



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

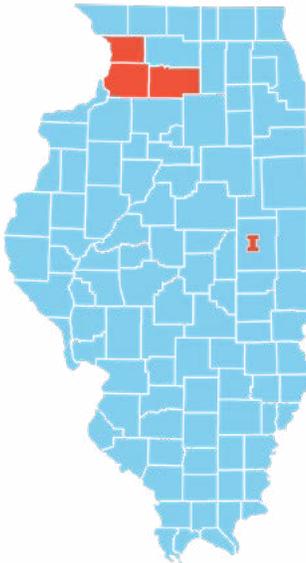


Serving Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Karla Belzer
County Director



Many hands, one mission

As I look back on the past year, I'm reminded once again of how deeply University of Illinois Extension is woven into the daily lives of our friends and neighbors in Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside counties. Our work shows up in classrooms, fairgrounds, community centers, libraries, local businesses, gardens, kitchens, and many other places. Everywhere we go, we see people learning, connecting, and discovering new possibilities—and that is the true measure of our impact.

What stands out most to me is the way our staff and volunteers show up for their communities. They listen closely, respond thoughtfully, and bring creativity and care to every program they deliver. Whether they're helping a young person find confidence, guiding an individual toward healthier choices, or collaborating with partners on community priorities, their commitment shines through.

This report offers a snapshot of that work, but it has its limits. It can't capture every conversation, every breakthrough moment, or every relationship built—but it does highlight the many ways Illinois Extension

continues to make a meaningful difference. I am grateful every day to lead a team so grounded in service and so dedicated to improving quality of life for all who call this region home.

Our accomplishments are possible only because of the strong network of supporters who believe in our mission. County boards, foundations, businesses, civic organizations, donors, and community partners all play a vital role in expanding our reach. And to our 4-H volunteers, Master Gardeners, and Master Naturalists—you are the hands and hearts that help carry Illinois Extension's work into every corner of our counties. We are truly thankful for your time, energy, and passion.

In 2025, we continued to spark curiosity, strengthen skills, and build connections that last. As we look ahead, we remain committed to nurturing leaders, supporting families, and helping our communities thrive. Thank you for walking alongside us and for being an essential part of the Extension story.

Karla Belzer
County Director

Cover photo: Liana Davies of the Maytown Comets 4-H club frosts cupcakes at the Frosting Fun SPIN Club. Photo credit: Emilie Davies

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

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

-  Community
-  Economy
-  Environment
-  Food and Agriculture
-  Health
-  Partnerships
-  Technology and Discovery
-  Workforce Excellence

2025 Engagement

Extension leaders, staff, and stakeholders define priorities that create meaningful, mission-centered outcomes throughout the state:

738 Communities Served	831K+ Program Attendees	9.4M+ Webpage Views	9.8M+ Social Media Visibility	1.8M+ YouTube Impressions
249 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	83 Online Courses Accessed by 13K+ People	10,846 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,848 4-H Clubs 20,242 4-H Club Members	68,697 Fair Exhibits 295,379 4-H Experiences

Partnerships

Resource Generation

5,129 Program Volunteers	277 Community Gardens	2,830 School and Community Partners	\$15,026,392 Value of Volunteer Contributions	\$499,188 Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated	\$960K+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners
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On July 4, 2025, the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act eliminated all funding for Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed nutrition education program. Here's the impact by the numbers:

Up to \$135M Estimated Annual Loss in Future Economic Returns on Investment in Illinois	2 million+ Residents Lost Access to Food and Health Education	1,754 Partners Including Schools, Food Banks, Early Childhood Centers, Public Health Departments, and Local Agencies Impacted	200+ Staff Members Affected by Layoffs	30 Years of Infrastructure and Network Building for the SNAP-Ed Program Lost
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Attendees enjoy a meal prepared by WACC students.



Lauren Wagner presents at the 2025 Ag Expo.



Ag Expo youth volunteers spark interest in 4-H membership

Agricultural literacy is declining among youth, leaving young people disconnected from the systems that feed their communities. With this decline, youth may miss opportunities to understand food production, environmental stewardship, and local career pathways. Each year, the Lee County Farm Bureau, Soil and Water Conservation District, and Illinois Extension come together to host Ag Expo, a hands-on, educational event that brings agriculture to life for Lee County fifth graders.

Held at the Lee County Fairgrounds, Ag Expo introduces students to the many facets of agriculture through interactive sessions on dairy cattle, bees, soil health, prairie ecosystems, pollinators, and more. It's a day filled with discovery, learning, and fun, and is designed to help youth understand the vital role agriculture plays in our daily lives.

One of the highlights of the day is the 4-H session, where current 4-H members share their experiences and showcase their favorite projects. Youth from the Wyoming Indians, Palmyra Hillbillies, AFC Aggies, and Dixon Wonder Workers 4-H clubs stepped into leadership roles, speaking about why they love 4-H and sharing past projects to inspire the fifth graders.

As the day progressed, these young 4-H leaders gained confidence—running games, giving directions, and explaining how prairie plants help keep soil in place, an important concept for sustainable farming. Their enthusiasm and leadership made a lasting impression on students and teachers alike.

