



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

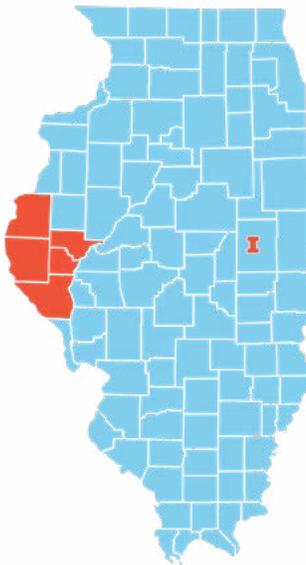


Serving Adams, Brown, Hancock, Pike, and Schuyler Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Shelby Crow
County Director



Message from the County Director

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We are proud to share highlights from our work over the past year and the positive impact our programs continue to have across the region.

If you have reviewed our reports in the past, you may notice that each year looks a little different. This reflects the commitment of staff serving Adams, Brown, Hancock, Pike, and Schuyler counties to continually develop new and innovative programming. Our programs are designed to meet the evolving needs of those living and working across our five-county area, and we adjust from year to year based on program evaluations and participant feedback.

Every three years, we conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to ensure we are offering relevant and responsive programs. This process allows us to review local data, engage with community partners, and assess our current offerings so we can adapt as community needs change. These efforts have contributed to strong participation, meaningful outcomes, and demonstrated success across our program areas.

A critical component of our success is our partnerships. We collaborate intentionally to avoid duplication of services and to fill gaps where needs exist. We are so grateful for these partnerships as they strengthen our reach,

enhance program quality, and help ensure that resources are used effectively.

University of Illinois Extension staff are deeply invested in their work because they are invested in their communities. They also live and work in these communities and work hard to improve the quality of life.

Finally, we could not do this work without our volunteers! We have more than 100 volunteers providing leadership to youth in the 4-H program, Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists providing countless hours improving and educating throughout our five counties. Much of this work is highlighted in the report but we cannot possibly capture nor overstate how deeply grateful we are for our volunteers and the lasting difference they make through their service.

Moving forward, we remain committed to building on this momentum—using data, partnerships, and community input to guide our efforts and ensure we continue to provide high-quality, relevant educational opportunities that support individuals, families, and communities across our five-county region.

We look forward to serving you in 2026!

Shelby Crow
County Director

Cover photo: 4-H member Lilyana Bliss exhibits swine at the Hancock County 4-H Fair.

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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Strategic Priority: Community Hands-on experiences inspire confidence and connection

When youth lack access to resources or guidance, exploring new interests can feel out of reach. Illinois Extension's youth development team is working to change that by creating hands-on experiences that open doors to learning, creativity, and confidence. These programs do not only teach skills—they build connections, inspire curiosity, and help young people see what is possible.

This year, those opportunities came to life through programs designed to spark discovery and growth. Super Saturday, now in its third year, has become a highly anticipated event for local 4-H members. Fifty-four youth from five counties gathered in Quincy for a day packed with interactive workshops. From rocket science and robotics to photography and baking, participants explored topics that challenged them to think, create, and learn by doing. "Super Saturday continues to grow, and it is exciting to see so many 4-H members eager to participate year after year," says Madeline Davis, 4-H program coordinator. The enthusiasm in the room was undeniable—proof that youth are hungry for opportunities to learn.

In Rushville, a Cake Decorating Workshop gave 13 participants—including five non-4-H youth—a chance to try something new. They learned decorating techniques, explored creative designs, and took home their own kits to keep practicing. "This is a great opportunity for youth to try something new, express their creativity, and learn a skill they can continue to build on," says

Kristin Huls, youth development educator. For many, it was an introduction to 4-H and the creativity behind food projects.

The youngest members found their place at Cloverbud Camps, where youth ages 5–7 rotated through stations filled with crafts, activities, and fair-ready projects. These camps help children gain confidence early and see themselves as part of something bigger. They leave with projects they can proudly display and a sense of belonging that sets the stage for future growth.

In June, Electricity School lit up imaginations as 63 youth learned about electrical safety and hands-on wiring. This program combined practical skills with important safety lessons, empowering youth with knowledge they can use at home and in future careers. For many, it was their first experience working with circuits—a skill that could spark an interest in STEM fields.

The impact goes beyond the workshop walls. Youth leave with more than projects—they gain confidence, problem-solving skills, and a vision for what they can achieve. Parents report that these experiences ignite conversations at home and encourage youth to explore new hobbies and career paths. For some, it's the first step toward leadership roles in 4-H and beyond.

Together, these programs share a common purpose: giving every child a chance to explore, learn, and grow—regardless of resources or background. By offering accessible, engaging opportunities, Illinois Extension helps young people discover new interests, build lifelong skills, and strengthen the communities they call home. These experiences do not just teach—they transform.



Ride Right Rally teaches life saving safety skills to area sixth graders

Each year, more than 100,000 people in the U.S. are treated in emergency rooms because of off-road vehicle accidents, and 500–700 lives are lost—many of them young people. These tragedies are often preventable with the right knowledge and habits. Illinois Extension stepped up to change that reality by leading the Ride Right Rally, a hands-on safety event that gave sixth grade students the tools to protect themselves and others.

At the Adams County Fairgrounds, over 340 sixth graders from Adams, Hancock, Pike, and Schuyler counties experienced safety in action. Guided by local 4-H and FFA members, students rotated through five interactive stations: ATV safety, mower safety, rollover protection, Power Take Off (PTO) hazards, and bicycle safety. Each station gave students practical tips, like why helmets matter, how to avoid rollovers, and how loose clothing can lead to PTO entanglement injuries.

