



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

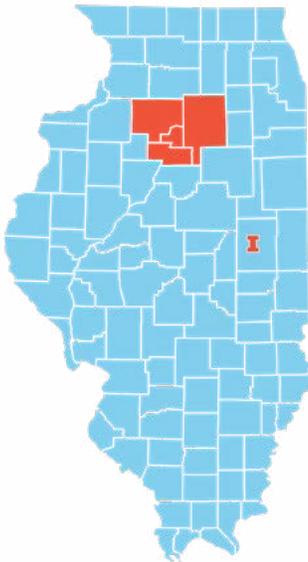


Serving Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Erin Orwig
County Director



Resilient Together: Staff, Partners, and Community

For 2025, the word that keeps coming to mind to reflect our staff and programming is resiliency. 2025 brought many changes to funding, which required changes to our programs as well as those of our partner agencies. Staff continued to provide high-quality, research-based programs through times of uncertainty and transformations. We appreciate our partners who work with us to enhance and educate our communities.

Please like and follow our Facebook page (University of Illinois Extension: Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall & Putnam counties) to be aware of the program schedule and view pictures of staff in the communities. It will make you realize the wide range of events and programs that occur in the four counties.

Enjoy the pictures of people making salsa, learning about the Mediterranean diet, harvesting community gardens, identifying frog calls, and learning new skills in the kitchen. Along with our in-person classes, there are also many opportunities for online classes given by Extension staff around the state.

We greatly appreciate all our participants, partners, volunteers, and donors. We could not continue to grow and provide our communities with such high levels of programming without all of them.

Erin Orwig
County Director

Cover photo: 4-H participants prepare their drones for competition.

Photo by Karina Delgado.

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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Ready, Set, Fly into the Future!



4-H youth explore drones and STEM careers

When the 4-H Drone Club launched, the goal was simple: give youth a chance to learn new technology and see where it could take them.

Thanks to a generous grant from Compeer Financial, Illinois Extension's 4-H purchased three drone kits, launching a learning adventure for more than 25 youth across the region. Participants explored flight fundamentals and explored drone use in agriculture and other careers.

The program wrapped up with a drone competition, where seven teams showcased their skills: navigating obstacle courses, performing “crop applications,” and demonstrating teamwork, creativity, and precision. Almost 70 people gathered at the Second Story Teen Center in Princeton to cheer on the teams. The teen center serves at-risk youth in the community, and Illinois Extension has partnered with the center to bring STEM programming to those youth.

By the end of the program, youth walked away with new confidence and a better understanding of how drones are used in agriculture and other careers. With support from community partners, the 4-H Drone Club opened the door for continued STEM opportunities across the region.



Learn more about 4-H
go.illinois.edu/4HBLMP

The kids inspired me to dive deeper into drone technology and the innovations shaping our future. While I taught them the fundamentals of flight, regulations, and how drones are transforming agriculture and career pathways, they showed me just how quickly youth and technology can soar. Their curiosity and capability over the last couple of months far exceeded my expectations and will leave a lasting impact on all of our lives.

Shasta Hladovcak, 4-H youth development educator



Shasta Hladovcak, 4-H youth development educator, helps 4-H drone competition participants with their drones.

Bureau County 4-H preparing youth to become beyond ready

Bureau County 4-H strengthened community connections and expanded youth learning opportunities through new and ongoing partnerships across the county. New collaborations this year included the Second Story Teen Center Drone Club and the John F. Kennedy Elementary School Garden. Continued programming served youth through the Mindful Mechanic Program at BEST School in Tiskilwa, Logan Junior High fifth grade classrooms, after school STEM programs at Bureau Valley and Ladd Elementary Schools, library-based STEM programs, and community events throughout Bureau County.

