



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

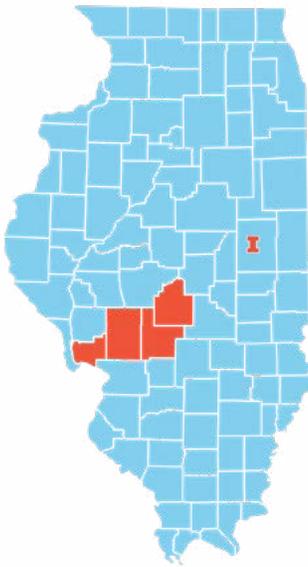


Serving Christian, Jersey, Macoupin, and Montgomery Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Sara Marten
County Director



Embracing change

Change.

Change is often described as the only constant, and while it can feel uncertain, it brings opportunities for growth and improvement. For many years, University of Illinois Extension staff across the country were known as ‘agents’, and many people often refer to us as ‘change agents’ within our communities—taking the knowledge, skills, and advancements happening at a campus level and bringing them to our local communities to create meaningful and transformative changes.

Change remains essential to our organization. It helps us stay relevant and responsive to communities and stakeholders. Illinois Extension's strength comes from our ability to adapt many long-standing programs and events to fit the ever-changing needs of the audiences that we serve. As we concluded our previous three-year plan of work in 2025, we began a new needs assessment process. The programs highlighted in the following pages continue to showcase our work in Illinois Extension's priority areas of thriving youth, workforce preparedness and advancement, chronic disease prevention and management, and social emotional health. While assessed needs and therefore program priorities may shift, our commitment to delivering high-quality educational programs for all never will.

This past year also brought significant changes for Illinois Extension. Federal funding for the

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) was reduced and later eliminated, leading to decreases in direct education, community outreach, and staff positions across our unit, the state, and the nation. These changes will impact many long-standing youth and adult programs. Despite these challenges, we remain committed to serving our communities. More information on the impact of SNAP-Ed programs can be found on pages 6 and 7.

One thing that has not changed is our dedication to the communities we serve. Our staff continue to provide high-quality learning experiences and evidence-based information that is practical and impactful. This work is only possible because of our volunteers, community partners, and supporters. Please join us in recognizing and thanking those who contributed to our success, including the recipients of this year’s Community Partner Award on page 5.

I am honored to share a brief highlight of the positive outcomes achieved through our outreach efforts in 2025. On behalf of our entire staff, thank you for your continued support. We look forward to serving you in 2026!

With gratitude and appreciation,

Sara Marten
County Director

Cover photo: 4-H members from Christian, Jersey, Macoupin, and Montgomery counties identify livestock feed samples at the unit's Livestock Skill-a-Thon.

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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Connecting with communities

Taste of Extension has quickly become a signature event for the unit, continuing to grow in popularity and impact. This past fall, more than 70 participants gathered at the Christian County Extension office to experience a “taste” of what Extension offers. This interactive event showcased the diversity of Illinois Extension programs through engaging pop-up activities, hands-on workshops, and educational learning stations.

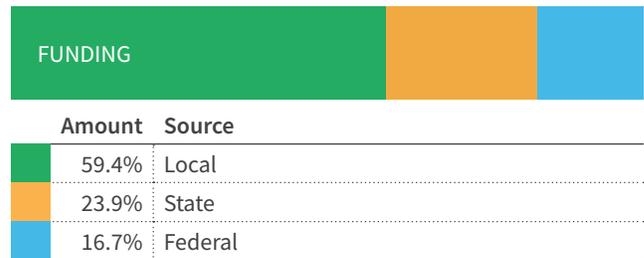
Families appreciated the come-and-go format, which allowed participants of all ages to explore activities at their own pace. Guests explored topics ranging from professional development in the “Dress for Success” station to Pumpkin Pie in a Bag and Pumpkin Trivia. Horticulture enthusiasts (both adults and kids) enjoyed the Knot and Nurture Macramé and Plant Propagation Workshop, learning how to propagate houseplants and create decorative plant hangers. The Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology’s Mobile Science Learning Lab added a STEM-focused dimension, sparking curiosity with real bat skeletons, insects, and 3D-printed models. Local partnerships also played a key role, with Christian County Master Gardeners hosting activities and Locust Creek Flower Farm providing flowers and expertise for pumpkin arrangements.

