



# Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

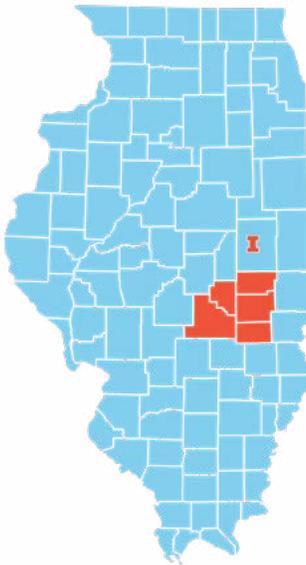


Serving Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby Counties  
**ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025**





Jessie Streit  
County Extension Director



## A message from the county director

As I reflect on the past year, I am struck by both the weight of the challenges we have faced and the responsibility that continues to define our work.

This past year required us to navigate the loss of federal funding that has long supported critical University of Illinois Extension programs and positions, specifically our SNAP-Ed program. These reductions are not abstract. They affect real people and community organizations that rely on Illinois Extension for education, connection, and support, as well as colleagues whose passion and expertise have strengthened our work for years. Saying goodbye to team members is one of the hardest things to do, especially when it is the result of circumstances beyond our control. Their contributions mattered, their relationships mattered, and their absence will be felt across our counties.

At the same time, Extension's mission has never been more relevant. Even through constraints, our team continues to show up...listening, adapting, and finding ways to meet community needs with care and creativity. That commitment gives me confidence as we look ahead.

We know the path forward will require continued adaptation and strong partnerships. However, we also know that Extension has endured for more than a century because it evolves while remaining grounded in service. The dedication of our staff, volunteers, advisory members, and community partners ensures that we will continue to bring value to the people of Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties.

Thank you for standing with us during a year of transition and for your continued belief in the work we do together. I am proud of this team, grateful for our communities, and hopeful about what we can continue to build together.

The following pages offer a sample of our work from the past year.

Sincerely,

Jessie Streit  
County Extension Director

Cover photo: A 4-H member shows off his prize-winning animal at the 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:

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

### Partnerships

### Resource Generation

<b>5,129</b> Program Volunteers	<b>277</b> Community Gardens	<b>2,830</b> School and Community Partners	<b>\$15,026,392</b> Value of Volunteer Contributions	<b>\$499,188</b> Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated	<b>\$960K+</b> External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners
------------------------------------	---------------------------------	---	---	---	---

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:

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

# SNAP-Ed funding changes



The recently passed One Big Beautiful Bill Act (Pub. L. No. 119-21, 139 Stat. 72, 2025) eliminated national funding for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education.

For over 30 years, Illinois Extension has led one of the largest SNAP-Ed programs in the country under the brand Eat.Move.Save. Extension has served as a hub to map agrifood systems in communities across the state, identify gaps, and develop programs, action plans, partnerships, nutrition education, and interventions based on system elements that drive food insecurity in each community.

Although official SNAP-Ed funding ended on September 30, 2025, Illinois Extension was able to continue scaled-back programming through January 2026 using unspent funds. This allowed staff to maintain valuable nutrition education and outreach to adults, youth, and after-school audiences during the transition.

While Extension is deeply saddened by this federal decision, it remains incredibly proud of the work accomplished and the lasting impact the program made across local communities. Extension is especially grateful for the strong partnerships and collaborations built across Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties, which have been foundational to SNAP-Ed's success.

Looking ahead, Illinois Extension remains fully committed to advancing nutrition security. Building on the strength of its past work, a newly formed Food and Nutrition program area will continue to explore innovative ways to support health and community wellness.

## SNAP-Ed Data



**121**  
SNAP-Ed sessions



**40**  
SNAP-Ed partnerships



**1,774**  
SNAP-Ed participants



**77**  
Changes adopted by partner organizations



**\$377,565**  
Federal SNAP funds received



Master Gardener volunteers stop for a photo during a work day in the Plant-A-Row Garden at Sarah Bush Lincoln Hospital.

## Plant-A-Row Garden: Growing food, growing community

Food insecurity affects more than hunger. Limited access to nutritious foods can impact health and academic outcomes, especially for children and families with fewer resources.

Local solutions that bring volunteers, partners, and Extension together are essential.

The Plant-A-Row Garden at Sarah Bush Lincoln, a partnership between Coles County Master Gardeners and Lincoln Hospital, works to address the need for and access to food. The partnership and gardens began more than 20 years ago and continue to evolve.