Thanks to their efforts, Illinois Extension received several inquiries from families interested in joining 4-H in the weeks following the event. It's a testament to the power of peer-to-peer learning and the impact of youth-led outreach.

2026 will mark the 20th anniversary of Ag Expo in Lee County and Illinois Extension is proud to celebrate two decades of collaboration, education, and community engagement. Events like Ag Expo not only teach agricultural literacy, they also build confidence, leadership, and a sense of belonging in local youth.

Inaugural Farm to Table Dinner highlights local food systems



As consumers, curiosity about where the food we eat comes from continues to grow. In a collaborative effort between Whiteside Area Career Center and Illinois Extension, the public had the chance to explore that curiosity through Illinois Extension's Farm to Table Dinner and Farm Tours in September.

Local farmers enthusiastically shared their passion for agriculture, offering an inside look at our regional food systems. Attendees visited a dairy farm, meat processing facility, hydroponics operation, cattle farm, and apple orchard before enjoying a delicious meal featuring locally sourced ingredients.

The dinner menu was curated by WACC's Culinary Arts class, under the leadership of their instructor, Chef Joe Hunt. Generous donations of fresh products allowed students to cook with ingredients that they rarely encounter, such as blue oyster and black pearl mushrooms from Amboy, locally raised prime rib, and crisp buttercrunch lettuce harvested just hours before reaching the kitchen.

Even the décor reflected the same collaborative spirit with floral centerpieces designed by Whiteside County Master Gardeners. Cut flowers were sourced from the home gardens of Master Gardeners and supplemented by a Dixon flower farm, creating a beautiful, late summer ambiance. During dinner, guests were also given the opportunity to design their own bouquets to take home.

The full-day event drew local residents as well as visitors from farther away, including a couple from Naperville, who discovered the event after visiting a vendor at their farmers market. After a warm day filled with farm sights, sounds, smells, and baby calves, the evening settled into a cool, quite close. Guests left with well wishes, hopes for the return of the event next year, and plans to invite their friends.



Illinois Department of Natural Resources staff teach Master Naturalist students how to use seine nets to sample and identify fish species at Franklin Creek State Natural Area.



From prairie to stream, trainees experience Illinois environments

Illinois Extension’s 2025 Master Naturalist training welcomed eight individuals dedicated to learning more about the natural world at a time when local ecosystems face increasing pressure from habitat loss, invasive species, and declining biodiversity. Without knowledgeable volunteers, communities risk losing the capacity to protect and restore these natural areas.

The training was designed to build environmental stewards who feel confident supporting local conservation efforts. A sampling of topics included prairie restoration techniques at Lake Carroll, forest ecology and flowing rivers and streams at Franklin Creek State Natural Area, herpetology at Nachusa Grasslands, ornithology, and soil science. During sessions, participants networked with conservation and environmental specialists, connecting them to valuable resources and information. Hands-on opportunities included tracking turtles using radio telemetry, identifying macro invertebrates, using a seine net and identifying fish, inspecting soil samples, and learning about dichotomous keys.

After course completion, participants entered the internship phase inspired to bring what they learned back to their communities with a sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm. One intern was so inspired by the ornithology class at Amboy Marsh that they have become a repeat visitor. These new Master Naturalist interns now join a passionate team supporting habitat restoration, special events, and educational outreach, strengthening conservation efforts in our local communities.



Trainees check turtle traps at Nachusa Grasslands with Extension Horticulture Educator Kim Rohling.



Smashing instead of trashing creates a more nutrient-rich Sauk Valley

The 2nd annual Lee County Pumpkin Smash was a smashing success for Illinois Extension and the Sauk Valley area. When organic waste is thrown in the trash, it ends up in landfills, contributing to methane emissions and polluted runoff. Instead, this event features fun "smash stations" to encourage jack-o-lantern composting. Without community education and alternatives, thousands of pounds of pumpkins would continue to add to these environmental problems each year. The 2025 smash expanded to include more partners, resulting in smashing nearly five times as many pumpkins for compost and doubling participation from the 2024 pilot event.

Illinois Extension partnered with Sauk Valley Community College, Whiteside Area Career Center, Lee and Whiteside Ag in the Classroom, and the Sterling Police Department. WACC staff and students built creative pumpkin smashing devices—including a medieval trebuchet, battering ram, log drop, and pumpkin piñata frame—giving WACC students hands-on woodworking experience that extended their classroom learning.

In 2025, 182 participants smashed 3,240 pounds of pumpkins, returning the material to farm fields to be composted into nutrients for next year’s crops. The event helped reduce landfill waste, boosted awareness of sustainable disposal practices, and strengthened community partnerships. The project is carried out in collaboration with SCARCE, the Illinois environmental nonprofit that launched Pumpkin Smashes in 2014.



A participant smashes their pumpkin at the battering ram station.



Master Gardener volunteers gather before their plant sale.



Lee County Master Gardeners celebrate decades of service

Impactful projects making a positive difference in local communities did not go unnoticed at the 2025 Illinois Extension Master Gardener Conference. This event marked 50 years of the Master Gardener program’s mission of helping others learn to grow. The Lee County Master Gardener program has been around for almost all those years and their hard work has paid off.

