



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.



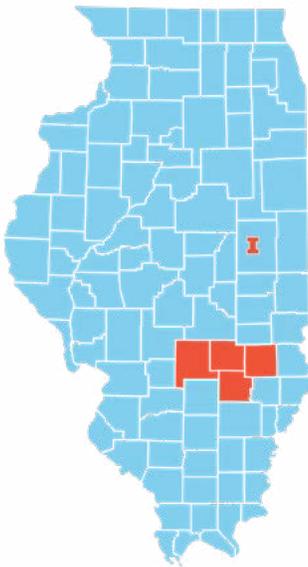
Serving Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Kasey Kemme
Extension County Director

University of Illinois Extension; Navigating a period of change



Another successful year has come to a close. As we reflect on 2025, our unit’s resilience stands out as a defining strength as we navigated a period of change. Throughout the year, our focus remained on delivering relevant, practical education that empowers the communities of Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper counties to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing world.

Our staff remains dedicated to providing accessible, high-quality programs that reach individuals regardless of location or background. Our commitment to serving youth and rural communities has been evident throughout the past year, with our 4-H programs continuing to rank among the largest and most active in the state. While 2025 presented new

challenges and transitions for our unit, our staff demonstrated remarkable resilience—embracing change, supporting one another, and proving our ability to overcome challenges as a unified team.

I am pleased to share this snapshot of our work across Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper counties. As we look ahead to 2026, we remain focused on building new partnerships, launching new initiatives, and continuing to meet the evolving needs of the communities we serve.

With gratitude,

Kasey Kemme
Extension County Director

Cover photo: Lane Luttrell, Clay County 4-H member, showcases his chicken during fair season. Photo courtesy of Erin Maxwell.

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
-  Health
-  Economy
-  Partnerships
-  Environment
-  Technology and Discovery
-  Food and Agriculture
-  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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Hunters Feeding Illinois improves food insecurity within local communities

Local residents experience hunger every day. Hunters Feeding Illinois connects hunters, meat processors, and food pantries to bring lean protein to Illinois residents and families, providing a unique pathway to address and improve food insecurity.

In the 2024-2025 hunting season, Hunters Feeding Illinois distributed 25,794 pounds of frozen, ground venison to 54 food pantries across east-central and southern Illinois. This provided an estimated 97,000 meals, reaching nearly 49,800 families.

Hunters Feeding Illinois, previously known as the Illinois Deer Donation Program, returned for its fourth season in partnership with Feeding Illinois, Access Illinois Outdoors, Southern Illinois Food Pantry Network, and University of Illinois Extension SNAP-Education. Food pantries in 50 Illinois counties are participating in the program this year.



Oconee Chop Shop workers, in neighboring Shelby County, are shown with their first deer donation of the season distributing 78 pounds of ground venison to the local food pantry.

Around one in eight people in Illinois struggle to access food, with rates higher in two-thirds of the program coverage area. Protein is expensive, and Hunters Feeding Illinois makes it possible for Illinois individuals and families to stretch their food budget.

SNAP-Ed Educator Michelle Fombelle

Like previous years, hunters can donate whole harvested deer at no cost. Partnering meat processors are prepared to accept donated deer at the start of deer hunting season in October. Because processing volume increases throughout the season, hunters are encouraged to call processors in advance to confirm they have slots to accept deer. Processors have a select number of slots for donated deer, which becomes more limited as the season continues.

Hunters Feeding Illinois supports food pantries in 54 Illinois counties. The following meat processors accepted deer donations in the local area:

- Blair's Slaughtering and Processing- Louisville
- Howe's Custom Deer Processing- Cowden
- Salt and Strings Butchery- Louisville
- Windy Ridge Processing- Shobonier

Thanks to Illinois Extension's collaboration with Feeding Illinois, donations will be doubled dollar for dollar. A \$50 donation becomes \$100, which covers the processing of one deer.

Individuals can visit the deer donation website to learn more about the program, find healthy venison recipes, or make a monetary donation.



