



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

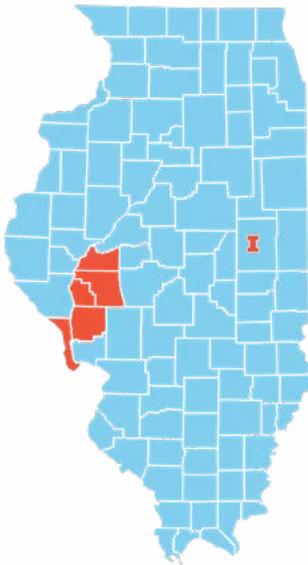


Serving Calhoun, Cass, Greene, Morgan, and Scott Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Aaron Dufelmeier
County Director



Collaborative partnerships are the key to community impact

Life is about the connections we make and the relationships we build. As we develop trust in each other, we begin to see the impact of "we." Together, we can accomplish so much more. As you take time to read our stories in this report, you will see that our successes and impacts are emphasized by a shared set of goals, mission, and vision with our partners. It is truly my privilege and a blessing to live and foster University of Illinois Extension's mission. Developing educational programs, sharing knowledge and research, all while building local partnerships to support the people of our communities, excites and encourages me every day.

Our partnerships expand our scope, broaden our reach, and increase our impact. Collaboration is often the catalyst for turning a program, project, or event idea into a reality. An awesome example of this is the Illinois Extension Lukeman Garden and Education Center, which you can read more about in this report. This educational site has connected youth and adults throughout the community to learn, grow, and give back together. This effort alone has fostered a stronger connection between the YMCA, Jacksonville Middle School, 4-H, Master Gardeners, Sol Systems, the Food Pantry, and Illinois Extension.

I firmly believe that connections, relationships, and exposure fuel individuals to pursue their passions. Our partnership with Sol Systems afforded us the opportunity to engage with 24 eighth grade students selected by their science teachers and to let them experience the Junior Solar Sprint curriculum. As a result, half of these students suggest they want to pursue a career path in the field of renewable energy, and 75% of these students believe that there is a growing importance for generating electricity through renewable sources.

I encourage you to continue reading to see how fortunate I am as the county director to provide leadership and help guide our team in Calhoun, Cass, Greene, Morgan, and Scott counties. As you take the time to do so, it is my hope that you will recognize our goal of working collectively for the greater good of the communities we serve. It is not only part of our organizational vision, but it is our commitment to leverage innovative research, cutting-edge technology, and collaborative partnerships to build a future where every community member is equipped to thrive in an ever-evolving world.

Together we make a difference!

Aaron Dufelmeier
County Extension Director

Cover photo:
Students climb into a combine during the Where Your Food Comes From event.

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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Local Partners

Extension staff partnered with or provided services for the following schools and organizations in 2025:

A-C Central Middle School	Franklin Junior/Senior High School	McCully Heritage Project
Beardstown Chamber of Commerce	Golden Eagle Ferry	Memorial Park
Beardstown CONNECT	Greene County Board	Meredosia-Chambersburg Junior High School
Beardstown Food Pantry	Greene County Economic Development Group	Missouri Botanical Garden
Beardstown Junior High School	Greene County Fairgrounds	Morgan County Board
Beardstown CUSD #15	Greene County Farm Bureau	Morgan County Fairgrounds
Behavioral Health Coalition, Illinois College	Greenfield Elementary School	Morgan-Scott CEO
Birth to Five Illinois, Region 1	Illinois Department of Natural Resources	Morton Arboretum
Bluffs Junior High School	Illinois Department of Public Health	The Nature Institute
Bob Freesen YMCA	Illinois Forestry Association	North Greene Junior High School
Brussels Grade School	Illinois School for the Deaf	Our Saviour School
Calhoun, Cass, Greene, Morgan, and Scott Fair Boards	Illinois School for the Visually Impaired Summer Camp	Overall Economic Development Commission of Cass County
Calhoun Community Foundation	Illinois Secretary of State Mobile DMV	Pact Head Start, Beardstown
Calhoun County Board	Illinois State Board of Education	Pleasant Hill Elementary School
Calhoun County Fairgrounds	Illinois Tree Farm Committee	Scott County Board
Calhoun County Farm Bureau	Illinois Walnut Council	Scott County Economic Development Corporation
Calhoun County Health Department	Jacksonville Area Chamber of Commerce	Scott County Fairgrounds
Calhoun County Soil and Water Conservation District	Jacksonville Area Community Food Center	Scott County Soil and Water Conservation District
Calhoun Elementary School	Jacksonville FFA	Sloan Implement
Calhoun FFA	Jacksonville Middle School	Sol Systems
Calhoun Growth Association	Jacksonville Public Library	St. Norbert School
Cass County Board	Jacksonville School District #117	Triopia Junior-Senior High School
Cass County CEO	Jacksonville Regional Economic Development Corporation	Virginia CUSD #64
Cass County Fairgrounds	Kamaroo Farms	Waverly First Community Center
Cass County Health Department	Lewis and Clark Confluence Center	Winchester Elementary School
Cass-Morgan Farm Bureau	Local Workforce Innovation Area 21 Workforce Board	Winchester FFA
Jennie Marr Dunaway	Local Workforce Innovation Area 22 Youth Workforce Committee	
Embrace Life Childcare, Beardstown		