Master Gardeners handle planting, maintenance, and harvesting to ensure a steady supply of fresh produce. In the past year, the garden produced more than **1,300** pounds of fruits and vegetables, all donated to local food pantries. These efforts provide healthy food to those in need and strengthen community connections, showing how Extension and local partners can make a meaningful impact on families and the wider community.

Year	Pounds of Produce
2023	2,380
2024	2,518
2025	2,504





## From farm to pantry: The impact of the 2025 Partners in Produce season

Illinois Extension is celebrating another outstanding year of collaboration, community, and shared commitment to feeding its neighbors. Thanks to the dedication of local growers, volunteers, and community partners, more than **112,600** pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables were purchased and donated to food pantries this season.

From crisp cucumbers and juicy tomatoes to hearty squash and zucchini, locally grown produce was distributed to food pantries and feeding sites across Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties. These donations helped provide families with nutritious food options, supporting healthy eating while stretching limited food budgets.

One of the season's key successes was the continued partnership and support from the Arthur Produce Auction as a central pickup location for food pantries. This approach strengthened relationships between growers and pantries while creating a more efficient and reliable distribution system across all five counties. The success of Partners in Produce demonstrates what is possible when farmers, organizations, and communities come together around a shared goal. Each box of produce represents not only nourishment, but also generosity, partnership, and community pride.

As the 2025 growing season comes to a conclusion, Extension extends sincere gratitude to the Arthur Produce Auction, Feeding Illinois, Eastern Illinois Foodbank, and the Central Illinois Foodbank, as well as to the growers, volunteers, food pantries, and community partners who made this year possible. The work truly could not have been done without their support.

Year	Pounds of Produce
2021	64,212
2022	61,241
2023	108,601
2024	136,000
2025	112,669



A young helper is ready to assist with the Partners in Produce food distribution.



Lambdin Farms Processing brings packed ground venison to a local food pantry as part of Hunters Feeding Illinois.

## Hunters support Illinois families

Food insecurity affects about one in eight Illinois residents, and for many families, rising grocery costs make putting nutritious meals on the table a daily challenge. Lean protein can be difficult for households to access when trying to stretch their food budgets.

Hunters Feeding Illinois is helping change that. In its fourth season, this program connected hunters, meat processors, and food pantries to provide fresh, locally sourced venison to families across the state. Partnering with Feeding Illinois, Access Illinois Outdoors, the Southern Illinois Food Pantry Network, and Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed, the program made it easier for food pantries to supply healthy, high-protein meals to those who need them most.

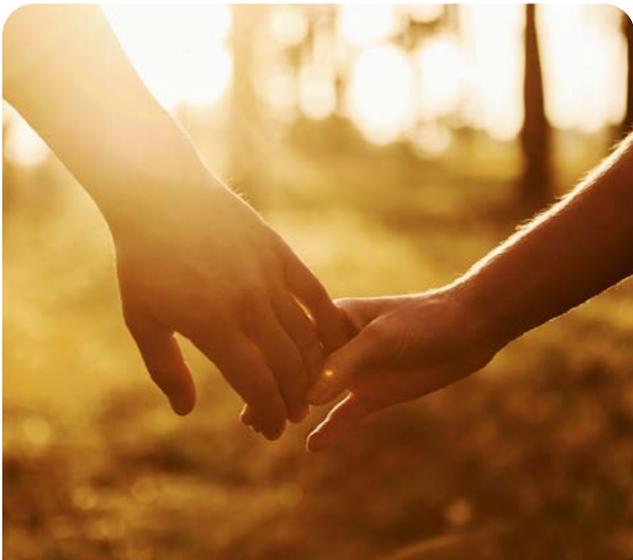
During the 2025 season, Hunters Feeding Illinois distributed **1,532** pounds of frozen, ground venison, providing an estimated **6,128** servings to families in Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties.

The success of this program depends on the generosity and dedication of hunters, meat processors, and food pantries. Thanks to their efforts, more families across Illinois have access to locally sourced, high-quality protein and a little more peace of mind at mealtimes.

Year	Pounds of Venison	Servings of Venison
2022	2,740	10,960
2023	8,000	32,000
2024	3,500	14,000
2025	1,532	6,128

Hunters Feeding Illinois helps ensure that families can put nutritious meals on the table while making their food dollars go further.  
Meredith Probst, SNAP-Ed educator





The Strong Couples Project offers free, researched-backed information to help couples build healthier relationships.