The day's most powerful moment came during a mock ATV/UTV accident simulation, where emergency responders demonstrated the 911 process from dispatch to helicopter evacuation. Students watched as EMS and law enforcement worked together and then explored the Air Evac helicopter, turning a dramatic scenario into a lasting lesson.

It's never if, it's always when. Always wear a helmet and always ask permission. Safety is very important.

Sixth grade participant

Students shared what they learned, mentioning key takeaways like wearing helmets, telling someone where they're going when riding, and knowing legal riding rules. These reflections show the event's lasting impact.

This event was made possible through strong community partnerships, including Adams County EMS, the Sheriff's



Students explore the Air Evac helicopter during the Ride Right Rally, learning firsthand how emergency responders handle real-life accidents.

Department, Adams County Fair Board, Birkey's Farm Store, Heritage Tractor, Smith Brothers Powersports, and county Farm Bureaus, who even provided lunch for participants. Additional support came from Knox Seed, First Bankers Trust, Refreshment Services Pepsi, and Ursa Farmers Cooperative.

“By giving students a chance to see, hear, and experience what safety looks like in action, we're helping them make smarter choices that could one day save their lives,” says Siera Duesterhaus, Adams County 4-H coordinator.

Because of Illinois Extension and its partners, hundreds of youth are now better prepared to navigate rural life with confidence and care. Safety isn't just a lesson—it's a legacy.





Nature-based learning launches summer curiosity for youth

For many youth, learning happens inside four walls. Without real-world experiences, concepts like ecosystems, conservation, and history can feel distant and disconnected. Illinois Extension addresses this gap by creating hands-on nature education programs that invite youth outdoors—often marking their first experiences engaging with local landscapes as the school year winds down and summer begins.

Each spring, Illinois Extension’s nature youth programs create meaningful opportunities for youth to connect with the natural world. Through field trips, family events, and experiential outdoor learning, participants are encouraged to observe, explore, and ask questions about the environment around them.



Through Nature School, Illinois Extension served 893 youth and 185 adults across multiple events. Supported by Extension educators, Ag in the Classroom staff, Youth Development professionals, and Master Naturalist volunteers, students from Iles, Unity, Western, Payson, Southeastern, and Lincoln-Douglas schools experienced learning outside the classroom.

During creek walks, youth investigated local streams to observe water flow, insects, plants, and streambed geology. Trail walks focused on identifying trees and plants and searching for signs of wildlife. Sensory-based activities—including texture scavenger hunts, sound bingo, and nature color wheels—helped youth slow down and carefully observe their surroundings. Lessons on bird adaptations, pollinators, seed dispersal, and leaf color changes connected classroom science to the living systems around them.

As summer began, opportunities for deeper outdoor learning expanded through JDUB Academy, John Wood Community College’s summer-long K–12 learning program. Within this setting, Illinois Extension’s natural resources educator led two nature-focused courses that allowed youth to build

skills, confidence, and curiosity through extended outdoor experiences.

At Pittsfield Lake in Pike County, nine youth participated in Fins, Furs, Forests, and Fun, a weeklong outdoor program focused on wildlife, forestry, and recreation. Youth used trail cameras to identify animals moving through park trails, worked through a skull maze to learn mammal identification, practiced navigation with compasses, learned basic archery safety and skills, developed tree identification knowledge, and gained fishing skills. The experience concluded with an outdoor skills competition that allowed participants to apply what they learned while building confidence and teamwork.



Another JDUB Academy course, Hidden Trails: Nature’s Role in the Underground Railroad, partnered with the Historical Society of Quincy and Adams county to explore how landscape and natural features supported freedom seekers in their journey north. Nine 4th–6th grade youth visited local historical sites, including the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Museum, the Quincy Underground Railroad Museum at Dr. Richard Eells’ home, the Museum on the Square, and the New Philadelphia National Historic Site. Through these experiences, youth learned how geography, natural cover, and waterways shaped history in their own community.



Together, these programs demonstrate how Illinois Extension creates meaningful, connected learning opportunities that help youth engage with nature at the start of summer. By connecting classrooms to creeks, history to landscapes, and curiosity to hands-on experience, Extension helps youth build knowledge, confidence, and a lasting connection to the world around them.



Legacy gift empowers Hancock County youth to Step Up and Lead

Delbert “Del” Dahl believed in the power of youth leadership. A proud 4-H member from Disco, Illinois, in the 1950s, Del often said the confidence and communication skills he gained through 4-H and FFA shaped his entire life. Those experiences inspired a lifetime of giving back—through awards, mentorship, and advocacy for programs that help young people thrive.

Del’s career reflected his passion for education and communication. After earning degrees in dairy science, he began as an Illinois Extension advisor and later served as an agricultural communications professor and department head at the University of Illinois. For 43 years, Del helped shape the lives and careers of generations of students.

In his 43 years as an agricultural communications professor and department head, he helped shape the lives and careers of generations of University of Illinois students. *from the obituary of Del Dahl*

In 2023, Hancock County honored him as 4-H Alumni of the Year. When Del passed away in 2024, his family ensured his legacy would live on through a memorial gift to the Hancock County 4-H Foundation. That gift funded the first-ever Step Up and Lead Conference in Hancock County on December 22—a leadership experience designed for fifth and sixth grade 4-H members.



Del Dahl was honored as Hancock County 4-H Alumni of the Year in 2023.

Nineteen youth gathered for a half day of hands-on learning. The energy in the room was contagious as participants tackled team-building challenges, practiced public speaking, and explored personality styles. They learned how to network with peers and discovered tools to lead in their families, schools, and communities.

One participant summed up the day perfectly: “The most important leadership lesson I’ve learned today is that everyone has different personality colors and mindsets than others.”