In partnership with SNAP-Ed, Bureau County 4-H offered a Gardening Special Interest Club for students in the John F. Kennedy Elementary Life Skills classroom. Throughout the spring, youth explored plant growth, soil health, and the nutrients needed for a successful garden. Participants gained hands-on experience assembling a raised bed, planting, caring for, and harvesting fresh produce. Learning continued into the summer when SNAP hosted Illinois Junior Chefs. Youth used produce grown in the garden to prepare nutritious recipes, strengthening their understanding of healthy eating and basic cooking skills.

Through strong partnerships and experiential learning, Bureau County 4-H continues to provide youth with meaningful, real-world opportunities that prepare them to be beyond ready for their futures while positively serving their community.



4-H participants harvest vegetables from their garden in Bureau County.

Marshall-Putnam 4-H Learn Grow Share SPIN Club grows food and community

Since winter, Learn Grow Share SPIN Club members met regularly to explore topics such as seed starting, soil health, garden planning, beneficial insects, nutrient needs, wildlife management, and more. By applying the skills they learned, the club empowered youth to grow food, develop leadership skills, and connect with their community through agriculture.

Much of the club's produce was donated to two community Blessing Boxes: one at Henry United Methodist Church and another next to the library in McNabb, serving families in two counties with access to fresh, healthy food. More than 742 pounds of produce were harvested and donated by youth members.

"This season wasn't just about gardening; it was about growth in every sense," says Bethany Harrison, SPIN club leader. "Our youth showed real dedication, and the impact they've made in the community is something to be proud of."

The season ended on a high note with a cookout and pumpkin harvest, bringing families and supporters together to celebrate the club's accomplishments.

Bethany Harrison and Anne Scheel, 4-H youth development coordinator, are already looking ahead to next year's gardening season. Plans for the upcoming season include expanded in-bed irrigation, increased outreach, and new opportunities for youth to engage in learning and community service.



4-H participants plant seeds during planting day in Marshall-Putnam County.

2025 4-H Program Participation



933
4-H Club Memberships



756
4-H Unique Members



54
4-H Unique Adult Volunteers



5,184
Hours by Adult 4-H Volunteers



Illinois youth expanding leadership at National 4-H Congress

Ten Illinois teens, including LaSalle County 4-H member Myracle Johnson and Bureau County 4-H member Lydia Hardy, represented the state at National 4-H Congress, a five-day national conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Selected for their leadership, service, and 4-H accomplishments, delegates joined other youth from across the country to participate in workshops, hear from speakers, and connect with peers.

Throughout the conference, delegates explored leadership development, teamwork, diversity, advocacy, and cultural awareness while building lasting connections. Johnson shared that one of her favorite experiences was meeting other 4-H members and learning about their individual 4-Her's paths. "I loved getting to meet and share interests with 4-Hers from different states," Johnson says.

Delegates also took part in a community service project at the Atlanta History Museum, helping remove invasive English ivy and learning about Georgia's native plants. In addition to educational programming and service, youth participated in International Night and celebratory events highlighting the national impact of 4-H.

Supported by the Illinois 4-H Foundation and Nann Armstrong, the experience helped Illinois delegates grow confidence, strengthen leadership skills, and return home inspired to lead in their communities. As Johnson reflects, "4-H will forever hold a special place in my heart."



"I had a wonderful time getting to know the Illinois delegation and making memories with them, especially the fun star pictures I encouraged us to take," Johnson says.



Embryology in the Classroom's baby chicks ready to meet students.

Students watch life unfold

Embryology in the Classroom has been a long-standing part of Illinois Extension's 4-H and Ag in the Classroom programs, and it continues to be an annual highlight throughout Marshall and Putnam counties.

In spring, 13 classrooms participated in the four-week program. Participating classrooms were in LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam counties. Two of the 13 classrooms were first-time participants, and both enrolled in the program at the recommendation of others.

For many of the teachers, it is an annual experience. In Putnam County Elementary School, the incoming third graders visited during hatching week 2024. Those same students were able to experience the program as third graders this year and see the whole process, which they had looked forward to all year.