Learn more or donate at go.illinois.edu/deerdonation



Partnership training meets the needs of local food service staff

Many students eat two-thirds of their meals at school, so it's important they receive healthy, nutritious food. ABCs of School Nutrition is a partnership between Illinois Extension and the Illinois State Board of Education.

Extension works diligently to meet professional development needs for local school food service staff in rural communities with limited funding. Professional Standards for school nutrition professionals are a key provision of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. It requires a minimum amount of annual training hours for all state directors of school nutrition programs, state directors of distributing agencies, school nutrition program directors, managers, and staff. To meet the required standards, local food service staff typically must travel more than two hours to earn their required hours. Attendance is usually limited to one or two staff due to budgetary constraints.

Recognizing the need in the area, Extension partnered with the local Regional Offices of Education #3 (Vandalia), #11 (Charleston), and #12 (Lawrenceville) to offer regional opportunities for food service staff to attend a one-day training to obtain all their required continuing education credits. School food service staff appreciate the opportunity to network with other schools, sharing advice, recipes, and solutions to common issues. Members of the Illinois State Board of Education also presented and were available for questions. In three days, 179 school food service staff from more than 30 rural school districts attended one of three regional trainings in July and August.



Local food service staff attend ABCs of School Nutrition to obtain all of their required training.

SNAP-Education



37

Local Partnerships (K-12 Schools, Early Childhood Centers, Emergency Food Sites)



173

Nutrition Education Classes



498

Nutrition Education Participants



Volunteers tend to the raised beds in one of the community gardens created through the Growing Together initiative.

Donation gardens provide produce to local communities

Food insecurity is not just about hunger. It's about not having access to food options that meet nutritional needs, which is particularly important for those with limited resources. Growing Together is a multi-disciplinary special project focused on increasing access to fruits and vegetables to help food-insecure families. The project is funded through SNAP-Ed and works in partnership with Illinois Master Gardeners.

Through this collaboration, SNAP-Ed funds were provided to build or expand food donation gardens as local Master Gardener projects. The goal is to use team-specific expertise, community education, and research-based intervention strategies to improve access to fruits and vegetables, improve food utilization at donation sites, and increase community capacity to sustain the donation garden food system in food-insecure communities throughout the state.

Fayette County's Little Vandalia Garden donated 2,892 pounds of fresh produce, while the Effingham County Community Garden donated an additional 734 pounds to their local communities. Beyond the immediate impact on food access, Growing Together facilitated the development of long-lasting partnerships that have proven invaluable for program reporting, continuity, and resilience during periods of staffing challenges. These strengthened relationships also opened the door to new collaborative projects independent of Growing Together funding, demonstrating the sustainability of the partnerships and positioning them for continued growth and impact.

Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



16

Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



\$34,775

Value of Volunteer Hours



Cooking Across Continents brings global learning to local youth



Effingham County 4-H's Cooking Across Continents program is a unique, engaging way for homeschooled youth to explore the world without leaving the county. This immersive program blends culture, geography, and hands-on cooking to help youth build skills while discovering how people live, eat, and connect across the globe.

Each month, youth are guided by a local "tour guide," a community volunteer who has personally traveled to the featured country. These guides bring their experiences to life by sharing stories, photos, and cultural artifacts, allowing participants to explore traditions, daily life, and geography in a meaningful, interactive way. Youth also receive a 4-H passport at the beginning of the year, collecting a new country stamp each month as they "travel" from destination to destination.

After learning about the country, participants move into the kitchen where the tour guide becomes the chef for the day. Together, youth prepare a traditional dish inspired by the featured country, giving them the opportunity to taste global flavors while building practical cooking skills. From measuring and mixing to food safety and teamwork, each session reinforces essential kitchen and life skills.

Beyond cooking, the program connects youth to the Passport to the World 4-H project area, encouraging curiosity, cultural awareness, and respect for diversity. By linking food, geography, and culture, Cooking Across Continents helps youth see the world through a broader lens while strengthening their confidence, independence, and willingness to try new things.