### Free online program supports couples

Many couples face challenges in communication, intimacy, and relationship satisfaction, yet finding accessible, evidence-based support can be difficult. Without guidance, these issues can lead to increased stress, conflict, and a decline in relationship well-being.

The Strong Couples Project, led by Illinois Extension, offers a free, research-backed online program designed to help couples build stronger, healthier relationships. The program uses proven online curriculum, along with five video coaching sessions, to teach practical skills in communication, conflict resolution, and relationship protection. Couples can participate from home, on their own schedule, making it convenient for a wide range of households.

Couples who participate report improved communication, increased intimacy, and higher relationship satisfaction. They also gain tools to manage conflict effectively and maintain connections over the long term. By providing accessible, science-based support, the program strengthens relationships, which in turn enhances family stability, emotional well-being, and overall quality of life.

Strong Couples gave us tools and techniques to communicate more effectively with one another.  
Strong Couples participant



37

Sessions offered since the program began



Learn more about Strong Couples  
[go.illinois.edu/StrongCouples](http://go.illinois.edu/StrongCouples)

## Health Jam and Health Rocks: Strengthening youth health and well-being



Many young people face challenges related to nutrition, physical activity, emotional wellness, and navigating peer pressure, all of which can affect their ability to develop healthy habits and make positive choices. Addressing physical and emotional health early is essential to supporting long-term wellness.

To address this need, 4-H provided Health Jam and Health Rocks, two complementary programs that focus on whole-child health. Health Jam, offered for many years through a strong partnership with Shelby County schools, helps youth understand how daily choices, such as nutrition, physical activity, and personal care, impact overall health. Hands-on learning activities, including food taste-testing, reinforce healthy behaviors and encourage youth to explore new foods.

Health Rocks was implemented to strengthen youth emotional well-being and build critical life skills, including decision-making, communication, and resilience. The program also includes substance use prevention education, helping youth develop skills to manage stress and navigate peer pressure. Using a train-the-trainer model, 4-H partnered with a school guidance counselor to provide curriculum training and ongoing support. The school is currently implementing Health Rocks and is serving 145 students.

Youth are gaining a better understanding of how their choices affect their health, building confidence in making healthy decisions, and developing coping and life skills that support long-term well-being. By promoting healthy habits and emotional resilience, Health Jam and Health Rocks contribute to healthier youth, stronger families, and more resilient communities across the five-county unit.



Shelbyville fifth grade students learn stretching exercises during a Health Jam session.



## Growing resilience through social-emotional learning

Youth across Illinois continue to face challenges related to emotional health and stress management. The 2024 National 4-H Index Study found that Illinois youth scored just 3.21 out of 5 in knowing how to care for their emotional health and 3.2 in having strategies to manage mental health, highlighting a need for education.

In response, the local 4-H team expanded its Health and Wellness programming with a focus on Social Emotional Learning. Programs like Mindful Me, Your Thoughts Matter, Your Feelings Matter, and Get Experience in Mindfulness were delivered in schools and libraries, providing support to **more than 550** youth locally. These programs increased access to inclusive SEL experiences, strengthened youth resilience and emotional regulation, and helped develop skills essential for lifelong well-being and success.



Social Emotional Learning programs equip youth with the tools they need to manage their mental health and develop skills to use now and into adulthood.



## Extension helps older adults improve balance and reduce falls

Falls are one of the most serious health risks facing older adults, often leading to injury, reduced independence, and fear that limits daily activity. To address this challenge, Illinois Extension offers A Matter of Balance: Managing Concerns About Falls, a program designed to build confidence, strength, and practical skills that reduce fall risk and support active living.

The program combines group discussion, problem-solving, and gentle physical activity to help participants safely increase movement, identify fall hazards in their homes, and develop strategies to remain independent.

Post-program surveys showed strong results: 100% of participants reported greater comfort discussing their fear of falling, making environmental changes, continuing exercise, and recommending the program to others. Ninety-five percent felt more comfortable increasing their activity level.

Participants reported making meaningful changes, including improving home safety, strengthening their legs and ankles, and becoming more confident about protecting their health. Through partnerships with local agencies, Illinois Extension continues to help older adults remain safer, stronger, and engaged in their communities.



Family Life Educator Cheri Burcham helps participants stay mentally engaged as they learn new skills and connect with peers during Wits Fitness.

## Wits Fitness supports brain health and social connection

As adults age, changes in memory and thinking can significantly impact daily life. Without regular mental stimulation and social connection, cognitive decline and increased isolation may occur. Illinois Extension's Wits Fitness program was developed to help adults strengthen brain health through cognitively challenging activities paired with meaningful social interaction.