Del’s story is a powerful example of the lifelong impact of 4-H. His investment in young people ensures that the next generation will continue to grow, lead, and thrive.



A comprehensive look at 4-H community impact

4-H reaching Adams, Brown, Hancock, Pike, and Schuyler counties

1,113

Youth Reached: One-Day Programs

- Babysitting Bootcamp
- Cake Decorating
- Cloverbud Camp
- Cultural Carnival
- Electricity School
- Fishing Clinic
- Food Challenge
- Green Trees
- Livestock Judging Clinic
- Ride Right Rally
- Step Up and Lead
- Super Saturday

618

Youth Reached: Extended Programs

- Cooking 101 School
- Dog Obedience
- Embryology
- Mindful Me
- Project Pals
- Shooting Sports
- Welcome to the Real World
- Youth Leadership Academy

32

Adults Reached: One-Day Programs

125

Adults Reached: Extended Programs

5,595

Total youth reached through 4-H programming



At 4-H Super Saturday, members explored the fascinating world of drones, learning to fly them themselves.

2,700

Total number of fair entries

172

Total number of members turning in project records

210

Total number of permanent records turned in

149

Total number of Illinois State Fair exhibitors

290

Total number of volunteers assisting clubs or serving at the fair (superintendents, judges, and judges assistants)



691
Total 4-H members



60
Total number of 4-H clubs



Strategic Priority: Economy

Women take the lead in agriculture through Annie's Project



Annie's Project brought women producers together to strengthen farm management skills through education and peer support.

Across Illinois and the nation, women are increasingly stepping into leadership roles on farms. Today, nearly one-third of agricultural producers are women, yet many find themselves navigating the business side of agriculture without formal training in finance, legal issues, or long-term planning. When life takes an unexpected turn, that knowledge gap can place stress on families and farm operations alike.

To address this challenge, Illinois Extension partnered with Annie's Project to offer a six-week course from January through March designed to strengthen confidence and decision-making among women in agriculture. Eight women producers from Adams, Brown, Pike, and Schuyler counties gathered weekly to learn from experts in production, marketing, financial management, human resources, and legal considerations--all within a supportive, discussion-based setting.

Participants explored the five areas of agricultural risk, practiced evaluating financial information, and gained practical tools they could apply immediately on their farms. Just as important as the technical content was the opportunity to ask questions, share experiences, and build connections with other women facing similar responsibilities. The result was a learning environment where participants could grow both their knowledge and their confidence.

For one participant, Annie's Project arrived at a critical moment. Marni grew up on a farm and married into farming in 1990. While she balanced teaching and raising six children, she handled the bookkeeping and supported the operation whenever possible, but she never felt compelled to fully understand the business decisions behind the farm. That changed in 2020, when her husband suffered a stroke.

Suddenly, Marni found herself responsible for making the finances work while their sons managed crop, hog, and cattle production. Although she had been in this role for several years, she realized she lacked the tools to make truly informed decisions. In 2025, she finally prioritized Annie's Project, seeking clarity and confidence in a role she could no longer afford to navigate alone.

"The most valuable takeaway for me was realizing that I am capable of managing these responsibilities, and that there are resources available to support my decision-making," Marni says. "The program reinforced that farming is not exclusively a man's world."

The impact of Annie's Project was immediate and measurable. Since completing the course, Marni has successfully negotiated interest rates with her banker and is actively working through estate planning—steps that strengthen her family's farm for the future. She has also chosen to attend Annie's Project again, drawn back by both the depth of information and the community of women who continue to share knowledge and ask thoughtful questions together.

"Annie's Project gave me the tools to ask the right questions and manage our farm's financial health more effectively," she says.

Marni's experience reflects the broader impact of Annie's Project. When women have access to education, peer support, and trusted resources, they are better prepared to lead farm businesses through uncertainty and change. Since its founding, Annie's Project has empowered more than 18,000 women in 38 states and one U.S. territory. In west-central Illinois, participants left the program with stronger skills, expanded networks, and the confidence to make decisions that will sustain their farms for generations to come.



Marni (fourth from the right) and her family gather to celebrate a milestone. Through Annie's Project, she gained the confidence and tools to help secure her family's farm for future generations.



Junior Master Naturalists get hands-on with local fish species during a lesson on river ecology.



Strategic Priority: Environment Youth explore, give back, and graduate as Junior Master Naturalists

Last summer, Hancock County youth discovered what it means to be a true steward of the environment. For the first time, Illinois Extension brought the Junior Master Naturalist program to the county, and 18 young adventurers stepped up to the challenge. For one week, they traded screens for streams, spending time outdoors and learning about the natural world. Research shows that time in nature improves mental health, builds confidence, and sparks curiosity—and this program gave youth the chance to experience that firsthand.

Each day began at Carthage Jaycee Park, where laughter and excitement filled the air as participants prepared for new adventures. Thanks to a strong partnership with the Carthage Park District, the park served as a home base for the week, providing youth with welcoming spaces to learn, explore, and build friendships. The partnership also made it possible for youth to cap off a week of hard work and learning with a celebratory pool party.

Throughout the week, participants explored nature sites across the region. They hiked the trails at Wildcat Springs Park in Hamilton and waded through creeks searching for fossils. At Kibbe Biological Station in Warsaw, youth learned about fish species and river systems before heading out for a boat ride on the Mississippi River. At Lakeview Nature Center outside Macomb, they discovered how native plants support pollinators and enhance local habitats.



Illinois Extension's Natural Resources Educator introduces youth to fossils and rock types, sparking curiosity about Illinois geology.

The program wasn't just about learning—it was about giving back. On the final day, youth rolled up their sleeves for a community service project that will leave a lasting mark. They installed a wood duck box and several bluebird boxes to support local wildlife, planted native species near the park entrance, and created tree identification stones along a new walking trail—turning it into a learning space for future park visitors.