The program has been especially meaningful for homeschooling families, offering a structured, hands-on educational experience that complements classroom learning. Through shared meals, interactive lessons, and a welcoming environment, youth form friendships, practice leadership, and develop a deeper appreciation of global cultures.

Cooking Across Continents reflects Effingham County 4-H's commitment to innovative, inclusive programming that prepares young people with practical skills and the global awareness needed to thrive in an increasingly connected world.



Learn more about Illinois 4-H
4h.extension.illinois.edu



Caroline Stice shows off Japanese-inspired attire during the Cooking Across Continents program.



Lou Lou Stice is ready to explore Japan during the Cooking Across Continents program.

Sewing program builds skills, confidence, and creativity

Effingham County 4-H youth had the opportunity to develop practical life skills through a hands-on sewing workshop that introduced participants to the fundamentals of machine sewing, fabric handling, and creative design.

During the workshop, youth worked one-on-one with experienced volunteers as they learned how to safely operate sewing machines, accurately guide fabric, and follow basic construction techniques. Participants practiced measuring, pinning, and stitching as they created their own sewn projects, building technical ability and confidence along the way.

The sewing workshop provided more than just instruction—it offered mentorship. Adult volunteers supported each youth at their own pace, helping them problem-solve, correct mistakes, and take pride in their finished work. This supportive environment allowed participants to grow not only in skill but in independence and perseverance.

Through activities like sewing, Effingham County 4-H continues to provide youth with valuable life skills that extend beyond the classroom. Programs that combine creativity with practical learning prepare young people to think critically, work patiently, and express themselves through hands-on projects—skills that serve them well in school, future careers, and everyday life.





Effingham County 4-H excels at livestock judging competition

Effingham County 4-H members earned statewide recognition at the Thirty-Ninth Annual Dan Hoge Invitational Livestock Judging Competition held at Black Hawk College, demonstrating outstanding skill, preparation, and professionalism in a highly competitive field.

Two Effingham County youth represented the county with distinction. Emma Beckman delivered an exceptional performance across multiple categories, earning:

- Eighth overall in the senior questions division
- Second overall in questions
- Fifth overall in sheep and goats
- Top 10 overall in cattle
- Eighth overall in the entire competition

Emma Wendling also had a strong showing, finishing 42nd overall in a competition that brought together top livestock judging teams from across the region.

The Dan Hoge Invitational is renowned for its rigorous standards and challenging evaluations, which require participants to demonstrate a deep understanding of animal science, breed characteristics, and industry standards while responding to complex oral and written questions. Success at this level reflects individual excellence and high-quality coaching.

These achievements were supported by livestock judging coach Evan Link, whose guidance and dedication helped prepare the youth to compete at a high level. Together, the team's performance highlights the strength of Effingham County 4-H's agricultural education and youth leadership programs. Effingham County 4-H is proud of Emma Beckman and Emma Wendling for representing the county with excellence and professionalism on the statewide stage.



Jasper County 4-H hosts summer camp for area youth

Summer programs help ensure kids continue to learn, grow, and thrive, even when school is not in session. At the conclusion of the 2025 school year, Jasper County 4-H was ready to jump in with experiential, hands-on learning opportunities for local youth. They hosted a summer camp, with each day focusing on a different 4-H theme.

During the program, youth spent their days exploring visual arts, food and nutrition, STEM, and natural resources through fun, hands-on activities. Through partnerships with local businesses and the help of Extension employees, the event reached nearly 45 youth across the county.



Kinsley Ochs shows off a fish she caught during Natural Resources Day at 4-H Summer Camp.

Youth spark imagination through 4-H program

4-H helps kids find their spark, build real-world skills, and become resilient, adaptable, lifelong learners. Students in the third grade classes at Newton Community Elementary and St. Thomas schools participated in the Spark Your Imagination program, which introduces students to 4-H projects offered by Illinois 4-H.

Students participated in hands-on activities that gave them insight into several 4-H project areas. They also made trail mix, decorated cookies, created marshmallow catapults, and made paper light circuits. They even planted underwear to learn about soil biodiversity as a fun way to engage with the environment. Allowing students to get a glimpse into different projects creates curiosity and encourages 4-H members to try new projects and non-4-H members to possibly join 4-H.