Offered monthly since 2015, Wits Fitness provides participants with opportunities to stay mentally engaged, learn new skills, and connect with peers. A recent evaluation of participants showed strong outcomes:

- 73%** reported high or very high knowledge gains
- 95%** planned to use what they learned
- 98%** planned to share information with others
- 100%** reported that the program met their needs

Because of Illinois Extension's efforts, participants reported increased confidence, greater social engagement, and a stronger commitment to maintaining their brain health, demonstrating the program's positive impact on individual well-being and community connection.





## Building skills, confidence, and community through 4-H fairs

Each summer, 4-H fairs across Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties serve as a highly visible culmination of months of learning and growth for local youth. While these fairs are often seen as competitions, the underlying challenge they address is much broader: preparing young people with the practical skills, confidence, and adaptability they need to succeed in college, careers, and community life. Youth need meaningful, real-world learning experiences that go beyond the classroom and help them translate interests into transferable life skills.

Illinois Extension 4-H addresses this need through a project-based learning model anchored by county fairs. Throughout the year, youth participate in hands-on projects aligned with their interests, including visual arts, creative writing, welding, gardening, baking, sewing, woodworking, and livestock management. These projects intentionally build responsibility, time management, problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills. The 4-H team organized and hosted fairs in Coles, Cumberland, Shelby, and the combined Moultrie-Douglas counties, creating structured opportunities for youth to demonstrate what they learned. General Project Shows featured conference judging, where members received constructive feedback, while livestock shows highlighted months of dedication to animal care and management. Cloverbuds, 4-H's youngest members, participated in age-appropriate projects and conference judging, building early confidence and communication skills.

These efforts align directly with 4-H's Beyond Ready initiative, which focuses on preparing youth with adaptability, leadership, and innovation skills needed in an ever-changing world. Community involvement strengthened the fairs' success and impact. Volunteers served as livestock superintendents, judges, and support staff, while local sponsors and families contributed resources, encouragement, and attendance. Together, they helped create welcoming environments that foster pride, belonging, and connection across counties.



Everett (right), a Shelby County Cloverbud 4-H member, shows off a project during fair season.

The scale and impact of these efforts are reflected in participation levels: Coles County had 436 fair entries, Cumberland County had 521, Moultrie-Douglas counties had 294, and Shelby County had 2,157. Many members advanced to the Illinois State Fair, earning top honors in livestock and general projects, including multiple champion and grand champion awards. These achievements demonstrate not only technical excellence but also youth readiness to perform and communicate their skills on a statewide stage.

Beyond ribbons and trophies, the lasting impact of 4-H fairs is seen in confident youth, strong peer relationships, engaged families, and resilient communities. By providing authentic, hands-on learning experiences supported by volunteers and Extension staff, 4-H fairs continue to shape future leaders and ensure youth across local counties are truly Beyond Ready.

## Youth Development Impact



**70**  
4-H Clubs



**1,011**  
Club Members



**3,408**  
Fair Exhibits



### HATCHING KNOWLEDGE: EXPLORING EMBRYOLOGY

Many youth have limited exposure to food production, making it hard to understand where food comes from or how to explore agriculture careers. Hands-on experiences are key to building agricultural literacy and connecting science to real-world applications. The 4-H Embryology program teaches incubation and hatching, embryonic development, animal care, and food production, while highlighting careers in agriculture. Delivered by 4-H staff in partnership with schools and libraries, the program reached 935 youth, providing meaningful, experiential learning in agriculture and science. Several chicks were adopted by 4-H members, allowing learning to continue beyond the classroom. This experiential program strengthened participants' understanding of animal care, food systems, and workforce opportunities.



### YOUTH LEARN SAFETY AWARENESS TO PREVENT ACCIDENTS

Accidental poisoning and chemical hazards are a real risk in agricultural and rural settings, where household and farm chemicals are common. Many youth may not recognize the dangers of confusing safe items with hazardous substances. The Extension team participated in the Moultrie-Douglas Ag Safety Day. Staff led a station on chemical look-alikes, teaching 257 youth how to identify potentially harmful substances. Using Illinois Poison Prevention Council materials, participants learned to read labels, recognize symbols, follow safety protocols, respond to accidental exposure, and distinguish safe items from dangerous ones. Youth left with improved safety awareness and practical skills to prevent accidents. Hands-on instruction reinforced lifelong habits of caution, supporting Extension's mission to promote safe, healthy communities.