The event’s success reflects Illinois Extension’s commitment to making research-based education accessible and engaging. By introducing new audiences to programs in 4-H youth development, horticulture, food and nutrition, and community and economic development, Taste of Extension strengthens community ties and inspires lifelong learning. Feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing interest in future workshops and volunteer opportunities.

Looking ahead, Extension plans to expand Taste of Extension to other counties in the unit, building on its proven ability to connect people with resources that improve lives. This event exemplifies Extension’s mission: fostering knowledge, collaboration, and growth in every community it serves.

Financial Report

Illinois Extension is funded through a combination of locally raised, county board, state, and federal dollars, which are returned to the community through educational programming. Illinois Extension is a three-way funding partnership that includes the state of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Christian, Jersey, Macoupin, and Montgomery county boards. The SNAP-Ed programs are funded by a federal grant from the USDA. These partnerships bring thousands of programming dollars into the four counties, in addition to local contributions, state, national, and federal support.



Community Partner Award

Illinois Extension’s impact is enhanced when creating partnerships with like-minded organizations, foundations, and corporations committed to supporting Extension programs. Illinois Extension provides research-based programs where youth and adults learn new skills and gain knowledge in an area that interests them.

The Extension Council is a volunteer board that serves in an advisory role, cooperating with Extension staff in planning, promoting, developing, implementing, evaluating, and financing Extension outreach that meets the needs, interests, and resources of the local communities served.

The local Extension Council sponsors the Community Partner Award, which recognizes a community partner annually. Illinois Extension is incredibly proud to award four organizations:

- Borgic Farms
- Carlinville Intermediate School
- Christian County Fair Board
- Jersey County Fair Association





BORGIC FARMS

Staff from Borgic Farms made a big impact on programming by bringing piglets from their sow farm into classrooms across Christian and Montgomery counties. They engaged students with live demonstrations, answered questions, and sparked curiosity about farming and animal care. Their efforts helped Illinois Extension reach nearly 1,500 students with this hands-on agricultural experience. “Staff from the Borgic team brought enthusiasm and knowledge to every classroom. Thanks to their commitment, students got to see, touch, and learn about pigs in a way textbooks simply can’t offer,” says Rebecca Niemeier, agricultural literacy program coordinator.



CARLINVILLE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

The school has partnered with Extension for more than 10 years with the 4-H Health Jam program. Over the years, the program has evolved to meet the needs of students and rebranded to Health Rocks, but the overall goal remains the same: to educate youth and provide needed information to help youth lead a healthier lifestyle. “The school is committed to teaching wellness and is a valuable partner that provides the platform for Illinois Extension to share knowledge with fifth-grade students at the school,” says Kate Harding, 4-H youth development program coordinator. In addition to Health Rocks, CIS collaborates with Illinois Extension with Ag in the Classroom and SNAP-Ed programs.



CHRISTIAN COUNTY FAIR BOARD

The fair board was selected for their role in youth programming with Christian County 4-H, providing impactful opportunities for local youth. For years, the board has been an incredible supporter of 4-H, providing instrumental resources for 4-H shows during the fair. “They consistently demonstrate a willingness to assist in any way necessary and are flexible in accommodating the needs and schedules of 4-H activities. The board generously allows us to use their facilities and ensures the grounds are well-maintained and accessible,” says Taylor Sinclair, 4-H youth development program coordinator. 2025 Miss Christian County Lydia Repscher accepted this award on behalf of the Christian County Fair Board in recognition and gratitude for their service to Extension.