Jasper County 4-H Ambassadors and 4-H Federation members assist with the program, which helps to build their leadership and communication skills. Third grade students are excited to see the teen leaders, and they all enjoy working together.



(L-R): Kody Bierman, Garrett Brummer, Kyle Bierman, and Jase Cochran enjoy STEM day activities at 4-H Summer Camp.

STEM programs and clubs spark curiosity and inspire learners



Astronomy Club inspires youth to look up and dream big

Astronomy helps youth become curious thinkers and inspired learners. In 2025, Fayette County 4-H launched its inaugural Astronomy Club, which quickly became a favorite among students, sparking curiosity and wonder about the cosmos. Each week, members gathered to explore the mysteries of the universe, from the twinkling stars in our night sky to the distant galaxies light-years away. The club hosted guest speakers, organized stargazing nights, and even held a telescope-building workshop. As the program progressed, the camaraderie among members grew, united by their shared passion for the stars. It was more than just a club; it was a journey through the universe, inspiring everyone involved to look up and dream big.



4-H Program Coordinator Olivia Snyder leads the STEM Challenge at Ramsey School.



STEM Challenge develops problem solvers of tomorrow

Illinois 4-H is empowering youth to be the inventors, makers, scientists, and engineers needed for an ever-growing STEM world. Fayette County introduced new, innovative activities to fifth grade classes this past school year through the STEM Challenge. The STEM Challenge is a series of STEM-themed activities that inspire young people to take an interest in STEM topics through hands-on learning and challenges.

The event was designed to ignite their curiosity and foster a love for science, technology, engineering, and math. Teams of young learners collaborated to solve real-world problems, engaging in hands-on activities that tested their ingenuity and creativity.



Fifth grade students race to complete their binary codes as part of the STEM Challenge at Ramsey School.

One of the most exciting parts of the challenge series was the Binary Code Relay Race. In this challenge, students were taught about the basics of coding and how it serves as the instructions in a computer program that tell it what to do. Students were tasked with translating a binary command into our alphabet and raced to be the first to complete the decoded task. The room buzzed with excitement as students cheered their team on and raced to solve the code.

By the end of the challenge series, the young participants not only gained new skills but also a newfound confidence in their abilities to tackle challenges head-on. The STEM Challenge in Fayette County was more than just a fun activity; it was an opportunity for students to discover the endless possibilities within the world of STEM and envision themselves as the problem-solvers of tomorrow.

4-H Programming



86
4-H Clubs



10,005
4-H Experiences



1,164
4-H Members



4,185
4-H Fair Exhibits



(L-R): 4-H member Leigha Ruesken, 4-H Educator Megan Pierson, and 4-H member Kenzie Alvis donate ground pork to the Clay County Ministerial Alliance Food Pantry.



Pork to Fork feeds those in need

4-H develops young people who are empowered, confident, hard-working, determined, responsible, and compassionate—seeing a world beyond themselves. For about four weeks this summer, a few Clay County 4-H members put this plan into action with a special project that had a significant goal in mind—helping to feed families in their community. Thanks to a food advocacy grant from Illinois 4-H, they were able to purchase two pigs from a local producer, provide their feed, and cover processing costs.

After months of hard work and dedication, the project resulted in 293 pounds of ground pork donated to the Clay County Ministerial Alliance Food Pantry—enough to help feed 146 families. This project not only taught local youth valuable lessons in responsibility, agriculture, and community service, but it also made a real difference in Clay County.



Kenzie Alvis shares packaged ground pork with a local food pantry.



Leigha Ruesken shares information about their food advocacy grant.

Local leaders and volunteers inducted into 4-H Hall of Fame



The Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame recognizes 4-H volunteers who have a track record of exemplary service to 4-H or outstanding career and community achievement and are nominated by either county Illinois Extension staff or by the Illinois 4-H Foundation Board. Several local volunteers and leaders, whose dedication and heart keep Illinois 4-H thriving, were inducted into the 2025 Hall of Fame. They were recognized alongside other 4-H volunteers from across the state during a special ceremony at the Illinois State Fair in August.