### AG PROGRAMS CONNECT FARMS TO CLASSROOMS

An understanding of agriculture doesn't happen by chance. For youth without direct exposure to farming or gardening, these concepts can feel abstract. Early hands-on experiences are critical for building this knowledge. These needs were addressed through Ag in the Classroom, Let's Get Growing, and Little Roots. Ag in the Classroom, in partnership with the Illinois Farm Bureau, connected students to real-world food systems. Let's Get Growing taught youth how to plan and maintain gardens, while Little Roots introduced younger students to basic gardening concepts. These programs helped youth develop gardening skills, learn about food systems, and build community connections, while teen leaders gained mentorship and teaching experience.



### HYDROPONICS PROGRAM EXPLORES SUSTAINABLE GROWING METHODS

Understanding sustainable growing methods can be challenging, especially when community resources exist, but instructional support is limited. The 4-H team partnered with the Newman Regional Library District and a local private school to deliver hydroponics programming. While the library already had hydroponic equipment, library staff wanted guidance on teaching how to use hydroponics at home. The private school sought engaging STEM instruction tied to real-world applications. 4-H staff led lessons that introduced youth to soilless growing systems and guided them through growing tomato and basil plants using hydroponic machines. Youth gained practical knowledge about food production and learned an accessible, sustainable method for growing plants. Participants left with skills they could apply beyond the classroom, strengthening their understanding of science, sustainability, and local food systems.





Master Gardeners share information on plant care, garden design, and more during A Botanical Evening in the Garden.



## Master Gardeners host A Botanical Evening in the Garden

Many in the community rarely have the opportunity to connect with nature, learn about gardening, or experience the benefits of fresh, homegrown plants.

The community was invited to stroll through the Idea Garden in front of Sarah Bush Lincoln during Illinois Extension’s event, A Botanical Evening in the Garden. The Master Gardeners’ expertise was on full display as they taught guests about plant care, garden design, and the value of edible plants. Guests also sampled botanical beverages and garden-inspired snacks infused with herbs, fruits, and edible flowers grown in the garden. Prize drawings encouraged participants to take herbs and gardening resources home, giving them the tools to start their own edible gardens.

Attendees left inspired, educated, and better equipped to incorporate gardening and fresh, homegrown foods into their daily lives. The event fostered community connection, hands-on learning, and an appreciation for sustainable gardening, while providing participants with tangible resources to continue the experience at home. It was an evening full of education, flavor, and community.



## Gardens, blooms, and bees, oh my!

Pollinators like bees, butterflies, and other insects are critical for healthy ecosystems and food production, yet many face threats from habitat loss and pesticides. Without pollinators, crop yields and biodiversity suffer, impacting communities and local economies.

Extension staff from across 4-H, Master Naturalist, Master Gardeners, and Health and Community Wellness have stepped in to address these challenges. 4-H youth participate in pollinator-focused workshops, learning how to plant pollinator gardens and understand the role of pollinators in food systems. Master Naturalists lead habitat restoration projects and educational events, teaching residents how to protect and support pollinator populations.

Master Gardeners contribute by planting pollinator-friendly gardens in community spaces, hosting workshops, and providing guidance on sustainable gardening practices. Health and Community Wellness shared the importance of monarchs, milkweed, and migration with local elementary students.

The impact of these efforts is tangible. Pollinator gardens now flourish in schools, libraries, and community areas, offering food and habitat for vital pollinator species. Together, these programs enhance pollinator populations, improve local ecosystems, and strengthen community connections to the natural world.



Volunteers work on the pollinator plot at Warbler Ridge.



11 Sessions



611 Participants

## Safeguarding Coles County water

After July’s harmful algal blooms made Mattoon’s drinking water unsafe, Illinois Extension took action. Water quality is a pressing environmental concern statewide, with challenges including pollution, nutrient runoff, and flooding, all of which can pose significant threats to public health and local ecosystems.

The Lumpkin Family Foundation awarded Illinois Extension a \$40,000 grant to fund a two-part initiative in Coles County. First, the Watershed Stewards program will provide public education on protecting local watersheds. Second, participants will help install native plants under trees to slow stormwater runoff, support pollinators, and reduce excess nutrients entering waterways; a concept known as “soft landings.”

Led by Extension specialists and supported by the Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant, these science-based strategies provide homeowners, landscapers, and farmers with practical ways to improve water quality before it reaches treatment facilities. These efforts provide the community with practical ways to keep water clean, protect ecosystems, and mitigate the risk of harmful algal blooms, small actions with a significant impact.