“My favorite part was walking the creek looking for fossils,” says Paxton Schullian, one of the participants. “I also liked meeting new friends and learning about nature.” The week ended with a pool party—a celebration of new friendships and accomplishments—but the impact didn't stop there. Families report that youth are now camping, talking about fossils, and noticing the natural world around them in new ways.

The success of the program was made possible through collaboration and volunteer support. Chris Talley, Carthage Park District board president and Illinois Master Naturalist volunteer, played a key role in supporting the program. Additional support came from Illinois Master Naturalists Madeline Davis and Doug Campbell, along with behind-the-scenes planning assistance from Erin Fink. Together, their dedication helped create meaningful, hands-on experiences for youth.

The smiles told the story. Even on a rainy day along the Mississippi River, the group stood soaked but grinning after stepping off the boat—proud of what they had accomplished and excited about what they had learned. For many, it was their first time seeing the river up close and understanding how local ecosystems are connected.

By connecting youth to nature and teaching stewardship, Illinois Extension is helping grow the next generation of environmental leaders. The Junior Master Naturalist program didn't just teach facts—it inspired a love of the outdoors and a sense of responsibility for the environment. Building on the success of this first year, the program will return this summer—expanding to Adams County and giving even more youth the opportunity to explore, learn, and give back.



Participants learn about native fish species before heading out for a Mississippi River adventure.



Community stewardship in action

Landowners gain skills to plan for the future of their woods

Through the Your Land | Your Legacy landowner education series, Illinois Extension expanded opportunities for private landowners to actively manage and protect their forests. Two new workshops strengthened local stewardship and long-term planning.

The Get to Know Your Woods workshop, presented in partnership with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, introduced forest management fundamentals such as setting land ownership goals, measuring tree diversity, and developing a forest management plan. Sixteen participants attended the July program, collectively representing 2,870 acres of woodland now better positioned for sustainable management.

Illinois Extension also delivered Intro to Invasive Species Management as part of a statewide certificate course. A hands-on field day at John Wood Community College engaged 11 participants, while an online course component reached 176 learners. Participants gained practical skills in invasive plant identification and management tools, helping protect forests, prairies, and community green spaces.



Increasing access to local native plants

Finding locally adapted native plants can be a challenge for homeowners who want to support wildlife and healthy landscapes. To make these plants more accessible, Illinois Extension partnered with the Quincy Native Plant Guild, Quincy Park District, and Carthage Park District to launch the Seed Savers: Native Seed Collection Program.



Supported by a partner grant, the initiative is establishing a small-scale native seed operation to increase the supply of locally-sourced seeds for homeowners and community projects. Volunteers collect, clean, and store seed from prairies and natural areas, ensuring that the plants grown locally are well-suited to the region's soils and climate. By strengthening this local seed system, the program supports neighborhood habitat restoration and improves ecosystem health. Native plants provide food and shelter for pollinators, enhance soil and water quality, and add ecological value to home landscapes. The program also trains volunteers and builds community engagement—expanding long-term conservation capacity in western Illinois. The Seed Savers program offers residents a simple way to make a lasting impact, helping restore biodiversity one yard, garden, and community space at a time.

Forest therapy trail creates space for nature connection

Illinois Extension's Master Naturalist volunteers support community well-being by designing and leading projects that foster meaningful connections to nature, such as the Forest Therapy Trail at Nature Trails East in Quincy. Master Naturalist JD Daniels collaborated with the Quincy Park District, Adams County Health Department, and Friends of the Trails to create a self-guided forest therapy experience that offers residents social and health benefits.

The project also served as Dr. Daniels' culminating capstone for the Illinois Climate Stewards program, reinforcing his commitment to connecting the public with nature through intentional, restorative outdoor experiences.



Certified by the Association of Nature & Forest Therapy Guides & Programs, this trail is the only certified forest therapy trail in Illinois. Thoughtfully placed signage invites visitors to slow down, engage their senses, and practice mindfulness as they move through scenic overlooks, quiet wooded areas, and a running stream—an accessible experience that fits a wide range of schedules, abilities, and comfort levels.

In a time when nearly one in six individuals experiences loneliness, the trail also provides an opportunity for community members to gather in nature and experience meaningful social connection.

Located at 3420 Kochs Lane, the Forest Therapy Trail offers residents intentional access to the restorative benefits of nature. Research shows that mindful time outdoors can reduce stress and anxiety while supporting overall well-being, making this volunteer-driven project a lasting, meaningful resource for the community.



A Master Naturalist volunteer records tree measurements during phase two of the ongoing tree inventory project.



Tree inventory strengthens Quincy's tree management

Managing an urban forest requires more than good intentions—it depends on accurate data and informed decision-making. In 2025, Illinois Extension-trained Master Naturalists partnered with the City of Quincy to complete Phase 2 of the city's tree inventory, expanding a pilot effort designed to support long-term urban forestry planning.

During Phase 2, volunteers inventoried 400 trees across 37 city blocks, cataloging species, assessing tree health, and identifying maintenance or removal needs. Combined with Phase 1, the effort now provides the city with detailed data on 641 trees, offering a clearer picture of Quincy's urban canopy and its current condition.

This information equips city leaders with a practical planning tool—helping prioritize maintenance, guide future planting efforts, and allocate limited resources more effectively. By relying on trained volunteers, the city gained high-quality data while minimizing costs, demonstrating how Illinois Extension programming translates education into tangible community service.

The Quincy tree inventory illustrates what's possible when local needs align with Illinois Extension-prepared volunteers: immediate benefits for the community today and a stronger foundation for environmental sustainability tomorrow.