Each year, Master Gardeners are awarded for exceptional projects and their leadership, innovation, and community engagement. An amazing group of Lee County Master Gardeners were recognized for their work to expand the Junior Garden to include a Kids in the Kitchen program in partnership with 4-H. Every summer, youth explore all aspects of gardening through a 15-week program that takes them from seed to harvest. The kids often wonder what they can do with the produce they grow. When the growing season ends, Master Gardeners work with the youth to select unique vegetables or fruits they are interested in learning more about. Recipes are then chosen for Kids in the Kitchen sessions. In this innovative program, youth expand their gardening skills and learn to use and process the foods they harvest.

Heritage Square

The Master Gardeners’ commitment to the community spans across all ages. As many Lee County residents are aging, there is a large population of adults that choose to live in assisted living communities. While these communities offer many wonderful amenities, oftentimes residents no longer have access to their own yards or gardening spaces. To bring gardening back into the lives of these individuals, Lee County Master Gardeners visit Heritage Square Retirement Center every month to provide hands-on garden activities and education.

Selecting activities can be challenging because they do not have space to garden in. Past activities have included lessons on fairy gardens, mini flower arranging, seasonal garden crafts, and trivia. Even though members cannot dig in the dirt in their own space, they love to reminisce about past gardening adventures.



Pictured L to R: Judy Truckenbrod, Mary Kathryn Stenzel, and Karen Stenzel accept the 2025 Teamwork award. Other recipients of the award: Lynn Borg, Jen Cooter, Darla Emmert, Zack Moss, Nancy Strock, Nancy Wadsworth, and Kandy Wright

Lee County Master Gardener Plant Sale

Each year, as springtime rolls around, many people wonder what they can do to improve their garden, yard, or landscaping. Lee County Master Gardeners have a solution—their annual plant sale. Held every May for the past 15 years, the plant sale is staffed with eager and knowledgeable Master Gardeners. Attendees buy plants and receive research-based education to have a successful growing season. Master Gardeners also include informational cards in their offerings to provide attendees with instruction and guidance on plant care at home. At the sale, Master Gardeners work hard to not only offer a wide variety of perennials, trees, vegetable starts, houseplants, and annuals, they also make sure everyone leaves the event with practical information on many different aspects of horticulture.

Helping Each Other Grow

In December, the Lee County Master Gardener program added four new members. Jessica Gardner, Justin Hohlen, Lori Kilgore, and Mardelle Slain completed all requirements to become active Master Gardeners. In addition, several members were recognized for milestone achievements. Tom Cartwright, Mary Kathryn Stenzel, Judy Truckenbrod, and Donna Waters received achievement pins for providing gardening education to Lee County for 15 years. Joyce Bettner was recognized for 20 years of active service as a Master Gardener. Nancy Strock and her husband Ken began volunteering with Illinois Extension in 2000. Ken served for 20 years until his passing in 2020. Nancy continues her dedication today, celebrating 25 years of participation. The Lee County Master Gardener program continues to grow, sharing a love of gardening and education throughout the community.



Strengthening skills and building bonds in the 4-H Dog SPIN Club

Building strong, healthy relationships between youth and their dogs is not always easy. Without guidance, families may struggle with obedience, safety, and responsible pet care. These challenges can lead to frustration for both kids and animals, limiting the chance for positive bonding. The Dog Care and Obedience SPIN Club in Carroll County was created to strengthen these skills and help youth become confident, responsible dog owners.

4-H members from across the county came together to build positive, heartwarming relationships with their dogs—relationships rooted in trust, responsibility, communication, and a little friendly competition. Throughout the year, youth explored everything from basic obedience, such as walking politely on a leash and learning to sit on command, to the fast-paced fun of the agility course. They also learned about responsible pet ownership, grooming, and how to read canine body language. Each meeting blended hands-on learning with engaging activities that helped kids and dogs grow in confidence and success.

One of the most meaningful results of the club was witnessing the special bond that formed between youth and their dogs. As kids improved their handling skills, their dogs responded with increased focus, trust, and enthusiasm. For many families, club sessions became a place to relax, laugh, and feel proud of the progress being made—tail wags included. Challenges still popped up: tired pups, confusing commands, and the occasional distraction. But the encouraging environment helped youth build leadership, empathy, teamwork, and resilience, all core values of 4-H.

The success of this program would not be possible without the dedication of members, volunteers, families, and very patient dogs. Youth gained lifelong skills and stronger bonds with their canine companions, setting the stage for another great year of learning and growth.



4-H member Katie Merboth waits for her turn on the agility course at the Carroll County 4-H dog show with her dog, Boone.



Small club, big impact: meet the Pacaneers

In January 2025, a new and exciting 4-H Special Interest Club was born in Lee County—the Pacaneers Alpaca Club. Many youth have limited opportunities to learn about livestock care or develop confidence through hands-on animal experiences, which can limit their connection to agriculture. The Pacaneers club was created to give youth meaningful, accessible experiences with alpacas—gentle, curious animals that many in our community may not know much about.

Founded by Mary Curtis, owner of Compass Rose Ranch, the club offers youth a hands-on introduction to animal care, showmanship, and training young alpacas to be comfortable on halter. After enrolling her daughter, Sarah, in 4-H, Mary proposed starting an alpaca-focused club to help youth build responsibility, communication skills, and confidence through showing.