Partnership with Sol Systems enables new opportunities at Lukeman Garden

Extension thrives when staff can build strong partnerships and collaborative relationships throughout the communities being served. Even when everyone involved has similar goals and good intentions, fruitful partnerships are not easy to establish or maintain. They require thoughtful planning and long-term commitments from everyone involved.

Local Extension staff have spent the last three years slowly building a partnership with Sol Systems. This solar energy company seeks organizations in the communities where it operates that share its goals of strengthening communities, supporting youth, and enhancing educational and workforce development opportunities.

Sol Systems' Power Purchase and Community Investment Agreement, established with additional funding from Microsoft, uses solar project revenues to support communities surrounding Sol Systems' utility-scale solar projects, which the company develops, constructs, owns, and operates.

This partnership has provided funding for projects that are fully integrated in areas where Extension already excels. A highlight is the expansion of operations at the Lukeman Garden and



Bob Freesen YMCA youth get their hands dirty while learning how to plant potatoes with local Horticulture Educator Ken Johnson.



A Master Gardener volunteer teaches youth from Bob Freesen YMCA a hands-on lesson about growing flowers.

Education Center in Jacksonville. With a funding partner in place, Extension staff built a partnership with Bob Freesen YMCA to offer hands-on activities for youth to learn about gardening and nutritious foods.

This funding also enabled Extension staff to build a partnership with Jacksonville Middle School to offer the innovative Junior Solar Sprint program. (Read more about this program on the following page.)

It's exciting to see the commitment and passion that Sol Systems is offering to our community and youth. This collaboration will allow us to expand our scope and outreach to youth, while providing experiences that will focus on food access, the environment, and renewable energy.
County Director Aaron Dufelmeier

Looking ahead, Extension staff are planning to include more partner organizations in educational efforts and community outreach activities at Lukeman Garden. They intend to seed native prairie plantings throughout the existing oak savanna, adding another dimension to community engagement and beautification. They will also add more fruit and vegetable production, including demonstration and research plots, and they hope to install a pollinator garden.

The fruitful and mutually beneficial partnership in Morgan County has also motivated Sol Systems to seek partnerships with Extension offices in other counties in Illinois.



Partnerships that build up youth



Students experience hands-on learning during Extension's in-school programs

Along with the 4-H club experience, Illinois Extension connects with local youth by working with schools to provide hands-on learning in their classrooms.

Welcome to the Real World

Budgeting, critical thinking, and career readiness are essential life skills, but not the most exciting topics for youth. To help students experience the importance of these skills, Extension partnered with schools to offer the interactive Welcome to the Real World program.

During classroom sessions, students identified potential future careers, learned about managing money, and developed personal budgets through engaging activities. The program culminated in a large-scale, real-world simulation in which students assumed adult roles, complete with a chosen career and corresponding income. They paid their monthly bills and managed their finances while practicing effective decision-making.

Junior Solar Sprint

Extension 4-H staff partnered with Jacksonville Middle School to deliver a hands-on STEM program focused on renewable energy. Through the Junior Solar Sprint program, eighth grade students received classroom instruction on how solar cells generate electricity, the basics of direct current systems, and key engineering principles related to vehicle design, such as weight distribution, friction, chassis materials, and gear ratios. Then they had “maker” sessions, where teams of two collaborated to design and construct functional solar-powered vehicles. Each team was provided with a solar cell, an electric motor, and various wheel, gear, and axle options to encourage creative problem-solving and engineering experimentation.

The program culminated in a race day event, where teams tested their solar-powered cars outdoors in natural sunlight, competing to identify the fastest design. In the final session, students dismantled their cars for the reuse of materials in future classes, reinforcing sustainability principles.