Participating classrooms covered kindergarten through eighth grade, with at least 470 youth experiencing the lifecycle of chickens. Teachers are provided with an incubator, an automatic egg turner, fertilized chicken eggs, curriculum materials, and classroom resources, along with technical support. Over the next three weeks, teachers and students will learn through observation, incubation, and embryonic development projects.

Teachers keep coming back and are willing to promote this program with their colleagues. Even with our marketing, the greatest advocates and promoters of Embryology in the Classroom are the personal testimonies.

Katharine Girone, Marshall-Putnam
Ag in the Classroom program coordinator



Learn more about Ag in the Classroom
go.illinois.edu/BLMPagclassroom



Farmers explore sustainability

From January through March 2025, Illinois Extension hosted the Sustainability on the Farm program series across Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam counties. This series was designed to address a critical need: helping farmers adopt practices that protect soil health, reduce nutrient loss, and enhance long-term farm sustainability.

Agricultural producers face increasing pressure to balance productivity with environmental stewardship. Many farmers are interested in practical, research-based strategies to implement conservation practices but lack access to localized education and peer support, or are unaware of the resources and funding opportunities available to them.

The five sessions were led by Illinois Extension and local industry professionals from organizations like The Wetlands Initiative, Pheasants Forever Quail Forever, American Farmland Trust, and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Each session provided expert guidance on sustainable ag practices, including cover crops, conservation tillage, wildlife habitat, edge-of-field practices, and cost-share programs. Participants left with actionable knowledge to integrate these practices into their operations. By fostering informed decision-making, this program series helped farmers improve profitability while protecting natural resources. By the end of the series, one program participant had already been approved for funding to restore a portion of their farm with native prairie, and another was pursuing the installation of a constructed wetland on their farm.

When farmers adopt conservation practices, the benefits extend beyond individual farms, improving water quality, enhancing wildlife habitat, and ensuring resilient food systems for future generations. Illinois Extension remains committed to providing educational resources and support to farmers and landowners in their pursuit of sustainable agriculture. Future programs and initiatives will continue to address the evolving needs of the agricultural community and promote responsible land stewardship.

2025 Ag Program Participation



73

Agriculture Educational Sessions



3,150

Agriculture Participants



Learn more about Agriculture programs
go.illinois.edu/BLMPag

Master Gardeners provide resources for inmates

Illinois Extension Master Gardener program brought its 'Tomato Troubles' workshop to the LaSalle County Jail. With a new garden in its first year, the project has given inmates in the drug treatment program a chance to learn new skills and take pride in their work.

The garden began this spring with donated plants from Bonnie Plant Farms in Ottawa. Inmates Hallan Brady, Derek Hornick, and Jovanny Castaneda rolled up their sleeves to handle planting and weeding. Their work included tying up tomato plants and trimming them at the bottom to keep the airflow.



Derek Hornick checks the progress of LaSalle County Jail's garden, where a variety of vegetables are thriving.

"This project has given our inmates in our drug treatment program another tool during their recovery to experience something they never thought they would do or care about," says LaSalle County Jail Superintendent Jason Edgcomb. "It helps them enjoy some of the simple things that living a sober life can present to them. They get excited to see what they have worked on produce so much harvest."

The Tomato Troubles workshop walked participants through how to spot plant problems and find solutions. The workshop included prevention tips on soil health, crop rotation, watering, mulching, pruning, staking, and airflow. Participants shared questions and observations, applying what they learned as they moved through the garden.

"Overall, it was a positive and practical program, helping participants strengthen gardening skills and build confidence in caring for their plants. I look forward to seeing how the garden grows in the future," says Master Gardener Coordinator Bettyann Harrison.



Master Naturalists provide critical data on frog and toad populations in LaSalle County



The Calling Frog Survey is a citizen science project that invites community members to learn how to identify frog calls and contribute valuable data to amphibian conservation efforts.

Before the Calling Frog Survey began, little was known about the distribution and status of amphibians in the region. Now the survey is providing important information to scientists and land managers who can use the data to conduct management and research that benefits amphibian populations.