Though small in numbers this first year, with just three dedicated members, the Pacaneers have already made a big impact. Members participated in several state and regional shows, including the Ogle County 4-H Llama Show in August. They competed in showmanship, costume, public relations, and obstacle classes, showcasing their growing skills and the versatility of alpacas.

One of the most exciting aspects of this club is its accessibility. Youth do not need to own an alpaca to participate. Through Mary's generosity, members can borrow alpacas from Compass Rose Ranch, removing financial and logistical barriers that often prevent youth from exploring livestock projects. This arrangement benefits both youth and animals—the alpacas gain valuable handling experience, and the 4-H'ers gain confidence, responsibility, and a deeper connection to agriculture.

The Pacaneers Alpaca Club demonstrates how 4-H and Illinois Extension continue to offer inclusive, innovative programs that connect youth with caring adults, unique learning experiences, and opportunities to grow into capable, confident leaders.



Sarah Curtis and her alpaca at the Ogle County 4-H Llama Show.



Left: Third place Junior Horse Bowl Team; Right: Allison Burrs with her first place award at the National 4-H Horse Public Speaking Contest.

Members of the Boots 'N Spurs Horse Club had successful year

Allison Burrs began her 4-H journey in 2017 when she was 10 years old. That summer, Allison and her sisters welcomed horses into their lives and were excited to learn everything they could about them. Allison joined the Boots 'N Spurs Horse Club, began showing horses, and soon became involved in competing in Horse Bowl and Hippology. Some of her favorite memories include late-night practices and trips to competitions with her best friends. A true highlight of Allison's 4-H experience was the opportunity to compete at the national level in Horse Bowl, Hippology, and Horse Public Speaking in 2025.

There's no doubt that 4-H has played a significant role in shaping Allison's future. Her involvement in 4-H and passion for horses have led her to pursue a career in horse training, while also creating memories and friendships that will last a lifetime. Through Horse Bowl and Hippology, Allison has grown not only as a horsewoman, but also as a person. The leadership, public speaking, responsibility, and teamwork skills she has developed will stay with her long after her 4-H years come to an end.

Allison wasn't the only one to find success in 2025. The Carroll-Whiteside Junior Horse Bowl Team placed third overall in the state competition, with Devin Burrs finishing second individually and McKenzie Merboth placing tenth. Other team members included Quinn Temple, Paisley Hardt, and Katie Merboth. At the state Hippology contest, Abigail Schmidt placed seventh in the senior division, Devin Burrs earned first place in the intermediate division, and McKenzie Merboth placed seventh in the junior division.

Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside 4-H

 **581**
4-H Club Memberships

 **69**
Adult 4-H Volunteers

 **1,933**
4-H Fair Exhibits

Brian and Mackenzie Treadwell inducted into 4-H Hall of Fame

Brian and Mackenzie Treadwell are former 4-H members who have become dedicated leaders of the Lee County 4-H Goat Club. Their journey from youth participants to Hall of Fame honorees is a powerful testament to the lasting impact of 4-H and its role in shaping future leaders.

Since the club's founding in 2019, Brian and Mackenzie have served as Goat Show Superintendents, Special Interest Club leaders, and mentors to Lee County youth. Their leadership has helped transform the Goat Club into one of the fastest-growing livestock programs in the area. In just four years, entries in the goat show have nearly doubled, including a nearly 40% increase over the past two years alone. This growth reflects not only the popularity of the program but also the enthusiasm and dedication of local youth.

Brian and Mackenzie's recent induction into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame is a well-deserved recognition of their passion, leadership, and commitment to youth development. Their efforts have not only strengthened the Goat Club but have also created lasting opportunities for young people to learn, lead, and thrive.



Brian and Mackenzie Treadwell accept their 4-H Hall of Fame award at the 2025 Illinois State Fair.



CARING KIDS, CONFIDENT SITTERS: PREPARING YOUTH FOR BABYSITTING SUCCESS

Finding a reliable babysitter can be a challenge, and watching someone’s small child for the first time can be intimidating. The Caring Kids, Confident Sitters workshop helped young teens gain skills needed to have a successful first babysitting experience, readying 30 area youth to take on babysitting jobs. Participants practiced infant care skills such as diaper changing, safe holding techniques, and how to prepare safe snacks by cutting foods such as grapes and hot dogs lengthwise into appropriate toddler sizes. They also explored safety practices to consider in the kitchen and outside areas. Youth discussed communicating with parents and received a form to document information such as routines, allergies, and contact details. When asked about the workshop’s impact, participants noted new skills applied during babysitting jobs, demonstrating success in building confidence and practical skills of workshop participants.



Youth practice cutting foods into appropriate sizes for toddlers.



Cloverbuds learn about dyeing flowers.