JERSEY COUNTY FAIR ASSOCIATION

This recognition celebrates their long-standing partnership with Jersey County 4-H, which has provided invaluable opportunities for local youth. For years, the Fair Association has supported 4-H shows, workshops, and the annual Jersey County 4-H Foundation Auction. Recently, the collaboration expanded with the launch of the Ag Education Booth at the Jersey County Fair, showcasing Illinois Extension programs in 4-H, Horticulture, Community and Economic Development, and Food and Nutrition. “Our partnership with the Jersey County Fair Association is a long-term investment in our community, providing resources and opportunities to learn and grow,” says Jessica Jaffry, 4-H youth development educator.





SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker Jenny Foster talks about the importance of protein in one's diet during the Illinois Junior Chefs program in Christian County.



The impact of SNAP-Ed funding cuts

For more than 30 years, Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed program has been a lifeline for families, teaching practical skills like stretching food dollars, reading nutrition labels, and preparing healthy meals. Through initiatives like Eat.Move.Save., local residents from children to seniors to families have gained tools to fight food insecurity and chronic disease.

The elimination of SNAP-Ed funding has created significant gaps in community nutrition support. With this loss, Extension is no longer able to provide many of the direct education programs, school partnerships, and community outreach efforts that helped residents make healthier choices on a limited budget. These cuts reduce access to nutrition education for individuals who rely on it most, including youth, older adults, and families facing food insecurity. Without these services, communities lose proven programs that promote healthier eating, increase physical activity, and support long-term well-being. Over time, these gaps may widen existing health disparities and limit access to the resources families rely on to build healthy habits.



2,970
Youth reached



321
Adults reached



268
Programs taught



Rob Arter, a resident of Park Glen Apartments, proudly shares his health journey after attending Illinois Extension classes.

A community transformed by SNAP-Ed

What began as a new SNAP-Ed partnership with a Section 8 housing complex in Christian County blossomed into a year of transformation for residents. Through monthly lessons led by SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker Jenny Foster and Illinois Extension educators Lisa Peterson and Andrew Holsinger, more than 100 residents learned practical skills to improve their health and well-being.

Participants explored affordable snack options, mastered slow cooker recipes, and discovered the joy of growing their own vegetables all through hands-on lessons. These programs didn't just teach; they inspired. One resident, motivated by a smoothie bike class, began making daily fruit smoothies, increased physical activity, and even quit smoking, resulting in improved overall health.



Youth learn how to fold whipped topping versus mixing it all together for their pumpkin pudding recipe.



Young chefs learn lifelong skills

Illinois Junior Chefs is a hands-on SNAP-Ed cooking and nutrition education program for youth ages 8 to 13. The program is designed to build confidence in the kitchen while encouraging healthy eating habits.

Over five two-hour classes, students explore each MyPlate food group (whole grains, dairy, vegetables, fruits, and protein) through interactive lessons. Each session blends essential cooking skills such as measuring, mixing, chopping, slicing, and cooking with practical nutrition education. The curriculum emphasizes skill-building, experiential learning, and self-confidence, making healthy choices fun and approachable.

Participants learn to prepare nutritious meals, discover affordable snack options, and understand how to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into daily meals. They also practice proper handwashing and food safety techniques, ensuring a strong foundation for lifelong healthy habits.

Evaluations show that students leave the program feeling more confident in the kitchen, with a greater preference for fruits and vegetables and improved eating behaviors. Many report cooking for their families, helping with grocery shopping, and applying food safety practices at home. To celebrate their achievements, each child receives a cookbook, handouts, a certificate of completion, and cooking utensils, which are tools that help them continue their healthy cooking journey.

Illinois Junior Chefs is more than a cooking class. It's an opportunity for youth to gain practical skills, build independence, and inspire healthier families and communities.



25

Illinois Junior Chefs camp sessions



76

Youth reached during Illinois Junior Chefs

Building healthy habits together

Last year marked an exciting milestone for SNAP-Ed; it was the first time SNAP-Ed partnered with Pana Head Start, Taylorville Head Start, and Central School in Taylorville. Preschoolers at all three locations welcomed SNAP-Ed with big smiles, endless curiosity, and tons of enthusiasm as they explored healthy habits through playful, hands-on learning.