This memorable experience had a measurable impact:

- 9 of 24 students indicated the program broadened their interest in potential careers related to renewable energy or engineering.
- 18 of 24 students expressed belief in the growing importance of electricity generated by renewable sources within their lifetime.



1,582

After-School and School Enrichment Participants



Students work together to build their solar-powered vehicle.



Local 4-H'ers build skills and memories through projects and shows

Youth need opportunities to explore their individual interests and to practice new skills in a supportive environment. In Calhoun, Cass, Greene, Morgan, and Scott counties, youth can join 4-H clubs to have fun group experiences along with individual growth through 4-H project work.

4-H members can choose from over 70 project topics. Their project work is self-directed and culminates in exhibiting at the annual county 4-H show. Judges evaluate the exhibit and also talk to the 4-H'er about what he or she learned through the project.

The very best local exhibits are selected to advance to the Illinois State Fair, where youth exhibit their work alongside 4-H'ers from across the state.



Cass County 4-H members participate in their Master Showmanship Contest.

Calhoun County	15 4-H Members	18 Project Exhibits
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Cass County	94 4-H Members	612 Project Exhibits
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Greene County	104 4-H Members	202 Project Exhibits
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Morgan County	252 4-H Members	1,040 Project Exhibits
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Scott County	132 4-H Members	732 Project Exhibits
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19 Local 4-H'ers who earned Champion, Reserve Champion, or Inspire Awards at the State Fair



Materials given to attendees at ABCs of School Nutrition

School food staff learn valuable nutrition information

School nutrition professionals and food service staff must regularly earn continuing education credits, and Extension is perfectly positioned to provide research-based best practices for meal planning, nutrition education, food safety, and more.

In summer 2025, 29 local food service staff from area schools participated in professional development training sessions led by local SNAP-Ed Educator Karina Moore and neighboring Educator Kayla Swaar. The ABCs of School Nutrition Learning Institutes, held in Jacksonville and Springfield, covered topics including Cultural Foods, Sugar, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points Policies, and Recruitment and Retention Practices. A representative from the Illinois State Board of Education's Child Nutrition Programs also presented during each training.

Participants indicated that they were excited to incorporate different ways for students to try new flavors and foods, and they appreciated the refresher on hazard analysis. Attendees also gained fresh ideas for maintaining and building inclusivity within their teams.

Staff who attended together from the same school district had discussions and action-planning time, which was a great benefit to them. Additionally, these training sessions were the perfect opportunity for local small, rural districts to connect with and learn from one another. This was an aspect the participants greatly appreciated, as there are not many opportunities for that to happen throughout the school year.





Partnerships that support the environment



Calhoun students launch forestry internship project



As the first step in a three-year forestry initiative, Calhoun Unit 40 agriculture students planted 600 white oak trees at the McCully Heritage Project. During the day-long event, students also participated in invasive species control to help restore and maintain the health of the local ecosystem. Before planting, students received hands-on instruction in proper techniques for planting bare-root trees. Some of the newly planted trees were tagged to allow for long-term monitoring and data collection on growth and survival rates.

In spring 2026, 10 high school students will take part in forestry-focused mini-internships at the McCully Heritage Project. These internships will provide foundational training in forestry and valuable field experience. Each participating student will receive a \$500 scholarship upon successful completion of the program.

This project is made possible through federal funding provided by the USDA Forest Service and the Morton Arboretum, secured by Extension staff member Michelle Berg.

About the McCully Heritage Project

The best way to learn about nature is to spend time in it, and people in and around Calhoun County can experience nature at the McCully Heritage Project. It covers 940 acres of hills

and hollows, with miles of hiking and horseback riding trails, two ponds for fishing and turtle watching, a wetland, forests, native grasslands, and camping areas. Extension partners with the McCully Heritage Project to offer a range of opportunities for youth and adults in the area to experience nature through hands-on activities.



Learn more about the McCully Heritage Project
mccullyheritage.org



Students participating in the new forestry internship program



Students experience nature during annual Earth Day event

Over 250 students gathered at the McCully Heritage Project to celebrate Earth Day through hands-on learning about nature and the environment. Topics included Illinois wildlife, river pollution, and appreciation of the natural world through preservation, restoration, and education. Extension staff taught sessions on the importance of native plants in supporting local habitats and the role of wild turkeys in the ecosystem. The event welcomed kindergarten through fourth grade students and teachers from all four Calhoun County elementary schools, as well as Pleasant Hill Elementary School.