In 2025, the Calling Frog Survey in LaSalle County grew significantly, expanding from two routes in 2024 to seven routes. The collected data provide critical insights into amphibian abundance and distribution, supporting conservation planning and land management decisions.

In 2025, nine volunteers from LaSalle County participated in the survey, recording more than 40 volunteer hours. They observed many of the 13 species of toads and frogs found in northern Illinois, including wood frogs, spring peepers, Northern Leopard frogs, gray tree frogs, and cricket frogs.

Chris Woeltje, Master Naturalist volunteer, began the first Calling Frog Survey routes in LaSalle County in 2024:

“For me, the most rewarding part of the frog surveys was discovering the unknown out in LaSalle County. Knowing we had a large population of cricket frogs was huge for me personally. Knowing that those frogs are all but gone from the Chicagoland area, but they are thriving at multiple sites here in LaSalle County is just the best.”

This expansion reflects the growing interest in environmental stewardship and the dedication of local volunteers. By participating, volunteers not only contribute valuable data but also deepen their connection to local ecosystems.

Master Naturalist volunteer Joann Bowman brought her 11-year-old grandson with her on her monitoring routes,



One of the many frogs identified by Master Naturalists.

stating, “We found it fun and rewarding to identify so many frogs in a 1-2 mile stretch of the I&M Canal. It was a great learning experience, and I’m planning on participating again next year.”

The Calling Frog Survey demonstrates how community involvement can drive meaningful scientific outcomes. Each observation helps scientists track changes in amphibian populations, which are key indicators of ecosystem health.

Through this project, volunteers become partners in conservation, ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy the rich biodiversity of the region.



29
Master Naturalist Volunteers



2,619
Master Naturalist Total Volunteer Hours



Building healthier communities through direct education, partnership, and systems change

Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed collaborated with local communities across Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall, and Putnam counties to strengthen conditions that support healthy eating and active living. In partnership with schools, food pantries, healthcare organizations, senior services, and community coalitions, Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed delivered short-term educational programs that collectively reached hundreds of youths and adults, contributing to lasting, community-driven change.

SNAP-Ed efforts combined direct nutrition education with policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) approaches, changes that quietly but powerfully shape everyday choices. This work unfolded in places where residents already live their lives: where children learn, where families access food, where older adults receive services, and where communities gather. By working across multiple schools, food pantry sites, and community settings in all four counties, Illinois Extension helped ensure that healthy options were not only taught but also supported by the environments in which choices are made.

Direct education focused on strengthening individual knowledge, skills, and confidence, while PSE strategies addressed the broader conditions that influence behavior. Together, these complementary approaches helped reduce systemic barriers and support healthier choices in food, physical activity, and overall well-being.

Illinois Extension's readiness-based approach helped prevent partner burnout while ensuring resources were directed to areas with the greatest long-term impact. SNAP-Ed efforts prioritized SNAP-Ed-eligible populations, culturally responsive engagement, and community-identified needs.

Across four counties, meaningful progress was achieved through initiatives such as the Illinois Extension Road Show, the ABCs Summer Learning Institute, the Walkability Academy, and Mendota's community engagement and grant successes,



Illinois Junior Chef graduates.

facilitated by the City of Mendota and Reimagine Mendota. Additional impact was achieved through partnerships with the Community Health Partnership of Illinois, OSF, Live Well Streator, Stronger You Bureau County, the River to River Food Pantry Coalition, the Bureau, LaSalle, Marshall, Putnam Resource Network, community gardens, and donation collaborations with the Illinois Valley Community Agriculture Department and Master Gardeners, the community donation garden at Northwest Elementary School in collaboration with the Green Thumb Club, 4-H, Nutrition and Wellness, and the Ruby Bridges Walk with Blackstone Elementary School. Collectively, these efforts increased community awareness, participation, and cross-sector collaboration in health and wellness.

While the SNAP-Ed program may be concluding, it leaves behind a strong foundation for deeper policy, systems, and environmental change. Communities are better connected, partners are more confident, and systems are increasingly aligned around shared wellness goals.