The health-focused activities encouraged students to explore food groups, physical activity, and trying new foods. The accompanying crafts allowed children to apply what they learned in a hands-on and engaging way, with projects ranging from simple food-group visuals to creative representations of fruits and vegetables. Each lesson concluded with a healthy snack aligned with the day's theme, giving children the opportunity to identify foods, explore textures and colors, and experience new tastes. Together, these interactive lessons, creative projects, and nutritious snacks created a well-rounded educational approach that resonated with preschool learners and helped build foundations for lifelong healthy habits.

Lessons taught for the school year:

- Singing and Dancing with Color Me Healthy
- Eat a Rainbow of Colors
- Try New Foods
- I Can Feel My Heartbeat
- Where Do the Colors Grow?

We loved having SNAP-Ed in our classroom!

Your lessons were engaging and full of hands-on learning. You helped us build healthy habits in a playful way, and the kids were thrilled every time you walked through the door. Thank you for making healthy learning enjoyable!

Ashley Wilhour, Pana Head Start teacher



To inspire kids to move and promote physical activity, SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker Jenny Foster leads a fun song and dance.





Thriving Youth



Cooking, connecting, and giving back

The 4 H Cook and Connect Kits for Families program strengthened family bonds, encouraged healthy habits, and sparked generosity across the community. Designed to make meaningful family time accessible and fun, each kit included non-perishable ingredients for a nutritious recipe created by Food and Nutrition Educator Lisa Peterson, along with an activity created by 4-H Youth Development Educator Jessica Jaffry, focused on communication, mindfulness, physical activity, storytelling, and teamwork.

More than 40 families and 80 youth participated, demonstrating a strong desire for simple, affordable ways to connect at home. Families also chose to pay kindness forward, donating more than 40 additional kits to local food pantries. These donated kits provided not only a meal but also an activity that invited families experiencing food insecurity to share a moment of joy and connection.

Survey results highlight the program's lasting impact. Families shared that the kits made it easier to cook together, sparked meaningful conversations, and created intentional family time. Many reported that they continued to use the activity materials, especially those promoting physical activity and mindfulness, well after the program ended.

Through Cook and Connect, families strengthened relationships, youth practiced leadership and generosity, and the community experienced a ripple effect of kindness. The program showed that when families are given simple tools to slow down and connect, they build habits that support healthier, happier homes long after the meal is over.

Putting their best foot forward

Macoupin County 4-H partnered with Crowe Boot and Shoe Company in Carlinville to host a youth program on proper footwear. An Ariat representative also attended, offering industry insight and expertise.

Participants learned why the right shoes matter, how to choose appropriate footwear for different activities, and basic shoe-care techniques. They also explored how shoes are made and why quality construction affects comfort, durability, and safety. Hands-on demonstrations showed how regular maintenance extends a shoe's life.

The program left a strong impression. One youth shared, "This program taught me how to select the right shoes for whatever activity I am completing. I am going to take better care of my shoes after learning the proper techniques." This partnership highlighted practical life skills, while connecting youth with local businesses and industry professionals.



Ariat donated a hat and two sets of boots for Macoupin County 4-H members to win.



Kneading new skills

Youth took part in a hands-on Bread Baking Workshop Series designed to introduce them to the basics of bread making in an engaging, educational environment. Through two workshops focused on French bread and sourdough, participants explored the bread-making process while developing practical kitchen skills. These workshops were offered in partnership with Bear Creek Farm and Ranch, whose instructors provided guidance throughout the experience.

During the French bread workshop, participants were actively involved in mixing, kneading, and shaping dough. Youth learned what ingredients are used to make bread and experienced the steps required to transform those ingredients into a finished loaf. Each participant prepared a loaf to take home and bake, extending the learning experience beyond the workshop and encouraging independence in the kitchen.

The sourdough workshop introduced participants to a different type of bread and the concept of fermentation. Youth worked hands-on with sourdough, learning how to shape and prepare a loaf while gaining exposure to traditional bread-making methods. The workshop emphasized patience, following directions, and attention to detail as participants worked through the process.

Overall, the Bread Baking Workshop Series provided youth with the opportunity to build confidence, practice new skills, and explore cooking as a practical life skill. Through hands-on learning and a strong community partnership with Bear Creek Farm and Ranch, participants gained valuable experience and a sense of accomplishment that can be applied beyond the kitchen.