Master Naturalists in action



The Illinois Extension Master Naturalist program continues to grow, preparing trained volunteers to serve their communities through environmental education, stewardship, and science-based action. Through their collective service, Master Naturalists are making a meaningful and lasting impact on local ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.



43 Master Naturalists

18 new in 2025



1,810 volunteer hours

16% increase from 2024



\$62,954

estimated community economic impact

How Master Naturalists served

Public Education: 538 hours

Examples include: trail signage, workshops, and public demonstrations

Youth Education: 348 hours

Examples include: field trips, in-school programs, and day camps

Stewardship: 314 hours

Examples include: land management at parks and camps

Community Science: 61 hours

Examples include: bird counts and butterfly monitoring

Technical Assistance: 40 hours

Examples include: answering questions and providing guidance to the public



After a day of seed collecting for the Seed Savers program, Illinois Master Naturalist volunteers gather for a group photo.



Hancock County Ag in the Classroom



Strategic Priority: Food and Agriculture Building agricultural literacy through consistent instruction and educator support

Agricultural literacy is strongest when learning doesn't stop after a single lesson and when teachers feel confident bringing agriculture into the classroom. In Hancock County, Illinois Extension's Ag in the Classroom program takes a consistent, intentional approach—supporting educators while delivering meaningful agriculture education across schools and grade levels.

During the 2024–2025 school year, Ag in the Classroom provided instruction in elementary classrooms throughout Hancock County and added visits in several middle-grade classrooms. This consistent presence helps students experience agriculture more than once and see how it connects to their learning over time.

Classroom lessons are reinforced through hands-on experiences that connect agriculture to science, safety, and conservation. Students participate in activities such as Arbor Day presentations, agricultural safety education, and conservation-focused projects developed through strong local partnerships. These experiences help students understand how agriculture and natural resources support their communities and the environment.

Hancock County Ag in the Classroom also places a strong emphasis on supporting educators. Through opportunities such as Spread Roots in Agriculture (see page 22) and a Virtual Book Club, teachers build confidence and gain practical tools they can use to integrate agriculture into everyday instruction. Investing in educators allows agriculture education to reach far beyond individual classroom visits.

Through consistent classroom programming, educator support, and strong partnerships, Illinois Extension's Hancock County Ag in the Classroom program ensures agriculture education is a sustained part of student learning—building understanding that continues year after year.

1,616

students reached in 2024-2025 Ag in the Classroom

58.23%

of all K-12 Hancock County students reached

691

agriculture lessons delivered

24 educators

earned professional development through Spread Roots in Agriculture

14 educators

earned professional development through Virtual Book Club



Adams County Ag in the Classroom



Connecting agriculture to everyday learning

Many students are several generations removed from the farm, yet agriculture shapes the food they eat, the environment around them, and the communities they live in. Adams County Ag in the Classroom helps close that gap by bringing hands-on, standards-aligned agriculture education directly to students—where learning happens and curiosity can grow.

Throughout the school year, Illinois Extension delivered Ag in the Classroom programming in every Adams County elementary school, ensuring students had access to agriculture education, regardless of location or school size. Rather than relying on one-time presentations, the program emphasizes ongoing engagement, allowing lessons to build over time and helping students connect agricultural concepts to science, food systems, and natural resources.

Classroom learning is supported by a flexible menu of lessons teachers choose to align with curriculum goals. This collaborative approach positions Ag in the Classroom as a trusted partner and ensures that agriculture education strengthens instruction.

Learning also extends beyond school walls. Through early childhood settings, the Adams County Fair, and community programming, students and families encounter agriculture in shared spaces that encourage exploration and conservation. Hands-on exhibits and interactive, family-friendly activities

reinforce classroom lessons while making agriculture approachable and relevant to daily life.

Ag in the Classroom also works with other Illinois Extension programs, including Nature School (see page 6) and Mississippi River Ripple Effects (see page 20), to expand how students experience agriculture alongside environmental science and natural resources. These joint efforts reinforce place-based learning by connecting lessons to the production agriculture, natural areas, and river systems that shape students' everyday experiences. Together, they help Adams County youth understand how agriculture relates to daily life—supporting informed choices today and strong communities in the future.

554

classroom programs delivered

3,554

students reached in 2025 through Ag in the Classroom

10,528

total student learning experiences across all programming opportunities offered

1,164

youth participated in the National Agriculture Week coloring contest

11% increase

in youth engagement at the Adams County Fair



Cooking confidence starts early with 4-H Cooking 101

Youth often want to help in the kitchen but lack the safety knowledge and basic skills needed to cook independently. Illinois Extension partnered with the Memorial Hospital Health & Wellness team to change that through 4-H Cooking 101 School, a multi-day summer program for youth entering fourth and fifth grade.

Ten participants learned kitchen safety, knife skills, and how to prepare fruits, vegetables, meat, eggs, and dairy. Lessons from the Family Dinner Project—supported by the Tracy Family Foundation—helped youth understand the importance of shared meals and positive time around the table.

The program concluded with a celebration where youth prepared and served food for family and residents from Hancock Village Assisted Living, showcasing their new abilities and boosting confidence.

By the end of the week, participants gained practical cooking skills and a stronger understanding of healthy choices, helping them become “beyond ready” for real-life responsibilities at home.



Youth explore livestock evaluation through hands-on judging clinic

Early exposure to livestock evaluation helps youth build animal science knowledge and explore agricultural career pathways. Illinois Extension and John Wood Community College met that need by hosting an entry-level livestock judging clinic for youth ages 8–18 at the JWCC Agricultural Education Center.