Learn more at [extension.illinois.edu/ccdms/nature-and-environment](https://extension.illinois.edu/ccdms/nature-and-environment)





## Building knowledge for healthier trees and stronger communities

Healthy trees are essential to safe neighborhoods, resilient communities, and long-term environmental sustainability. However, many homeowners, community leaders, and local decision-makers lack access to reliable, research-based information on proper tree care. Inadequate pruning, poor planting practices, and limited understanding of tree health can lead to increased storm damage, higher maintenance costs, and the gradual loss of community tree canopy.

Illinois Extension addressed this need through the online Community Tree Care Series, a set of educational programs designed to improve public understanding of tree health, maintenance, and management. The series provided practical, research-based guidance on tree selection, planting, pruning, maintenance, and long-term care to **more than 500** people.

The series has had a positive impact on individuals and communities. Participants reported increased knowledge and confidence in making informed decisions about tree care, leading to safer practices and healthier landscapes. Communities benefit from improved stewardship of public and private trees, reduced risk of damage from poorly maintained trees, and stronger partnerships between residents, local organizations, and Extension. By strengthening local capacity for tree care and management, the Community Tree Care Series supports long-term environmental health and contributes to safer, more resilient communities across the county.



Participants assist with a tree planting during the Community Tree Care Workshop.



Master Naturalist Kim McGee leads a session on fire resistance at Tree Fest.

## Master Naturalists: Protecting our environment

Local communities face challenges in maintaining healthy natural areas, from invasive species and habitat loss to limited public knowledge about local ecosystems. These issues can affect water quality, wildlife populations, and overall environmental health, making community education and stewardship essential.

Illinois Extension Master Naturalists address these concerns through education, stewardship, hands-on conservation projects, and community engagement programs like Landscaping for Wildlife, Tree ID Walks, and invasive species removal days. Master Naturalist volunteers remove invasive plants, plant native species, and provide outreach that helps residents understand the importance of sustainable land and water management.

The impact of these efforts is far-reaching. Master Naturalists help protect and restore natural habitats, increase public awareness of environmental issues, and inspire residents to take an active role in conservation. Their work supports healthier ecosystems, enhances outdoor recreation opportunities, and fosters a community that values and protects its natural resources for future generations.

Local partners for the Master Naturalist program include: Douglas-Hart Foundation, Grand Prairie Friends, and Coles County Soil and Water Conservation District.

### Master Naturalists



**23**  
Sessions



**890**  
Participants



**21**  
Master Naturalist  
Volunteers



**1,437**  
Volunteer Hours



**\$49,270**  
Value of Master Naturalist Volunteer Contributions



# Beyond Ready: Building skills, building futures



## Workshops engage local youth

Many youth face limited access to programs that build communication skills, leadership capacity, financial literacy, and career awareness outside of the traditional classroom. Communities across central Illinois continue to identify the need for educational opportunities that support youth development, workforce readiness, and life skill acquisition. These gaps are especially evident in rural areas, where opportunities for experiential learning and career exploration can be limited.

To address these challenges, the 4-H team delivered a variety of workshops. This past year, the 4-H team delivered 219 educational workshops, reaching **5,117** youth. Programming addressed financial wellbeing, food production, social and emotional health, workforce preparedness, chronic disease prevention, enhancing and preserving natural resources, community involvement, and connectedness and inclusion. Workshops were designed to be hands-on, developmentally appropriate, and accessible, with delivery occurring in schools, libraries, and community settings.

Workshops were offered as stand-alone learning experiences and as entry points into ongoing 4-H participation. Partnerships with local schools, community organizations, libraries, and volunteers helped to strengthen and expand reach. The impact of these efforts is evident at the individual and community levels. Youth participants developed practical life skills, increased confidence, and gained exposure to potential career pathways. Educators and community partners reported strengthened collaboration and increased capacity to support youth development efforts locally. Collectively, these workshops contributed to a stronger pipeline of engaged, informed, and prepared young people, supporting long-term community vitality and workforce readiness.



Youth learn about small engines during a Coles County 4-H workshop.



Moultrie-Douglas youth learn hands-on skills through a sewing workshop.

## Cooking 101: Building healthy habits and life skills in youth

Community needs assessments conducted in 2023 and 2025 highlighted a consistent concern: many local youth lack basic knowledge of nutrition, food safety, and kitchen skills, essential foundations for independence and lifelong health. Without early exposure to these skills, youth are less prepared to make safe, informed food choices that support their well-being.