Participants in the sourdough workshop learn the importance of accurate measurements when making sourdough and discover why it's essential to consistently "feed" their starter.



A quick climb onto the chair gives this participant the perfect angle to decide where to add her finishing touches of berries and dogwood.

Branching out with creativity

A holiday-themed workshop invited youth to build evergreen porch pots using natural materials such as evergreens, foliage, pinecones, and berries. The workshop was led by Horticulture Educator Andrew Holsinger in partnership with 4-H. The workshop gave youth a chance to explore natural resources, develop practical skills, be creative, and build confidence. By working with materials from nature, participants gained appreciation for the plants and seasonal resources around them.

During the workshop, youth learned to combine materials in visually appealing ways while exploring textures, colors, and placement. They arranged materials to create balanced designs and followed step-by-step instructions to assemble their porch pots. Along the way, participants solved problems, made design decisions, and expressed their creativity.

The workshop supported personal skill development as youth practiced focus, patience, and attention to detail while completing their projects. Working with natural materials encouraged curiosity and thoughtful design choices. Many participants felt proud of their finished porch pots and gained confidence in completing a project from start to finish, strengthening their creativity, practical skills, and environmental awareness.





Environment



4-H youth take the lead in conservation

Jersey County 4-H Club members gathered at Wock Family Lake to plant 26 native oak trees, launching a long-term initiative to establish a vibrant oak savanna in the community. The event brought together youth, volunteers, and community leaders for a hands-on conservation project designed to enhance biodiversity, improve wildlife habitats, and create a legacy for future generations. The planting continues the multi-phase ecological restoration plan at Wock Family Lake.

The project reflects the passion 4-H members have for making a difference and demonstrates youth leadership in conservation. By planting these oak trees, the group helped beautify the space while creating a healthier environment and a living classroom for years to come. Their efforts also fostered teamwork, environmental awareness, and a sense of stewardship that youth will carry into future projects.

Oak savannas yield unique combinations of light levels, soil moisture, pH, and organic matter that support more than 600 species of plants, butterflies and moths, nesting birds and bats, mushrooms, and other species. Oaks are drought and heat tolerant, making them relatively well-adapted to future climate impacts. The chosen oak species of Northern Red Oak, White Oak, and Bur Oak or Mossycup Oak were selected for their native adaptability and long-term ecological value.

The project was made possible through support from Jerseyville Parks & Recreation, Jersey County Soil and Water Conservation District, and dedicated 4-H youth who prepared the land, planted trees, and will help monitor their growth over time.

Hands-on learning helps build life skills



Mid-State Cornerstone Academy in Montgomery County has been a valued partner of the local 4-H program for many years, serving youth with behavioral and learning disabilities across a 22-county region. This partnership expanded with the addition of hands-on horticulture programming and enhanced life-skills education tailored to student needs.

Youth participated in activities such as maple syrup tree tapping, giving them opportunities to connect with nature and experience seasonal agricultural practices. The academy also strengthened its 4-H offerings with sewing and budgeting classes, where youth practiced fine motor skills, followed step-by-step processes, made practical decisions, and applied math skills that support independence. Students gained confidence as they created sewn items, managed simple budgets, and saw how their new skills could be used in daily life.



Students practice maple tree tapping during a hands-on horticulture session at Mid-State Cornerstone Academy.



Where learning takes root and grows

A Fruit Tree Grafting Workshop brought together participants from all over the unit and state who were eager to learn about the art and science of grafting fruit trees. Led by Horticulture Educator Andrew Holsinger in partnership with local orchardist Pat Gibson of Heritage Farms, the workshop introduced participants to a skill that can significantly benefit small farm families, fruit growers, and backyard orchardists. Proper grafting techniques can improve fruit quality, increase yield, and support long-term tree health, making it a valuable practice for anyone interested in home fruit production.

