H alumnus and volunteer. His passing in June 2025 left members of the Mason County 4-H program and beyond deeply saddened and filled with great loss.

The 4-H Federation members led a project to purchase and dedicate a colossal-sized Adirondack chair for the fairgrounds, in honor of Jamey.

"As we celebrate the life of Jamey Harp, we remember all the wonderful, selfless acts he accomplished to make his life whole. A life full of integrity, humility, generosity, and compassion. His gentle nature and kind spirit always shone when it came to his 4-H volunteerism," read Joli Pierson, 4-H program coordinator at the unveiling ceremony held during the Mason 4-H Show. "His legacy will live on in every ribbon won, every skill mastered, and every life touched by his 4-H leadership. His hands were truly devoted to larger service, and he will continue to inspire all who follow in his footsteps. May we all carry forward his spirit by living the way Jamey did – with purpose, pride, and a heart for others."



A colossal size Adirondack chair was dedicated at the Mason County Fairgrounds in memory of Jamey Harp. His family was honored by the special gift presented on July 23, 2025, during the evening 4-H awards ceremony.

*Photo by Anita Wilkinson*

The chair is adorned with a plaque and the inscription, "May all who sit here feel his spirit and remember the values he lived by. Service, Kindness, and Community."

Jamey's 4-H volunteer accomplishments include:

- 4-H Leadership
  - 2 years - Jr Leader, Peaceful Valley 4-H Club
  - 32 years - Leader, Peaceful Valley 4-H Club
  - Assisted Easton Ramblers 4-H Club
  - 4-H Expansion & Review Committee
  - 2017 Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame Inductee
- Extension Council member
  - Mason County Extension Council
  - Unit Extension Council
- Mason County 4-H & Jr Show Association
  - Fair Board member
  - Superintendent for several 4-H and Jr. Show divisions including sheep, goats, poultry, rabbits and visual arts
  - Calf and pig scramble committee member
  - Fairgrounds night watchman



Top left: Tazewell 4-H members enjoyed their co-branded t-shirts sponsored by Tazewell Farm Bureau. Top right: Extension and Farm Bureau staff and volunteers worked together to establish a native plant demonstration garden in Fulton County. Bottom left: Mason Farm Bureau Manager Ryan Held handed out the incentive gift at the Farm Safety Day. Bottom right: Peoria County Farm Bureau Young Leaders coordinated a lawn mower driving contest during the 4-H Show.

Photos by Anita Wilkinson





# Partner Spotlight

## Illinois Farm Bureau: Fulton, Mason, Peoria and Tazewell Counties

The partnership between local Farm Bureaus and Illinois Extension goes back much further than any current staff members. There has been cooperation between the two service-focused organizations for more than 100 years.

As the national Cooperative Extension Service began in 1914, thanks to support from the newly formed Illinois Farm Bureau, local ag agents were placed in nearly every county of the state to bring the research-based information from campus to local communities. Now the way the partnership unfolds looks different, but the reason remains the same, to support farms, food, and families in Illinois.

### Farm Safety Day in Fulton and Mason

The annual Farm Safety Day has been happening for over 30 years. Extension and Farm Bureau staff and volunteers in Fulton and Mason counties work together to plan this event, which educates youth (and their accompanying adults) about important risks and safety measures. Over the years, the topics have broadened beyond just the common dangers around the farm to include topics that can benefit all youth, no matter where they live.

Safety around grain bins, ATVs, tractors, augers, and livestock has been the foundation of the day's sessions. Topics that help youth understand hazards around electricity, school buses, poisonous plants, and water are examples of those more broad topics.

### 4-H Shows

Each of the local Farm Bureaus supports the 4-H Shows and county fairs in different ways. Financial support comes in the form of trophy and special event sponsorships. For many years, the Peoria Farm Bureau Young Leaders coordinated the lawn mower driving contest during the 4-H Show. Tazewell Farm Bureau has a tradition of providing the fan-favorite color-changing cups for the lemonade shake-ups and a 4-H and Farm Bureau-branded t-shirt for exhibitors.

### Annie's Project

Since 2016, Annie's Project has been offered locally in partnership with Extension and Farm Bureau. More than 100 women have gone through the program that is dedicated to strengthening women's roles in agriculture. The course provides training in five key areas of agricultural risk: production, human, financial, market, and legal.

This year, 27 women from seven different counties attended the program in Tazewell County. It was delivered in a new, hybrid format that combined two days of in-person sessions with six hours of online content.

### Ag Education for youth and adults

Extension educators in commercial ag, 4-H, and horticulture have been partnering with Farm Bureau to provide educational workshops. Recently, Kevin Brooks presented at the Peoria County annual meeting. Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle taught a succulents class to the Tazewell County women's committee. Judy Schmidt has provided training at the Summer Ag Institute in Peoria County.

### Hunters Feeding Illinois

SNAP-Education has partnered with Tazewell County Farm Bureau in an effort to address food insecurity. Through the Hunters Feeding Illinois program, hunters can donate whole harvested deer at no cost to participating meat processors. The processed meat is then donated to local food pantries to help Illinois individuals and families to stretch their food budget.

### Native Plant Demonstration Garden

Fulton County Farm Bureau became the home to the unit's first native plant demonstration garden. The building landscape was redone in 2023 to showcase 25 species of native plants. The project was planned, installed, and maintained by Farm Bureau staff and volunteers along with Extension Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists.

## UNIT STAFF



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County Director



**Anita Wilkinson**  
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**Nicole  
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**Paula Lane**  
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**Angie Sassine**  
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**Julann Schierer**  
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**Sue Beeney**  
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## RETIRED in 2025



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**Jane Frazier**  
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**Joli Pierson**  
Mason 4-H  
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**Christine Belless**  
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**Katherine Ellis**  
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## 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



**Krista Gray**  
Fulton Coordinator



**Abbie Phillips**  
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**Judy Schmidt**  
Metro Educator



**Lynda Sharp-Lower**  
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**Skye Mibbs**  
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**Jo Elyn Smith**  
SNAP-Ed Instructor





Front cover photo: Tazewell 4-H member David K. was an exhibitor at the 4-H Show and Jr. Fair.

Back cover photo: Spring Creek Preserves in Tazewell County was one of the outdoor classroom locations for the Natural Resources Core Education training.

*Photos by Anita Wilkinson, Extension communications program coordinator*

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**Illinois Extension**

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

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#### College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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