CLOVERBUDS GET CREATIVE WITH COLOR

Young children thrive when they’re given chances to explore science, creativity, and hands-on learning in ways that feel playful and engaging. The 4-H Cloverbud Creations with Color workshop created that space, inviting youth ages 5 to 7 to discover the joy of learning through color-focused activities. Across two days, kids made colorful toilet paper roses, mixed rainbow snacks, created sand art, dyed flowers, and experimented with a Skittles color spread activity. They also shared nature color clipboards they completed at home, extending learning beyond the workshop. Led by longtime 4-H volunteer Casey Stichter, the program blended science, art, and fun in ways that sparked excitement and discovery. Children left with a stronger sense of creativity, confidence, and curiosity. They were encouraged to keep exploring color in nature throughout the seasons, building on the skills they gained through Illinois Extension’s support.



HOLIDAY CREATIVITY AND STEAM

Children today often have limited chances to dig into hands-on creativity, problem solving, and STEAM exploration outside of school. When those opportunities are scarce, kids can miss out on discovering new interests and building confidence in their abilities. Illinois Extension’s Holiday STEAM workshop brought area youth together at Harvest Time Bible Church for a morning of science, technology, engineering, art, and math exploration. The space transformed into creation stations: kids learned woodburning, built PVC launchers to send marshmallows flying at a holiday display, mixed lip balm, and crafted catapults. Younger children, ages 5 to 7, enjoyed their own “12 Days of Christmas” activities, from dove ornaments to handprint winter swans. Youth left with handmade goodies to share with their families and, more importantly, with the confidence that they can create, experiment, and try new things. The workshop sparked curiosity, encouraged problem solving, and showed kids that learning can be joyful and hands-on.



Wren Dirks works on a wood-burning ornament.



Hometown Leaders listen in on a Lee County board committee meeting.

YOUTH EXPERIENCE COUNTY GOVERNMENT DURING THE LEE COUNTY HOMETOWN LEADER PROGRAM

Young people benefit when they understand how local government works and see themselves as part of the civic process. The 4-H Hometown Leaders program created that opportunity by engaging teens with direct experiences with county government. The opening session, Intro to County Government, offered an in-depth look at county operations and departments. Youth identified issues facing their community and shared proposed solutions directly with county board members. They then attended two committee meetings and a full board meeting, gaining firsthand insight into decision making and board responsibilities. The program concluded with visits to eight county departments, where youth explored each office’s role, learned about career paths, and engaged with staff. These experiences strengthened civic understanding, built confidence, and sparked meaningful conversations with local leaders—helping students see themselves as future contributors to their communities.





Seedling Explorers: where learning takes root

Today, many children have limited opportunities to explore nature, understand where food comes from, or experience working in a garden. Without early exposure, youth may miss out on developing curiosity, healthy eating habits, and a connection to the natural world. Illinois Extension staff created the Seedling Explorers program at the Sterling Township Gardens to give pre-K youth meaningful outdoor learning experiences that build confidence, sensory awareness, and an understanding of how food grows.

From discovering vibrant “magic beans” inside Scarlet Runner Bean pods to growing pumpkins and finding bugs, youth were immersed in outdoor exploration. They dug in mud, planted seeds, picked vegetables, and learned when and how to harvest tomatoes—avoiding green ones, then sneaking a few for a snack. They observed plant growth, visiting insects, and the fruits their care produced, engaging all their senses with new sounds, scents, textures, and flavors.

Each morning of the 12-week program began with a storybook about gardening or nature, followed by a short activity before heading into the garden. Marveling over strawberries and ripening watermelon became a shared lesson in patience. Harvesting their own produce was a first-time experience for many, and youth took home what they picked. Extra produce was donated to the Sauk Valley Food Bank, extending the program’s impact into the community.

Lovingly called “garden club,” the Seedling Explorers program received enthusiastic feedback from youth and parents. As a free, drop-in program, children came and went as schedules allowed, with several regulars returning week after week. By season’s end, each explorer stamped their passport and left with new skills, confidence, and a deeper connection to the natural world.



Seedling Explorers examine different seed colors and shapes.



Homegrown Healthy participants harvest produce.

Homegrown Healthy addresses food and nutrition insecurity



Households often struggle with food and nutrition insecurity due to limited access to fresh produce or the skills needed to grow and prepare it. Without these skills, families may rely more heavily on processed foods and miss opportunities to improve their health. The 10-week Homegrown Healthy gardening program was developed to help community members gain confidence in growing, harvesting, and using fresh produce. Twenty-one participants completed the program in 2025.

The program offered hands-on activities, make and takes, weekly recipe samples, and produce from the program in Morrison. Radishes were a big hit—several participants took home seed packets and were excited to learn they could plant a second fall crop. Tomatoes were another favorite. Participants shared that the practice in class helped them care for their at-home plants more effectively, resulting in larger harvests.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Some participants expressed interest in becoming Master Gardeners, while others reported making the class recipes for their families. Even seasoned gardeners planned to implement new techniques next year based on what they learned. Participants also requested an advanced class and a farm or greenhouse tour for future program sessions.

Survey results indicated that knowledge of growing, preparing, and storing produce increased from moderate to high. Program graduates received a hydroponic kit to grow fresh produce at home during colder months and a "Five Ingredients or Less" cookbook. Participants walked away with practical skills, greater confidence in using fresh foods, and new tools to support healthier eating at home.

Food, Agriculture, and Environment



17,796
Program
Attendees



449
Educational
Sessions



Students learn that health rocks

Our lives are full of choices, and the decisions youth make today can significantly influence their health as adults. Dixon Madison fifth grade students participated in 4-H Health Rocks sessions during physical education classes, focusing on decision-making skills and healthy lifestyle choices.