Designed for landowners, volunteers, growers, and curious learners, the session began with an overview of grafting basics, including rootstock selection, scion wood preparation, and the tools needed to perform successful grafts. Holsinger and Gibson demonstrated commonly used techniques such as whip and tongue and cleft grafting, explaining how proper alignment and precision cuts influence whether a graft will “take.” Participants then moved into a hands-on practice session where they applied the techniques themselves, gaining practical experience in making cuts, securing graft unions, and handling grafting materials safely.

Survey feedback reflected the workshop’s strong impact. More than 60% reported they planned to attempt grafting at home, use the resources shared during the session, or pass the information along to others. Several participants later shared successful grafting results.

The overwhelmingly positive response highlights the value of offering practical, skill-building horticulture programs.

Through this workshop, attendees left with not only two self-grafted apple trees, but also the confidence and knowledge to continue growing their own fruit trees for years to come.



A hands-on moment from a tree grafting workshop where an attendee practices graft cuts.

I forgot about the apple trees since we had to store them in a cool space, but I got them planted just in time. Both grafted trees were successful!

Participant in the Tree Grafting Workshop



Health



Improving physical and socioemotional health through community walk series

Physical inactivity and frequent poor mental health days remain ongoing concerns in Macoupin County, where rates meet or exceed the Illinois state average. To address both issues in a practical, community-centered way, Food and Nutrition Educator Lisa Peterson launched a six-week, in-person walking support group focused on overall wellness. The program was designed to reduce barriers to physical activity while fostering social connection, routine, and accountability.

In partnership with Carlinville Area Hospital and D&D Fitness Center, the series combined brief, research-based educational lessons, guided stretching sessions led by certified personal trainers, and outdoor group walks along the hospital's walking path. Community partnerships were central to the program's success.

Carlinville Area Hospital provided meeting space at no cost, coordinated health professionals to lead two educational sessions on stress management and joint health, and assisted with program promotion. D&D Fitness Center contributed certified trainers to lead safe, effective stretching prior to each walk. Extension delivered education on goal setting, eating for energy, hydration, and sleep, coordinated communication among partners and participants, and evaluated program outcomes.

This has been a great motivator to get me moving in the morning.
Participant in the walking series

The program averaged 11 participants per session, exceeding expectations for an early-morning offering held from 7:30 to 8:30 a.m. A post-series evaluation showed strong outcomes, with 100% of participants reporting increased knowledge, greater motivation to remain physically active, and meaningful connections with others in the community. Improvements in social and emotional well-being emerged as a key impact. Participants supported one another's health goals across generations, including a college student and a retired professor who formed an accountability partnership and committed to continuing their walks beyond the six-week series.

Due to its strong participation, positive feedback, and measurable outcomes, the walking support group will be offered again in spring 2026. The program will expand to Montgomery County in partnership with Hillsboro Area Hospital, where improving physical activity levels and mental well-being are also community priorities.



Participants walk around the path at Carlinville Area Hospital.



Building healthy snacks with confidence

In response to growing community interest in salad preparation and widespread media attention on seed oils, Fresh and Flavorful Salads at Home was launched to meet learners where they are. This hands-on class went beyond the basics, helping participants build nutritious, satisfying salads while separating food facts from food headlines.

The program highlighted the health benefits of green and leafy vegetables such as cabbage, lettuce, romaine, arugula, spinach, and kale, along with guidance on proper storage and food safety. Participants learned strategies to reduce the risk of foodborne illness, including Shiga-toxin-producing E. coli, and explored ways to build balanced salads by incorporating grains, fruits, vegetables, and flavorful dairy options.

A key focus of each session was salad dressings. Participants discussed the role of healthy fats, reviewed current research on the safety of seed oils, practiced portion awareness, and learned what to look for on nutrition facts labels. They also prepared homemade dressings using simple, accessible ingredients. Working in small groups, participants created a variety of salads and dressings, reinforcing skills they could confidently replicate at home.



A class participant carefully reads the salad recipe to prepare a flavorful, nutrient-rich salad.

71 participants ages 17 to 70+

Class was offered five times unit-wide

100%

increased knowledge after the class

All participants also agreed they had a better understanding of healthy eating habits, felt more confident making healthy food choices, and felt better equipped to manage chronic health conditions.