The clinic drew more than 70 participants, beginning with classroom instruction on evaluating livestock structure and traits. Youth then practiced their skills on beef, goats, and sheep,

along with a virtual swine class. JWCC livestock judging team members worked alongside Extension staff to guide youth in placing classes and giving reasons.

Event coordinator Kristin Huls noted strong enthusiasm for the clinic, which she says “sets the stage for future opportunities” in livestock judging and broader involvement in the livestock industry.

By offering accessible, low-cost training without requiring 4-H or FFA membership, the clinic expanded regional access to agriculture education while strengthening the future livestock workforce.

Workshops and courses strengthen school nutrition



School nutrition staff must meet annual USDA Professional Standards, yet many districts struggle to access affordable, high-quality professional development. Illinois Extension helped fill that gap by offering local workshops and virtual statewide trainings through the ABCs of School Nutrition program.

Illinois Extension delivered in-person workshops in Pittsfield and Quincy for staff from 11 school districts, providing six hours of training on scratch cooking, cultural flavors, breakfast strategies, reducing added sugars, and cutting food waste. These sessions equipped kitchens with practical steps to improve meal quality.

Extension also co-taught online courses that reached more than 300 school staff, including certified food handler training and food allergies in schools—helping districts meet requirements and strengthen student safety.

Extension contributed to statewide curriculum development by creating three new courses on culinary math, cultural flavors, and effective hiring and retention practices for school cafeterias.

Together, these efforts improved school meal programs and strengthened the nutrition workforce serving Illinois students.





Entrance to the Memorial Garden at the Illinois Veterans Home in Quincy.



Master Gardeners grow beauty, community, and connection that lasts for decades

As Illinois Master Gardeners celebrate 50 years of helping others learn how to grow across the state, local volunteers who have served for more than two decades continue to shape the landscapes where communities gather, learn, and enjoy the outdoors. Their work is visible in the bright colors along walking paths, restored garden spaces at local parks, and the places where children stop to smell flowers, watch butterflies, or learn about the natural world.

For long-serving volunteers like Cathy Shanks, gardening has always been a way of life. She joined the Master Gardener program in 2000 after a lifetime of digging in the soil. “I’ve gardened my whole life—so why not learn more?” she says. Cathy loves the learning, the hands-on work, and the friendships she’s made with fellow gardeners. What keeps her volunteering after 25 years is simple: “We create new gardens, save old garden spaces, and enhance public areas. The reactions from the public are so rewarding—people are appreciative and interested, and that leads to great teaching opportunities.”

Her most meaningful project began at the Illinois Veterans' Home in Quincy, where she was asked to help care for the Memorial Garden. She stepped into that role with pride, helping maintain a special space that honors residents and supports families. Twenty-five years later, she still tends that garden. “I was honored to do this for the Veterans' Home,” Cathy says.

For Alice Rakers, who joined the program in 2005 at age 65, becoming a Master Gardener was a way to deepen her

knowledge and stay connected to something she loves. Shortly after joining, she adopted two neglected gardens in Moorman Park—a butterfly garden and a hummingbird garden. With help from her family, fellow Master Gardeners, and a local Girl Scout troop, Alice restored the gardens and began adding new plants each year. More than two decades later, those gardens remain a beloved stop for park visitors.

“It’s always enjoyable to be working in the gardens and having people thank us for keeping them up,” Alice says. One of her favorite moments is spotting monarch caterpillars on the milkweed she planted—sometimes a teacher will take one to a classroom so students can watch it transform into a butterfly.

Together, Cathy, Alice, and fellow volunteers show what happens when passion meets purpose. Master Gardeners don’t just grow plants—they grow community spaces, lifelong learning, and moments of joy that ripple far beyond the garden beds they tend.





Strategic Priority: Health SNAP-Ed partners empower families to eat well and move more

Families in rural Illinois often face tough choices when it comes to healthy eating. Limited budgets and lack of nutrition knowledge can make it hard to put balanced meals on the table. Without support, these challenges can lead to poor health outcomes and missed opportunities for kids to learn healthy habits early.

Illinois Extension’s SNAP-Ed team is changing that story. Across Pike, Hancock, and Schuyler counties, community outreach workers delivered hands-on programs that make healthy living achievable for families of all ages.

In Pike County, the team reached 820 students through school-based programs like OrganWise Guys, which uses fun organ characters and storytelling to teach K–2 students why healthy choices matter, and Serving Up MyPlate, which helps older kids gain independence in making nutritious decisions. Summer programs kept kids active and learning, while 130 adults joined family nights and pantry events to discover budget-friendly recipes. A creative partnership with Findley Apartments in Pittsfield helped seniors stretch their SNAP dollars by sharing simple, nutritious meals for under \$7—proving healthy eating is possible on any budget.



In Hancock and Schuyler counties, SNAP-Ed reached 373 youth through programs like OrganWise Guys; Illinois Junior Chefs, a five-day cooking school where kids learn kitchen skills and food safety; CATCH Kids Club, which combines nutrition tips with



active play; and Color Me Healthy, a fun, music-filled program for preschoolers. Families also participated in *EatPlayGrow*, a family night that blends crafts, nutrition, and movement. The team connected with adults at food pantries and regional distribution events, providing resources and interactive education during 48 substantial interactions.

Both team members also partnered with Hunters Feeding Illinois, providing food safety resources on proper storage and cooking temperatures for venison, along with recipes to help families prepare healthy meals using donated game meat. This practical support ensures families can safely enjoy nutritious protein while reducing food waste.

Together, these efforts mean more families are equipped to eat well, move more, and thrive—no matter their income. In total, SNAP-Ed served nearly 1,200 youth and 180 adults across three counties, building healthier communities one lesson at a time.