Students learned a five-step decision-making process: identify the decision, brainstorm options, select the best choice, weigh positives and negatives, and consider short- and long-term consequences. They also explored how emotions, peers, social media, and role models impact choices and practiced focusing on facts to make informed decisions.

Survey results from 140 participants highlight the program's success:



95%
agree their choices affect their future



96%
said they could refuse cigarettes if offered



94%
committed to helping peers avoid alcohol and drugs

By equipping youth with practical tools and knowledge, Health Rocks helps them navigate challenging situations and build lifelong healthy habits. This collaboration between Illinois Extension educators and PE teachers demonstrates the power of prevention education in shaping positive behaviors.

Health Rocks includes additional interactive sessions that discuss stress management, brain health, and body systems, including respiratory and cardiac. Students also participate in a trip to OSF Saint Katharine Medical Center, where they learn about healthcare careers and visit four departments: imaging,



A student observes a microscope slide in the laboratory at OSF Saint Katharine Medical Center.

dietary, speech therapy, and laboratory. One teacher shared, “I look forward to this field trip every year and appreciate the learning opportunity for my students.”

Supported by a \$1,500 Illinois 4-H grant sponsored by Altria, Health Rocks continues to encourage youth to make choices that lead to healthier futures.

Students crunch into healthy eating

Limited exposure to fresh produce and nutrition education can make it difficult for children to build healthy eating habits. Without early, positive experiences with fruits and vegetables, youth may be less willing to try new foods, which can contribute to poor lifelong nutrition.

In response, Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed staff partnered with Washington and Jefferson Schools in Dixon to engage approximately 700 students in the Great Apple Crunch, a Midwest-wide celebration of local foods and healthy eating. Students learned where apples come from, why fruits matter for their health, and how choosing local produce supports area farmers. With apples donated by Selmi's Orchard, students sampled different varieties, discussed flavor and texture, and voted for their favorite—ultimately choosing the sweet apple.

Illinois Extension staff expanded the learning through a Carrot Crunch spin-off event. Acting as “nutrition detectives,” students examined carrot seeds with magnifying glasses, explored how vegetables grow, and tasted fresh carrots with and without ranch dressing. The playful, hands-on approach encouraged curiosity and reduced hesitancy around trying new foods. One student who insisted he disliked carrots agreed to take a bite and immediately announced, “Now, I like carrots!” Another eagerly suggested a future celery crunch activity.

Through these activities, students gained a deeper understanding of where their food comes from, increased their willingness to try new fruits and vegetables, and strengthened healthy habits in a fun, community-building environment.



Illinois Extension staff serve carrots to students. Students voted and ultimately decided they preferred carrots with ranch dip.





Lunch and Learn addresses challenges

A growing challenge for food pantries and community organizations is that many clients struggle with food insecurity shaped by past trauma. Without trauma-informed volunteers, these individuals may feel judged or unsafe, limiting their ability to access needed resources.

To address this, Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed and Family Life staff provided a “Trauma & Food” Lunch and Learn for volunteers from food pantries, food banks, the YWCA, and other partners. Educators Kara Schweitzer and Taylor Louscher taught how trauma influences food behaviors and how compassionate, trauma-informed practices improve client experiences. As a result, volunteers reported greater understanding and confidence, strengthening their ability to create welcoming, supportive environments for community members facing food insecurity.

I gained so much knowledge that will help me work with pantry guests.
Food Pantry Volunteer



Food pantry volunteers learn how past trauma can influence how resources are accessed and lead to increased food insecurity.



Creating Better Health at Whiteside County Senior Center

Limited nutrition knowledge, rising food costs, and uncertainty about how to use pantry ingredients make it difficult for adults to prepare healthy meals at home. Without support, these challenges can lead to poor nutrition and increased food insecurity. To address this, Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed staff delivered Create Better Health, an adult nutrition and cooking class, at the Whiteside County Senior Center. The program included cooking demonstrations, tastings, budgeting strategies, and practical ways to use produce commonly available at local food pantries. Through guided discussion and hands-on learning, participants gained confidence, learned affordable meal ideas, and discovered new ways to stretch their food dollars.

Food and supply drives help to fulfill basic needs



Many local families struggle to afford essential household items, from nutritious food to basic cleaning supplies. In May 2025, Illinois Extension organized two coordinated efforts to address these needs. Healthy food is a crucial part of a balanced diet, yet many food-insecure families struggle to access nutritious foods. The Nourish Your Neighbor Food Drive helped bridge this gap by collecting non-perishable food items for distribution.

A clean home is essential for health and well-being, yet many families facing financial strain must place cleaning supplies far down the list of necessities. The Sparkle and Shine Cleaning Supply Drive filled this need by collecting essential household cleaning items.

Together, these efforts collected 315 pounds of food and cleaning supplies, valued at \$620.55, which were donated to the Dixon Community Food Pantry, helping ensure local families have access to essential items during times of financial strain.



Food pantry volunteer, Josie Whaley, graciously accepts the donations collected through Illinois Extension efforts.