Keith Payne
Clay County 4-H



Ben Frazier
Fayette County 4-H



Trish Purcell
Effingham County 4-H



Gary Joe Johnson
Jasper County 4-H

4-H takes many helping hands. We are grateful for each individual in our community who takes time out of their busy schedules to make 4-H programs in our counties such a success.”
4-H Educator Megan Pierson



View all of the 2025 4-H Hall of Fame inductees
go.illinois.edu/254HALumniVolunteerAwards



Celebrating Extension staff and their impact on local communities

Illinois Extension is excited to celebrate the accomplishments of current staff and welcome new staff members. Their work to develop educational programs, extend knowledge, and build partnerships supports people, communities, and their environments as part of the state's land grant institution.



Extension Director and Associate Dean Matthew Vann presents the Individual Extension Excellence Award to Katie Turkal.

Katie Turkal receives Individual Excellence Award

4-H Youth Development Program Coordinator Katie Turkal embodies the spirit of 4-H through her creativity, energy, commitment to youth development, and work with partners. Balancing school programming, community outreach, and fair season preparation, she launched a successful 4-H summer day camp. Each day highlighted a different theme— nature, STEM, cooking, and the arts — giving participants hands-on experiences that built confidence, curiosity, and lifelong skills. Her thoughtful planning, enthusiasm, and partnerships made the camp smooth and impactful. Beyond her outstanding event coordination, Turkal's leadership, mentorship, and collaboration have strengthened relationships across schools and communities. Her work exemplifies how one person's passion can spark meaningful learning and lasting engagement for youth across her community.

Patty Edwards receives Walking on Sunshine Award

The "Walking on Sunshine Award" is given to Illinois Extension Nutrition Education Program team members who show an exceptionally positive attitude. SNAP-Ed Community Worker Patty Edwards was a recipient of the award during the 2025 Illinois Extension Nutrition Education Program conference. The award acknowledges staff who bring joy and enthusiasm to their important work in nutrition education.



Patty Edwards

Kasey Kemme steps into leadership role

This past year, Kasey Kemme stepped into a leadership position to further serve the residents and communities of central Illinois as county director. As a former 4-H educator for the unit, Kemme has years of experience and a strong commitment to education and community engagement. In her role, she oversees local Extension operations, including staff leadership, budget and finance, program planning, and impact reporting. Kemme also guides strategic partnerships and supports volunteers to amplify Extension's mission: delivering research-based educational programs that enrich individuals and strengthen local communities.



Kasey Kemme

Megan Pierson named 4-H educator

After serving as a 4-H Extension program coordinator for five years, Megan Pierson is taking on a new role as the unit's 4-H youth development educator. Pierson's connection to local 4-H communities and her background with youth engagement positions her for success in the new role. She will serve the youth of Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper counties, empowering them with skills needed to go beyond the expected and to be Beyond Ready.



Megan Pierson

Erin Maxwell transitions to office support role

Erin Maxwell began her career with Illinois Extension in 2002 as Extra Help, then moved to a SNAP-Education community worker in 2004. Since then, she has been serving the Clay County community in many ways, including collaborating with food pantries and delivering healthy living education to youth throughout the county. In December 2025, Maxwell transitioned to Clay County Office Support Assistant. Extension is excited to have her in this position and looks forward to seeing how she continues to grow.



Erin Maxwell



Announcing new staff

Extension professionals are committed to the values of collaboration, credibility, inclusivity, and learning. Illinois Extension is excited to welcome new staff members to support Clay, Effingham, Fayette, and Jasper counties.

Maci Niemerg

Maci Niemerg joined Illinois Extension in July 2025 as an Office Support Assistant in Jasper County. In this role, she assists with day-to-day operations, community outreach efforts, and educational programming that align with Extension’s mission to serve residents through research-based resources and community development. A native of Dieterich, Niemerg graduated from Dieterich High School and continued her education at Lake Land College, where she earned an associate’s degree in business. She is passionate about community engagement and is enthusiastic about contributing to the mission of Extension. Niemerg looks forward to connecting with community members and is committed to delivering exceptional support and service to make a positive impact throughout the region.