1,200 youth reached
across three counties



180 adults engaged
through family nights and food pantries



8+ schools
and multiple community sites partnered



Helping young people build mindful habits and safe caregiving skills

Today's youth are navigating growing expectations, emotional stressors, and real-world responsibilities at younger ages than ever before. Without intentional support, children can struggle to manage stress, regulate emotions, and make safe decisions—skills that are foundational for lifelong health and wellbeing.

Illinois Extension is addressing this challenge by creating mindful, developmentally appropriate opportunities that equip youth with the tools they need to care for themselves and others. Through programs like Mindful Me and Babysitting Bootcamp, Illinois Extension is helping young people build confidence, responsibility, and practical life skills in safe, supportive learning environments.

These are important life skills, and the earlier we introduce them, the better prepared our students will be.

Ryanne Jacoby, principal, Carthage Primary

Mindful Me introduces second-grade students to mindfulness through six engaging classroom sessions led by Youth Development Educator Kristin Huls. Using experiential learning activities aligned with Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards, students explore goal-setting, self-awareness, time and stress management, emotional regulation, and mindful eating. By practicing these skills early, youth begin developing healthy habits that support academic success and personal wellbeing.

The program was piloted in Hancock County, where school leaders recognized its value in helping students build foundational life skills that support emotional wellbeing and classroom success. Plans and schedules are already underway to expand Mindful Me into additional classrooms and communities in 2026, ensuring more youth have access to these vital tools.



A participant practices the Heimlich maneuver, an essential safety skill for childcare.

For older youth, Illinois Extension is also fostering safety and responsibility through hands-on workforce readiness experiences. Fifteen youth ages 9 to 15 participated in Babysitting Bootcamp, a collaborative program hosted by Hancock County 4-H, Memorial Hospital, and Willow Grove Childcare & Learning Center.

During the half-day workshop, participants rotated through interactive sessions focused on first aid, choking hazards, child engagement strategies, healthy snacks, general safety, and basic business skills. Each youth left with a first aid kit, family profile binder, and a “Safe Sitters” bag—resources they can use immediately as they begin caring for children in their community.

“This was a great learning opportunity for youth in Hancock County,” says Madeline Davis, Hancock County 4-H program coordinator. “With babysitting now an official Illinois 4-H project area, this workshop helped prepare youth for the real-world responsibilities of childcare.”

Together, Mindful Me and Babysitting Bootcamp reflect Illinois Extension's commitment to the Health and Community strategic priorities by promoting emotional wellbeing, personal safety, and practical life skills. Whether learning how to pause and manage emotions in second grade or practicing first aid and responsibility as a teen, young people are gaining the confidence and competence needed to become mindful, capable adults—strengthening families and communities across west-central Illinois.



Strategic Priority: Partnerships

Illinois Extension and FFA strengthen youth opportunities through partnership

Preparing young people for future careers in agriculture and natural resources takes more than one organization—and in west-central Illinois, Illinois Extension and the National FFA Organization are proving just how powerful collaboration can be.



In late 2024, agriculture educators and FFA advisors in Section 11 were preparing students for the annual Forestry Career Development Event (CDE) when unforeseen circumstances threatened the event just weeks before it was scheduled. Wanting to ensure students still had access to this valuable learning opportunity, advisors reached out to Illinois Extension to explore whether working together could keep the contest moving forward.

Illinois Extension was eager to help.

With leadership from Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy Educator Amy Lefringhouse and the support of dedicated Illinois Master Naturalist volunteers, Illinois Extension stepped in to host the Forestry CDE at South Park in Quincy. The event was a success—providing students with a hands-on, real-world learning experience while introducing many of them to Illinois Extension for the first time.

That success sparked something bigger.

In 2025, Section 11 advisors asked Illinois Extension to consider hosting the Forestry CDE on an ongoing basis. What began as a short-term solution quickly grew into a lasting partnership—one that now impacts multiple school districts and hundreds of students each year.

The 2025 Section 11 Forestry Career Development Event was hosted at Carthage Jaycees Park. A total of 180 students from 12 schools across Adams, Brown, Hancock, McDonough, and Schuyler counties competed, putting their forestry knowledge and problem-solving skills to the test. The contest challenged students to identify 25 tree species and 20 forestry tools, complete timber cruising measurements on 10 trees, interpret topographic maps and legal land descriptions, identify chainsaw parts, and troubleshoot common chainsaw issues—skills directly connected to careers in forestry, conservation, and natural resource management.

Two Illinois Extension staff members committed 10 hours to contest preparation, while seven Master Naturalist volunteers contributed a total of 28 volunteer hours gathering supplies, setting up stations, and serving as station hosts during the event. Volunteers guided competitors through each station, answered procedural questions, and ensured the contest ran smoothly—providing students with both structure and encouragement on a warm, sunny day.

Beyond the logistics, the Forestry CDE created a meaningful opportunity for Illinois Extension to connect with students, educators, and community members. Participants learned not only about forestry, but also about Illinois Extension's educational programs, volunteer opportunities, and long-standing commitment to Illinois communities. For many students, it was their first introduction to Illinois Extension—a growing community resource they may one day return to as volunteers, professionals, or lifelong learners.



This partnership is part of a much larger pattern of collaboration between Illinois Extension and local FFA programs. In 2025 alone, Illinois Extension staff supported FFA programming by contributing 30 combined hours judging and assisting with Section, District, and State FFA events—from job interview and public speaking competitions to parliamentary procedure and conduct of meetings. In return, FFA members partnered with Illinois Extension on local initiatives, including supporting agriculture education through Ag in the Classroom programming and assisting with community outreach at the Adams County Fair.

Rather than competing to serve youth, Illinois Extension and FFA are leaning into their shared strengths—creating more access, more learning, and more opportunities for young people to explore careers, build leadership skills, and connect with their communities. Together, Illinois Extension and FFA are opening doors for young people—using shared strengths, real-world learning, and community partnerships to prepare the next generation for what comes next.