Youth gain skills in Illinois Junior Chef



Many youth lack basic nutrition knowledge and cooking skills, which can lead to unhealthy eating habits that persist into adulthood. Without early skill-building, families may continue to rely on processed foods or struggle to prepare balanced meals. To address this, Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed staff delivered the Illinois Junior Chef program at Coloma Homes for youth ages 8–13. Extension staff taught the five food groups and hands-on skills like mixing, measuring, and chopping using simple tools families are likely to have. Youth prepared two healthy recipes each session and learned how to make nutritious meals safely and confidently at home. As a result, participants gained practical skills, increased willingness to try new foods, and developed greater independence in helping their families prepare healthy meals.



Three-part series promotes healthy living and aging

Aging can pose a variety of challenges and opportunities. With the older adult population on the rise, it is important to provide resources and support to help individuals cope with the challenges and embrace the opportunities of aging.

To meet this need, Illinois Extension offered a Living and Aging Well series in collaboration with Lee County Council on Aging. This series featured four monthly workshops taught by Kara Schweitzer, family life educator, on timely, research-based topics related to wellness and aging.

The series kicked off with I'm Positive, I'm Aging. In this session, participants explored research-based characteristics of successful aging including optimism, maintaining friendships, and living a healthy lifestyle. Ageism and the impact of societal views on aging were also discussed.

The next session of the series, Someday is Today: Live Your Bucket List, focused on the benefits of goal setting and strategies for creating a bucket list—a list of things to accomplish or experience in life. Participants were encouraged to create their own bucket list and identify concrete steps to make their goals a reality.

During the third session, Who Gets Grandma's Yellow Pie Plate, participants discovered ways to talk to family members about the difficult subject of distributing family items with emotional and sentimental value while keeping relationships intact.

In the final session of the series, Looking at the Funny Side: the Value of Humor, participants explored the physical and psychological benefits of humor and discussed ways to use humor effectively when dealing with stress and change.

Feedback on the series was positive, with 100% of participants agreeing that the series met their needs, 97% planning to use information they learned in the series, and 97% planning to share information they learned with others. Participants identified actions they plan to take because of this series including socializing more, learning new things, getting started on goals, talking with family about plans for treasured items, and incorporating humor into daily life.

Tai chi participants demonstrate the "commencement" move. Tai chi can be practiced sitting or standing, making it an accessible choice for improving mobility and strength.

Tai chi program expands offerings and outreach

According to the National Institute on Aging, more than one in four people aged 65 and older fall each year. Research shows that the likelihood of a fall and the severity of health problems following a fall both increase with age. Many people are afraid of falling and desire a low-impact form of exercise that can increase physical fitness and balance. Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention is an evidence-based program that promotes strength, balance, and flexibility through a sequence of slow, smooth movements.

Illinois Extension introduced the Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention program in 2024 and expanded it in 2025 to meet the health needs of even more community members. Tai chi programming was provided at Self-Help Enterprises and the Whiteside County Senior Center in Sterling and Winifred Knox Memorial Library in Franklin Grove. Kara Schweitzer, family life educator, received additional training to increase the program's reach through Seated Tai Chi for Arthritis. This is a modified version of the tai chi program, which supports those with pain, chronic conditions, and/or mobility challenges through a safe and accessible form of exercise.

Working my body in exercise allows me more freedom to live my life.

Tai Chi Participant

Tai chi is a popular program that has demonstrated impact on health and well-being, with 73% of participants reporting improved balance, 64% reporting reduced fear of falling, and 82% reporting intent to continue practicing tai chi independently. Additionally, 64% of participants gained new social connections and friendships with others during the program.





WORKPLACE WEDNESDAY CONNECTS EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS

A strong local pipeline of qualified workers is essential, yet high school teachers and counselors often face challenges in understanding the skills employers expect from new graduates. Regional Office of Education #47 launched Workplace Wednesday to give educators the chance to visit businesses to gain firsthand insight into workforce expectations. These visits help translate employer needs into classroom guidance and curricula. As a featured business in 2025, Illinois Extension highlighted its role as both an employer and a partner in workforce development to local educators. Presentations included career pathways within Illinois Extension, the history and mission of the organization, and how 4-H programming equips youth with skills that align with workforce needs. For Illinois Extension, the importance of building strong connections with educators who shape the region’s future workforce was reinforced. As teachers gain new perspectives, students receive better guidance, and communities strengthen their talent pipeline, these outcomes illustrate how Extension’s partnerships contribute to long-term economic vitality in northwestern Illinois.



POVERTY SIMULATIONS BUILD AWARENESS ACROSS NORTHWESTERN ILLINOIS

Understanding the realities of poverty can be difficult without lived experience. As part of a CDC Action Grant, Illinois Extension hosted three poverty simulations across northwestern Illinois. In both Carroll and Whiteside counties, these half-day programs gave 137 community members a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by more than 12,000 residents in this three-county region who live at or near the poverty line. Using the Missouri Community Action Network model, each simulation places participants into roles representing households with limited financial resources. Participants were tasked with keeping jobs, caring for children, paying rent or mortgages, buying groceries, and managing unexpected setbacks. The exercise highlighted how quickly families can find themselves in crisis when resources are scarce. By fostering empathy and understanding, these simulations help northwestern Illinois residents recognize the barriers faced by neighbors in need. More importantly, they inspire participants to consider how they can work together to build stronger support systems within their communities and create pathways out of poverty.