To address this need, the 4-H team provided Cooking 101, a statewide-recognized program that introduces youth to nutrition, food preparation, and kitchen safety through hands-on learning. Participants learned how to prevent burns and cuts, practiced proper hand washing, safely stored perishable foods, and cleaned fresh produce. These practical lessons went beyond theory, providing youth with skills they can apply at home every day.

Through partnerships with schools and libraries, the 4-H team expanded access to the program, reaching youth where they live and learn. Participants demonstrated increased confidence in the kitchen, applied nutrition concepts in real-life situations, and developed the ability to prepare safe, healthy meals independently. These experiences support not only individual growth, but also healthier families and communities.

Looking ahead, Cooking 101 will continue to address local needs, support long-term health goals, and help youth build the confidence and life skills needed to establish healthy habits that last a lifetime.



## 4-H Public Speaking develops communication and leadership skills

Strong communication skills are essential for academic success, workforce readiness, and civic engagement; however, many youth have limited opportunities to practice formal speaking in supportive, real-world settings. Anxiety about public speaking, lack of instruction in speech organization, and minimal exposure to constructive feedback can limit young people's confidence and ability to effectively express ideas. Developing these skills early is critical to preparing youth for leadership roles and meaningful participation in their communities.

The 4-H Public Speaking program addresses this need through structured, project-based learning and competitive opportunities that emphasize skill development and personal growth. Public Speaking is offered as a 4-H project area in which youth independently learn how to plan, organize, and deliver speeches. Participants receive instruction on speech structure, audience engagement, and effective use of body language.



Local youth participate in 4-H Public Speaking workshops.

To support youth in developing these skills, Illinois Extension program coordinators offered Public Speaking Workshops that provided guided instruction, peer interaction, and opportunities to practice in a supportive environment. These workshops also align with Extension's priority of building community by connecting youth with shared interests and experienced instructors.

Thirteen youth participated in public speaking workshops across the unit. The workshops served as an introduction to the 4-H program and its emphasis on experiential learning. The Moultrie-Douglas County workshop featured instruction from a teaching associate professor at the University of Illinois, offering youth access to subject-matter expertise and higher education perspectives. Additionally, 17 4-H members participated in public speaking contests, applying their skills in a formal setting that emphasized preparation, professionalism, and confidence.

Youth gain increased confidence, improved communication skills, and experience presenting in front of an audience, skills that transfer to academic settings, future employment, and community involvement. Looking ahead, the 4-H team has planned a campus field trip in 2026 in collaboration with the University of Illinois Public Speaking department. This experience will further support workforce readiness by exposing youth ages 8-18 to a college campus environment while strengthening essential communication and leadership skills.



Youth learn how income, expenses, and consumer choices are connected through Welcome to the Real World.

## Preparing youth for real-life decisions

Many young people leave school with limited experience managing money or understanding the true cost of living on their own. Without opportunities to explore careers, practice budgeting, and make everyday financial decisions in a safe setting, youth can feel unprepared for adulthood. Local needs assessments and statewide Extension priorities continue to point to financial literacy and workforce readiness as critical areas of need for today's youth.

Welcome to the Real World is a 4-H program designed to address these gaps by giving youth hands-on experience with career exploration and budgeting. Through a combination of classroom lessons and an interactive simulation, participants learn how income, expenses, and consumer choices are connected. During the simulation, students move through stations staffed by community volunteers and local organizations, each representing common living expenses such as housing, insurance, or transportation. Schools may choose to offer the full lesson series or focus solely on the simulation, allowing flexibility to meet classroom needs while still delivering meaningful learning.

In 2025, the program was implemented in Coles County through partnerships with local schools and community members. Extension staff worked closely with teachers to provide instruction and coordinate volunteers for the simulation tables. As a result, **257** youth participated in Welcome to the Real World, gaining a clearer understanding of career options, budgeting basics, and the financial responsibilities that come with independent living.



Learn more about 4-H  
[go.illinois.edu/ccdms4H](https://go.illinois.edu/ccdms4H)







## Extension Council

The unit advisory council is an important advocacy group that supports Illinois Extension’s services as required by the County Cooperative Extension law. The council helps meet the challenges of maintaining close relationships and community awareness in each county by cooperatively working with Illinois Extension staff in planning, promoting, developing, implementing, and evaluating Extension programs, which are designed to meet the needs, interests, and resources of the local communities being served.

### Who serves on the council?

Membership is comprised of representatives from Coles, Cumberland, Douglas, Moultrie, and Shelby counties who are willing to represent their organization, community, or interest in Illinois Extension services and resources.