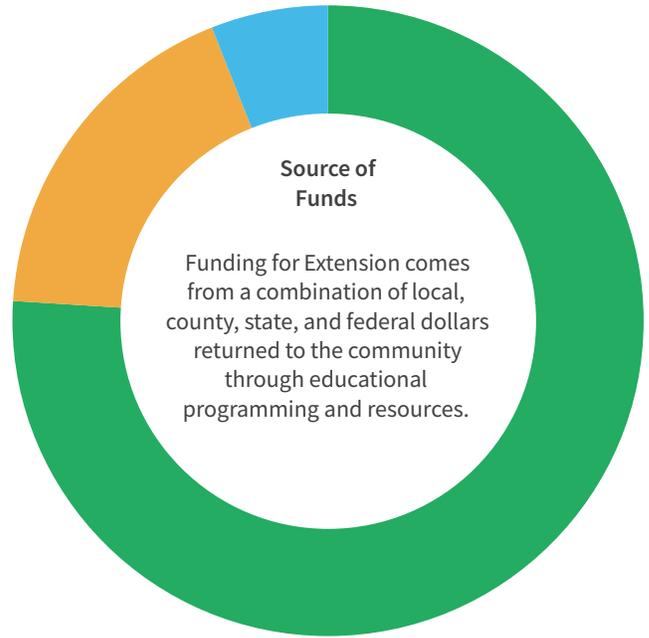
Maci Niemerg

Natalie Stine

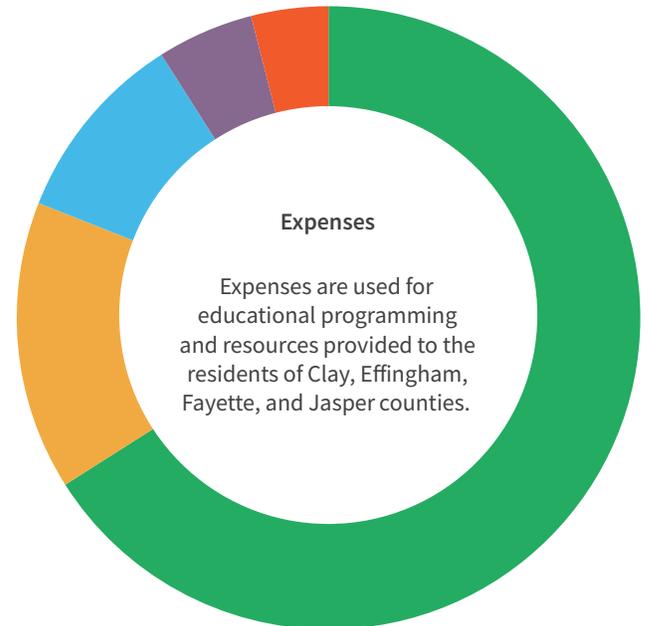
Natalie Stine joined Illinois Extension in December 2025 as an Office Support Assistant in Effingham County. Stine and her husband, Dan, have operated their grain and livestock farm in rural Farina for the past 25 years. Agriculture has played a central role in their family life. Growing up, Natalie and Dan were active 4-H members, and they continued that tradition with their three boys, each of whom participated in 4-H throughout their youth. Stine has supported the program for many years through volunteering and involvement in various activities. She is excited to join the Extension team and looks forward to supporting staff and serving local communities.



Natalie Stine



Amount	Source
76%	State
18%	Local
6%	Federal



Amount	Source
66%	Personnel
15%	Programming
10%	Facilities/Utilities
5%	Travel
4%	Other

STAFF

Kasey Kemme
County Director

Michelle Fombelle
SNAP-Ed Educator

Megan Pierson
4-H Youth Development
Educator

Patti Logan
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

Olivia Snyder
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

Katie Turkal
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

Michelle Hoffman
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