Poverty simulation participants cash in their pay checks and try to keep up with loans at the bank.



ROCK FALLS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT THE REAL WORLD

Many young people enter adulthood without a clear understanding of financial responsibilities, leaving them unprepared to manage money, plan for the future, or make informed career and life decisions. Without these skills, students face financial stress and limited opportunities. To address this, over 70 students at Rock Falls High School participated in the 4-H Welcome to the Real World program. Students learned about budgeting, bank accounts, credit cards, and credit scores, and then applied their knowledge in a hands-on simulation. They selected a career and managed a monthly budget, covering housing, insurance, food, and other expenses. The impact was significant. More than 85% of students reported gaining a better understanding of real-world costs. One student said, “I liked how we were able to pick a salary from what our real future career was and not just a set budget. This made it more realistic.” Another shared, “It gave me more knowledge about the real world out there. Now I know I for sure want to go to college.” Immersive learning experiences like this equip youth with critical skills, build confidence, and prepare them for a financially responsible future.

EXTENSION COUNCIL MEMBERS

Thank you to the individuals who serve on Extension Council. The Extension Council guides Extension staff when determining programming and outreach efforts.

Carroll County

- Deeann Kramer, Thomson
- Lee Reese, Lanark

Lee County

- Jennifer Lang, Dixon
- Eileen Piper, Amboy
- Lupita Serrano, Dixon
- Karen Stenzel, Amboy
- Emily Zimmerman, Dixon

Whiteside County

- Gordon Kelm, Tampico
- Teresa Galloway, Galt
- Abbey DeShane, Erie
- Pam Martinez, Rock Falls
- Abby Noble, Rock Falls
- Cilvia Rivera, Sterling
- Daniel Swihart, Sterling



Lindsay Young: 2025 4-H Alumni Award Winner

Lindsay Young exemplifies compassionate care—both in her career as a nurse practitioner and as an engaged civic volunteer. Throughout her life, she has used the skills she developed as an active Whiteside County 4-H member to positively impact her communities. Lindsay’s commitment to service and leadership earned her the 2025 Illinois 4-H Alumni Award.

In her career, Lindsay has continually sought to grow professionally, earning successive degrees in her nursing profession, taking on leadership and mentorship roles in the workplace, and sharing her knowledge with other health care professionals as a conference presenter.

As an engaged and selfless volunteer, Lindsay has served people in her community including 4-H’ers in Illinois and Minnesota as well as hundreds of people internationally through her involvement with numerous medical mission trips.

One example of Lindsay’s service-focused growth trajectory is when she progressed from a teen participant of a service project at the Springfield Ronald McDonald House during a 4-H youth leadership conference, to serving as an ambassador, valued volunteer, and current secretary for the Board of Trustees at the Ronald McDonald House in Rochester, Minnesota. Today, Lindsay prepares meals, leads family activities, and provides emotional support to children and families who, in a time of uncertainty, call the Ronald McDonald House their home away from home.

In giving back to the organization she learned so much from, Lindsay shares her knowledge with today’s 4-H’ers by showing



Lindsay Young accepts her award at the 2025 Illinois State Fair.

them how to plan a demonstration or meeting, how to organize workers for volunteer roadside cleanups, or how to operate a lunch stand at the county fair. She has encouraged these same 4-H members as they show their projects at Achievement Days or 4-H Shows.

Lindsay truly is a model 4-H ambassador—someone who effectively plans, organizes, evaluates, and leads with empathy, energy, and a teaching focus—in her career and in her life because of the skills she gained through 4-H. Her dedication and impact shine brightly, making her a truly deserving recipient of the 2025 Illinois 4-H Alumni Award.

My 4-H years taught me all this.
Lindsay Young

DONOR LISTING

Thank you to the individuals and businesses who locally supported our funding efforts in 2025.

1st Gateway Credit Union	Dixon Township	Kiwanis Club of Sterling	Ryan and Rory Miller Foundation
Adolph Red Angus	Eastland Feed & Grain Inc.	Lake Carroll Women's Club	Sauk Valley Area Chamber
Allan Esgar Memorial	Elkhorn Grove Township	Lee County Extension Foundation	Sawyer Family
Bloch Family	Flowers Etc.	Lee County Pork Producers	Scotts Electric Inc.
Boehle Family	Hahnaman Township	McCaulley Family	Sterling Federal Bank
Bradford Victor Adams Mutual Insurance	Hall Family	McCormick's Nursery & Landscaping	United Hairlines
Brewster Cheese Company	Hanford Insurance	Meusel's Dairy Delite	West Point Tree Farm
CGH Medical Center	In Memory of Charles Ramsdell	Morrison Family	Willow Creek Township
Chadwick Lamplighters	In Memory of Otto & Thelma Oleson	Peterson Farm	Woodland Township
Clark Carroll Insurance Agency	Jensen Family	Rock Falls Township High School Activity Fund	Young Family
Community State Bank	Keim Family	Rock River Trail and Horseman Association	
Dickson Family	Kenney Family		

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