### When and where does the council meet?

There are four meetings per year. Meetings are currently held at noon at Sarah Bush Lincoln on the first Thursday of February, May, August, and November.

### Interested in learning more?

Contact County Director Jessie Streit at [mcclusk2@illinois.edu](mailto:mcclusk2@illinois.edu) or call 217-543-3755.

### Thank you to the 2025 Extension council members!

#### Coles County

Bristole Zimmerman

#### Cumberland County

Janet Blade

Tom Webb

#### Douglas County

Elizabeth Mitsdarffer

#### Moultrie County

Travis Phelps

Scott Seegmiller

Erik Stollard

#### Shelby County

Kelly Barringer

Gary Gengini

**181**

4-H, Master Naturalist, and Master Gardener volunteers

**64**

Local leaders receiving local governmental educational resources

**115,173**

Pounds of produce donated through SNAP-Ed and Master Gardener initiatives

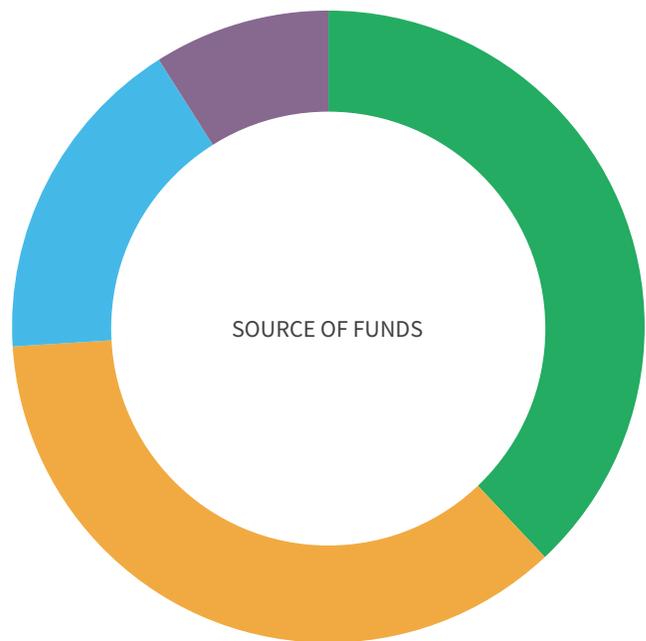
**915**

Total educational sessions for the five-county unit

**26,572**

Total contacts for the five-county unit

Funding for Illinois Extension comes from a combination of local, county, state, and federal dollars returned to the community through educational programming and resources.



Amount	Source
38%	County Board Funding
36%	State Funding
17%	Local Funding
9%	Federal Funding

---

## STAFF

Jessie Streit  
County Director

Krista Houk  
4-H Educator

Meredith Probst  
Food and Nutrition Educator

Kathy Deters  
Office Support Associate

Melania Kincaid  
4-H Program Coordinator

Penny Hood  
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Diana Litteral  
Office Support Assistant

Macey Maxey  
4-H Program Coordinator

MaryBeth Massey  
SNAP-Ed Program Coordinator

Cheri Burcham  
Family Life Educator

Yolanda Nation  
4-H Program Coordinator

Jenny Lee  
Master Gardener and  
Master Naturalist Program  
Coordinator

Rachel Stenger  
4-H Program Coordinator

---

## OFFICE INFORMATION

### Coles County Extension

809 Broadway Ave.  
Mattoon, IL 61938  
(217) 345-7034

### Cumberland County Extension

102 S. Meridian, PO Box 218  
Toledo, IL 62468  
(217) 849-3931

All offices

Mon - Fri, 8 am - 4:30 pm  
(closed noon - 1 pm)

### Shelby County Extension

1125 W. North 2nd St.  
Shelbyville, IL 62565  
(217) 774-9546

### Moultrie-Douglas County Extension

304 E. Progress St.  
Arthur, IL 61911  
(217) 543-3755

---

## ONLINE



[facebook.com/UniversityofIllinoisExtensionUnit19](https://facebook.com/UniversityofIllinoisExtensionUnit19)



[extension.illinois.edu/ccdms](https://extension.illinois.edu/ccdms)



[uie-ccdms@illinois.edu](mailto:uie-ccdms@illinois.edu)



**Illinois Extension**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

### College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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.

©2026 University of Illinois Board of Trustees. For permission to reprint, revise, or otherwise use, contact [extension@illinois.edu](mailto:extension@illinois.edu).