442
SNAP-Ed Classes



1,383
SNAP-Ed Participants



Participants assemble Snackle Boxes, learning healthy, balanced snacks for on-the-go.



Illinois Extension partnership brings healthier eating classes to local Farm Bureau members

The Nutrition and Wellness program supports healthier lifestyles by providing practical, skills-based education. A partnership with Farm Bureau leadership expanded this work by aligning programming with community interests and needs.

The collaboration began when Tiffany Moodie, Marshall-Putnam Farm Bureau director, connected with Illinois Extension after following local programs on social media and in the news. With support from an Illinois Farm Bureau Consumer Grant, Moodie partnered with Extension to offer programs that help participants make informed food choices in daily life.

Over three years, the partnership delivered 15 one-hour sessions to 312 participants. Topics gave participants practical skills they could apply at home. Programs focused on convenient, creative food ideas, including the Snack Box Ready session, which taught food safety and balanced snacks while featuring no-bake energy bites. Other programs demonstrated healthier charcuterie boards, seasonal produce, quick meals, and flavorful, reduced-sodium slow-cooker soups.

Evaluation results showed that participants moved from moderate to very high confidence in using nutrition information. Most said they were extremely likely to use program resources and share what they learned. Feedback highlighted appreciation for practical recipes and ideas that could be used immediately at home and with family. By combining Farm Bureau insight with Illinois Extension resources, the programs delivered nutrition education that supported healthier choices and extended impact beyond the classroom.



Illinois Extension and OSF HealthCare deliver diabetes education

Illinois Extension and OSF HealthCare partnered to provide research-based education to help community members prevent diabetes, manage it, or support loved ones living with diabetes. Nutrition and Wellness Educator Susan Glassman and OSF HealthCare Clinical Dietitian Jennifer Scully led the program, creating a supportive environment where participants could ask questions, discuss real-life challenges, and learn practical strategies for everyday decision-making.

The program focused on making informed food choices, including understanding nutrition labels, portion sizes, and carbohydrate intake. Participants explored ways to adapt meals and stay engaged in their personal health goals. Following the program, participants reported positive behavior changes, such as choosing healthier foods, reducing sugar intake, and paying closer attention to nutrition information.



Cooking the Mediterranean Way: Students and Illinois Extension expand nutrition impact

The Mediterranean diet was a central theme in the nutrition education series, helping participants include more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, and nuts while reducing processed foods and added sugars. One program, Cooking the Mediterranean Way, offered three sessions on appetizers and salads, meal planning and main entrees, and snacks and desserts, with cooking demonstrations and practical strategies participants could apply at home.

A key feature was collaboration with the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Assistant Professor Krystal L. Hodge and her Food and Nutrition students created recipes, handouts, flyers, shopping lists, ingredient swap guides, videos, and social media content, including a program video used in sessions. This partnership gave students experience while extending the program's reach and impact.

Participants reported increased knowledge of Mediterranean-style eating and greater confidence in planning and preparing meals. They tried new recipes, explored healthier ingredient substitutions, and gained practical tools for making balanced meals part of everyday life. Combining evidence-based education with student-developed resources supported healthier choices and demonstrated the value of community and university partnerships in creating meaningful learning opportunities.

Breadmaking connects health, skill, and tradition

Let It Dough is an annual breadmaking workshop led by Nutrition and Education Educator Susan Glassman. The program introduces participants to the art of homemade bread, showing how baking at home allows individuals to choose wholesome ingredients, avoid preservatives and allergens, and experiment with different flours. Participants learned essential food safety practices, proper bread temperatures, accurate measuring and kneading techniques, and how different flours affect fiber content and gluten development. The health benefits of homemade breads were also explored, giving participants the knowledge to make informed choices in their own kitchens.

Following the workshop, many participants planned to put their learning into action by using a thermometer, measuring ingredients accurately, and baking bread at home, carrying both skills and tradition forward.



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