The event was a collaborative effort coordinated by Extension and the Calhoun County Health Department. The day featured educational activities led by representatives from Extension, Calhoun County Health Department, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Calhoun County Farm Bureau, Calhoun County Soil and Water Conservation District, Missouri Botanical Garden, Lewis and Clark Confluence Center, The Nature Institute, Kamaroo Farms, and Illinois Department of Public Health.



Earth Day attendees explore the natural world around them.



Pond management seminar teaches practical knowledge

Local landowners, educators, and nature enthusiasts gained practical knowledge to support healthy and sustainable pond ecosystems during a Pond Management seminar hosted by Extension and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources at the McCully Heritage Project. The seminar featured IDNR Fisheries Biologist Blake Ruebush and included outdoor classroom instruction and hands-on field activities at the McCully pond. Participants gained valuable insights into a wide range of pond management topics, including pond site selection, pond construction, and pond maintenance; fish species, fish stocking, and fish harvest; summer and winter fish kills; and aquatic plants and aquatic plant control.

Attendees gain practical knowledge during Commercial Tree Fruit School

To help producers improve production and efficiency, enhance profitability, and provide quality produce that is safe for consumption, Extension hosts Commercial Tree Fruit School. The 2025 session for the southwestern Illinois region was held in Hardin. Attendees learned about managing plum curculio and stink bugs in tree fruit, modern intensive orchard systems for peaches and pears, disease management updates for peaches and apples, and mitigating cold damage in a changing climate.

In a post-event evaluation, participants indicated they would change their spray practices to better manage pests and diseases, as well as change their pruning practices, because of what they had learned. In addition, over 80% of participants had implemented a practice they learned during previous schools, such as looking for disease-resistant cultivars and using leaf and soil analysis to better fertilize trees.

Good Growing continues to provide reliable information for gardeners

A vast array of useful information is available to gardeners statewide through the popular Good Growing newsletter, blogs, podcasts, and videos. Local Horticulture Educator Ken Johnson is part of the team that creates these valuable resources to help homeowners and communities create sustainable gardens and landscapes that provide beauty, food, and property enhancement. The most popular blog posts and podcast videos in 2025 covered topics including milkweed, buffalo gnats, invasive species, wild ginger, and companion planting.

The Good Growing team also hosted the Grow Along program again in 2025. Participants were given seeds for unique and "new-to-us" plants such as Kajari Melon, Mega Punk Celosia, Bullseye Toothache Plant, and more.



52
New blog entries



289,467
Views of all blog articles



56,330
Plays of 51 new podcasts and 51 new videocasts



112,161
Plays of all podcasts and videocasts



2,095
Subscribers to the weekly email newsletter



Find Good Growing resources
go.illinois.edu/GoodGrowing





Partnerships that strengthen local communities



Building stronger communities starts with supporting child care

Jennifer Russell, community and economic development educator, has been collaborating with local residents, businesses, and child care agencies to expand and strengthen child care options in the community. Her work includes guiding a potential child care entrepreneur through every step of the planning process—from exploring educational resources on starting a rural daycare center, to developing a business plan, to identifying funding and networking opportunities. Russell has also partnered with local employers to explore child care solutions that support the workforce. Along with colleague Dustin Fritsche, she meet with Lincoln Land Community College representatives to discuss local child care needs and toured new child care facilities in Beardstown to gain a deeper understanding of community and workforce priorities.



Vital transportation stabilized through regional collaboration

Extension played an active role in a regional transportation task force addressing the Golden Eagle Ferry operations in Calhoun and Jersey counties. Because of increased costs of vessel operations and the inability to garner grant dollars as a private company, the effort to form a public/private partnership to increase access to federal and state grants became a reality for the region in October 2025. The recent award of grant funding provides a solid footing for planning a future with continued access and tourism in the region. While the City of Grafton and community volunteer George Andres led the initiative, Extension's involvement supported planning efforts and helped connect the group to marketing and workforce development resources. This collaboration reflects Extension's ongoing commitment to working alongside local partners to address key regional challenges.

Illinois State Representative Kyle Moore visits with local business owners while touring Cass County with Extension staff.

Trust and communication lead to customer service excellence

Throughout 2025, Jennifer Russell delivered customer service trainings to front-line office support staff and all new employees on campus to strengthen service quality and workplace communication. The sessions emphasized active listening, delivering clear and accurate information, and building trust in daily interactions. Drawing from Harvard researcher Amy Cuddy's work about first impressions (can I trust this person and respect this person), along with Frances X Frei (Harvard) and Anne Morriss (Leadership Consortium) on the "trust triangle," participants explored how credibility and connection are built through the balance of empathy, logic, and authenticity. By focusing on these foundational elements, the training equipped employees to foster confidence, clarity, and respect in every customer exchange—reinforcing a culture of excellence and trust across the organization.