From awareness to action

Many partner agencies request Poverty Simulation trainings annually, which often results in repeat participation for staff. Over time, organizations began asking for a meaningful next step that would deepen learning beyond the emotional experience of the simulation. In response to these requests, the program From Awareness to Action was created. This program explores the real life challenges and systemic barriers highlighted in the poverty simulation and guides participants in developing practical strategies, skills, and action plans they can use in their daily work to more effectively support individuals and families experiencing poverty.

The program encourages participants to take a closer look at conditions within their own communities. Through facilitated discussion, case examples, and guided reflection, participants identify gaps between existing services and the actual needs of residents. They learn how to use both qualitative and quantitative local data to understand trends, uncover root causes, and prioritize areas for improvement.

A key component of the program is recognizing the resilience, resourcefulness, and problem solving abilities that people living in poverty demonstrate every day, even when they may be too overwhelmed to see those strengths in themselves. The program highlights practical, community-driven solutions such as free laundry days, "adopt a neighbor" for ongoing support and connection, or transportation options that reduce everyday barriers and promote dignity while meeting immediate needs.

By incorporating asset-based community development principles, From Awareness to Action emphasizes how existing strengths, relationships, and local resources can be used to create sustainable change. The program equips participants with the tools and confidence needed to move beyond empathy and toward meaningful, informed action that strengthens their organizations and the communities they serve.



Community and Economic Development Educator Valerie Belusko guides participants through activities that explore practical strategies that help support individuals and families experiencing poverty.



Strengthening agricultural literacy

Ag in the Classroom is a statewide agricultural literacy program that provides educators and students with resources to help them understand the vital role of agriculture in their lives and society.

Christian, Macoupin, and Montgomery counties work to educate students, teachers, and the public about agriculture in fun and creative ways by going into local classrooms throughout the year and holding workshops for educators. Lessons are hands-on and feature where food comes from and different agricultural commodities grown in local areas in the state, while still featuring tried and true lesson kits such as embryology and the life-cycle of butterflies.

Uncovering the world beneath us

In Christian and Montgomery counties, kindergarten, first, and second graders learned all about soil and the amazing living things found beneath our feet. They learned how earthworms help keep soil healthy by breaking down organic matter and loosening the soil as they burrow. Students even had the chance to dig in like real soil scientists and gently hold a worm, which many said was their favorite part of the lesson.



Kindergartener Devan Bell colors a worksheet featuring earthworms and other organisms found in soil.



4,093

Students and educators reached



507

Learning sessions

Exploring the path food takes



Educators from Calhoun, Christian, Macoupin, Montgomery, and Sangamon counties returned to their classrooms with a new perspective on agriculture, one that extends far beyond production and highlights the essential role transportation plays in the food supply chain. Through the Roads, Rivers, and Rails Summer Agricultural Institute, teachers gained a clearer understanding of how transportation systems work together to move food from farms to consumers domestically and globally.

Teachers noted, “the institutes always brings plenty of real-world examples of ag that could be used at all grades in a variety of subjects.” By learning how grain moves along rivers, how rail connects rural areas to global markets, and how roads complete distribution, they gained practical examples to explain complex supply chain concepts. Teachers also deepened their understanding of how transportation impacts food availability and distribution, recognizing how infrastructure, logistics, and timing influence what food is available and at what cost.



ADM Grain Manager Travis Sayers shows how grain travels by barge and rail from their facility down the Mississippi River for export to other countries.

Educators left with resources for all subject areas that will help students understand how food travels long distances before reaching their tables and why a reliable transportation system is essential to a secure food supply. The experience also broadened teachers’ awareness of agricultural careers, including those tied to logistics, transportation, and distribution.

Hands-on learning and exposure to new ideas increased teachers’ confidence and enthusiasm. They described the institute as a great experience, offering awesome classroom activities, free resources, and many new learning opportunities. Educators left better prepared to connect classroom learning to real-life systems, introduce students to agricultural careers, and help them understand how food moves from farm to table.



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