Strategic Priority: Discovery Ripple Effects connects youth to the Mississippi River ecosystem

Illinois Extension launched Ripple Effects, a brand-new curriculum designed for third grade classrooms to bring science standards to life through the lens of the Mississippi River. Developed in partnership with Adams County Ag in the Classroom and a dedicated committee of Illinois Master Naturalists, the program helps students explore heredity, traits, and survival while connecting them to the ecosystem right outside their classroom walls.

The idea began with local Master Naturalists who recognized the benefits of outdoor learning and wanted all youth to experience nature during the school day. After surveying area teachers, Illinois Extension staff discovered a need for additional resources to teach heredity concepts. Using the Mississippi River as a case study made the content more engaging and relevant by connecting learning to familiar places, which encouraged students to think critically about local wildlife and habitats.

Ripple Effects also opened the door to campus-level collaboration. Through a partnership with the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology, students experienced hands-on science with the institute's mobile lab, bringing advanced genomic concepts into an elementary classroom setting.

This experience allowed students to learn directly from practicing scientists and use advanced technology like microscopes and cameras to explore aquatic organisms living in the river. It provided a snapshot into how scientists perform research at the University of Illinois.

In 2025, Ripple Effects debuted at Lincoln-Douglas Elementary School, reaching 79 youth and four teachers through a week-long curriculum aligned with third grade learning standards. The program was delivered by Illinois Extension staff with support from six Master Naturalist volunteers, blending classroom instruction with hands-on activities that spark curiosity and environmental stewardship.

Plans are underway to expand Ripple Effects to all elementary schools in the Quincy Public Schools system this year, ensuring more students experience the wonder of the Mississippi River and the science behind survival.





Teachers discover new ways to connect science, literature, and agriculture



As science standards evolve and classrooms place greater emphasis on real-world connections, teachers need professional development that helps them show students how scientific concepts apply beyond textbooks. Without those opportunities, students can miss chances to build curiosity, problem-solving skills, and an understanding of how science connects to their everyday lives. Illinois Extension addressed this need through innovative Ag in the Classroom programming in Hancock County, led by Ag in the Classroom Coordinator Dawn Weinberg.

During the Spread Roots in Agriculture: Summer Agriculture Institute for Teachers, 24 educators earned professional development credit through hands-on learning at horticulture operations across west-central Illinois. Teachers explored plant production, orchard and greenhouse systems, and farm planning while interacting directly with agricultural professionals. These experiences provided practical, classroom-ready examples of how science, technology, and agriculture work together in real-world settings and local career pathways.

Weinberg also introduced a virtual book club focused on *Sharing Books Talking Science: Exploring Scientific Concepts with Children's Literature*, a first-of-its-kind professional development opportunity offered statewide through Ag in the Classroom. From January through March 2025, 14 educators participated in 11.5 hours of guided learning that demonstrated how familiar children's books can be used to strengthen scientific thinking. Through weekly reflection and peer

discussion, teachers explored new ways to prompt scientific questioning, make cross-content connections, and link science concepts to agriculture and everyday experiences.

By offering both in-person and virtual professional development, Illinois Extension expanded how educators can access high-quality training while supporting innovation in the classroom. As a result, teachers are better equipped with tools, confidence, and discovery-based strategies that strengthen science instruction and help students think like scientists.





Strategic Priority: Workforce Excellence Leadership academy rebuilds regional connections and strengthens civic capacity

Strong communities depend on strong leaders—people who understand local challenges, build relationships across boundaries, and work together to move the region forward. Western Illinois Leadership Academy was created to meet that need. After several years on pause, the program returned with renewed purpose and a clear understanding that developing local leadership is essential for the strength of western Illinois communities.

WILA's roots go back to 1996, when Rural Adams Development Corporation, Great River Economic Development Foundation, and Illinois Extension joined forces to expand leadership opportunities and build connections across rural communities. Early organizers had a clear vision for the future, recognizing that communities could achieve more by working together than by working alone. As Mark Field, then president of Rural Adams Development Corporation, recalls, "We realized neighboring counties were part of our everyday work. Inviting those partners into the experience—and visiting places like DOT Foods—just made sense." As participants visited businesses and projects in surrounding counties, it became clear that a regional model would open new opportunities and partnerships throughout western Illinois.

When WILA paused, communities felt the gap. Leaders emphasized the importance of bringing the program back—not just for professional development, but to rebuild relationships, increase civic engagement, and support the next generation of decision-makers.

Seven participants formed the first returning class, engaging in six day-long sessions from March through May. They visited businesses and community organizations in Adams, Brown,

Hancock, Pike, and Schuyler counties—including a dairy farm in Hancock County, the fitness center in Schuyler County, the new library in Brown County, and Blessing-Rieman College in Adams County. In Pike County, participants visited the John Wood Community College Agricultural Education Center and explored the unique natural resources of western Illinois in a session led by Illinois Extension's natural resources educator. Across the six themed sessions, participants connected with leaders representing education, workforce development, government, community development, agriculture, and healthcare.

The class concluded in Springfield at the State Capitol, where participants met with legislators, observed a House committee hearing and a Senate session, and gained firsthand insight into how state decisions influence local priorities.

Since its founding, hundreds of WILA graduates have moved into influential roles across the region. Many describe the experience as transformational—broadening their perspective, deepening their relationships, and inspiring new leadership. By bringing WILA back, Illinois Extension and its partners are investing in leaders who will guide western Illinois into the future.



Senator Jil Tracy meets with WILA participants outside her office at the Illinois State Capitol during their final session.

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University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs were funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.

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