Webinars bring government education to local leaders

One way that Extension supports communities is by creating and sharing educational resources to help local leaders strengthen their skills and tackle complicated challenges. In 2025, Extension hosted educational webinars covering important current issues, including solar developments, geothermal assistance and funding, high-speed broadband access, rural economics, grant funding, downtown development, federal and state legislative updates, and more.



Watch Local Government Education webinars go.illinois.edu/LGEwebinars

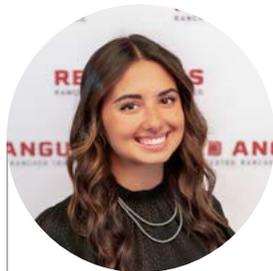


The people who make these partnerships possible



Reflections from summer intern Peri Andras

Summer 2025 marked my third consecutive year interning at Illinois Extension, and it's been an experience that has truly shaped my career goals and personal growth. When I first started back in summer 2023, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. It was not only my first time working at Extension, but also my first real job. I was excited, but definitely nervous to step into a professional environment for the first time. Looking back now, I had no idea just how pivotal that summer would be in influencing the direction of my future.



Peri Andras

One of the most meaningful parts of this entire experience has been the mentorship I've received. I grew up in 4-H, so I already knew many of the people in the office, but getting the chance to work alongside them gave me a whole new perspective. Over the past three years, they've generously shared their time, their knowledge, and their advice, helping me grow not just professionally, but personally as well.

The relationships I've built here are a big reason why I kept coming back each summer. The Extension office has always been a place where learning is encouraged, and the people genuinely care about you and your development. It's also just a fun and welcoming environment that made showing up to work something I genuinely looked forward to. Honestly, this experience has set a high bar for the kind of workplace I hope to find in the future—maybe even too high.

There really aren't enough words to express how grateful I am for Extension and the staff who made this internship so meaningful. This experience has helped shape who I am, both as a person and in terms of the career path I want to pursue. I hope to stay connected and maybe even return in a new capacity one day.

Horticulture Educator Ken Johnson shares information with a group of kindergarten students attending the annual Where Your Food Comes From event, which reaches 300 students each year through interactive agriculture literacy sessions.

Local volunteers inducted into Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame

Five local volunteers were recognized for their outstanding service, leadership, and commitment to the 4-H program and to their communities. Their dedication makes a lasting impact on the lives of 4-H youth.

- Terry Strauch - Calhoun County
- David Vergin - Cass County
- Jerry Joyce - Greene County
- Tammy White - Morgan County
- Lance Steckel - Scott County



Financial Report



Amount	Source
48%	Local
35%	State
7%	Federal
10%	Other



Amount	Source
70%	Personnel
30%	Non-Personnel

STAFF

Aaron Dufelmeier
County Director

April Littig
4-H Youth Development
Educator

Emily Sidwell
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

Ken Johnson
Horticulture Educator

Michelle Berg
Natural Resources,
Environment, and Energy
Educator

Jennifer Russell
Community and Economic
Development Educator

Dustin Fritsche
Community and Economic
Development Program
Coordinator

Karina Moore
SNAP-Ed Educator

Therese Wilson
Office Support Specialist

Georgianna Flowers
Office Support Assistant

Rebecca Schafer
Office Support Assistant

OFFICE INFORMATION

Morgan County Extension

104 N Westgate Ave.
Jacksonville, IL 62650
(217) 243-7424
Fax: (217) 243-1544
Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm
closed noon - 1 pm

Greene County Extension

25 N US Hwy 67
Carrollton, IL 62016
(217) 942-6996
Fax: (217) 942-3827
Mon/Wed, 8 am - 4:30 pm
closed noon - 1 pm

Calhoun County Extension

818 S Park, P.O. Box 366
Hardin, IL 62047
(618) 576-2293
Fax: (618) 576-8013
Tue/Thu, 8 am - 4:30 pm
closed noon - 1 pm

Scott County Extension

401 N Walnut
Winchester, IL 62694
(217) 742-9572
Fax: (217) 742-3582
Tue/Thu, 8 am - 4:30 pm
closed noon - 1 pm

Cass County Extension

651 S Job
Virginia, IL 62691
(217) 452-3211
Fax: (217) 452-7260
Mon/Wed/Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm
closed noon - 1 pm

ONLINE



uie-ccgms@illinois.edu



facebook.com/UoflExtensionCCGMS



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