



# Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

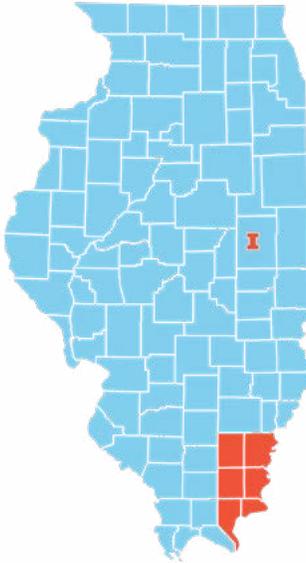


Serving Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Pope, Saline, and White Counties  
**ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025**





Angela Messmer  
County Director



# 2025 marks another exciting chapter for University of Illinois Extension

The past year has been filled with impactful programs, memorable events, and countless moments where our staff and volunteers showed their unwavering commitment to the communities we serve. It has been a privilege to witness firsthand the creativity, skill, and heart that go into every workshop, class, and outreach effort.

In this report, you'll find a snapshot of our 2025 accomplishments—photos and stories that highlight cooking schools, agriculture programs, 4-H shows, nutrition education, food donation gardens, youth development, and so much more. I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the difference these programs make every day in the lives of youth, families, and community members throughout our region.

I am incredibly proud to work with such an exceptional team. Their dedication, professionalism, and deep care for the people we serve truly set them apart. Each day, they bring their best—ensuring our communities receive meaningful, high-quality programming in 4-H Youth Development, SNAP-Ed, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Small Farms

and Local Foods, and Community and Economic Development. They represent the very best of what Extension stands for.

As we look ahead to 2026, we are excited to continue building on our successes—strengthening long-standing traditions, expanding our reach, and creating new opportunities that inspire learning, connection, and growth.

I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to our 4-H volunteers, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, County Boards, 4-H and SNAP-Ed families, community partners, and the residents of the counties we serve. Your support, time, and trust make everything we do possible. We are honored to work alongside you.

Thank you for being part of the Illinois Extension and Dixon Springs Ag Center family. We look forward to all we will accomplish together in the coming year.

Angela Messmer  
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Hardin/Pope County 4-Her's explore the Shawnee National Forest during the Hiking SPIN Club.

# 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
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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:

<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
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# Through Annie's Project, Southeastern Illinois College and Illinois Extension empower local women in agriculture



A group of local women with a desire to increase their knowledge of farming and farm business topics came together at Southeastern Illinois College for a discussion-based workshop called Annie's Project. During this six-week course in late January through February, attendees were visited by professionals who presented on topics such as balance sheets, cash flow, farm and home insurance policies, production tools, and bookkeeping software just to name a few. Annie's Project is a nationally recognized organization founded by Ruth Hambleton. Ruth's mother, Annie, grew up in a small town in Northern Illinois. Her goal was to marry a farmer and she did. Annie spent her lifetime learning how to be an involved business partner with her farm husband. Together they did great things, but it wasn't easy. This is Annie's Project – taking her experiences and sharing them with farm women living and working in a complex business. Ruth based the educational component of Annie's Project on the needs of farm women she identified while working for Illinois Extension in the areas of farm business management and marketing.

Sponsors for this course included SIC, Farm Credit Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Illinois Extension. With a better understanding of the information and networking created from this course, the women participating identified several other women in agriculture that they feel would greatly benefit when this course is offered in the future. One participant, a fourth-generation grain farmer actively involved in the daily operations of her family farm stated:

I am really glad I decided to attend this course. I have learned something new and beneficial to my farm every night we have met. It is also great to be able to share experiences and challenges with other women.

Sandy Tuttle, Tuttle Farms



Sandy Tuttle speaks to the group about succession planning on family farms and the importance of being open to adopting new and innovative practices.



Learn more about Annie's Project mission [anniesproject.org](http://anniesproject.org)



## 2025 research efforts from Dixon Springs Agricultural Center high tunnels

The focus of fruit and vegetable research over the past year has been the incorporation of cover crops into the overall management practices within one of the high tunnels at Dixon Springs Agricultural Center. This focus is a continuation of a previously funded grant project that evaluated methods of increasing natural predator insect populations to achieve biological insect control over typical high tunnel insect pests. By overwintering cover crops within the high tunnel, not only was a habitat being created for insect retention, but the cover crops also provided soil health benefits of increased microbial activity, increased organic matter, and improved water and root infiltration.

Economically, tomatoes deliver the quickest rate of return on investment of a high tunnel structure. Typically, in southern Illinois, tomatoes are planted into high tunnels by the first week of April. When incorporating overwintered cover crops into a high tunnel production system, the biggest challenge is making sure cover crops have completely terminated. Spring oats, for example, winter-kill and will terminate naturally well before the April 1 planting date. But other cover crops, like crimson clover or annual ryegrass, survive through the winter and will need to be terminated. For these crops to be successfully terminated, they must reach flowering stage in development.

Extension's research compared two different termination methods, mechanical and solarization, to determine which one worked best and met the planting date goal. For solarization, clear plastic was attached over the growing beds from the end

of February through the end of March. This method provided enough heat to completely terminate the cover crops even though they had not reached the flowering stage prior to being covered. Based on the timing of the solarization and the amount of plant growth, solarized plots showed less root and biomass development, which was expected. The specific system of raised beds at DSAC required mechanical termination, which involved weed eating the plants at ground level once 50% flowering was reached. Crimson clover was flowering before the April 1 deadline, but the annual ryegrass still had not reached flowering by the second week of April. Plots were mechanically terminated during the second week of April, and several sections of annual ryegrass continued to regrow throughout the tomato growing season. This regrowth created competition for nutrients, causing tomato plant growth and fruit set to be delayed and reduced when compared to other plots with no annual ryegrass competition.

Future research plans include:

- Continued work on cover crop termination dates using solarization.
- Insect monitoring and collection.
- Comparison of organic fertilizer and conventional fertilizer for lettuce and tomatoes being grown hydroponically.
- Tomato and pepper variety trial.

## DSAC commercial tunnel harvest 2025



14,386

Pounds of produce



## MASTER GARDENERS BRING BEAUTY AND EDUCATION TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Local Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists helped their communities in big ways in 2025. They were involved in community garden efforts, established seed libraries, and educated youth during Stewardship Week. Volunteers assisted youth during summer gardening classes and helped maintain the gardens during the growing season. There are now five seed libraries located within local libraries to help serve the needs of library patrons. An estimated 325 people were served by these local seed libraries. Additional seeds were also shared with other local organizations, including food pantries.



**719**  
Volunteer hours



**\$25,014**  
Value of volunteer hours



## A YEAR OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR MASTER GARDENER AND MASTER NATURALIST VOLUNTEERS

In 2025, Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers dedicated their skills across southern Illinois. Some, like Herb Klickner, received state recognition at the Springfield conference, with Klickner earning the prestigious State Outstanding Award—an honor bestowed on only about 2% of Master Gardeners each year. Deanna Dyer was honored with the Sustained Excellence Award for her ongoing contributions and new initiatives. Congratulations to Herb and Deanna!

The Master Gardener program also provides advanced training. Charlie Nolan completed a course on Mastering Urban Tree Health and Identification. Herb Klickner enhanced his skills by completing Advanced Ecology. Klickner completed the Master Naturalist training, which includes training in ecology. Extension values local volunteers who expand their knowledge to better serve their communities.



## HANDS IN THE SOIL, HARVESTS FOR THE COMMUNITY

2025 marked the fourth summer of youth gardening classes at the Dixon Springs Ag Center youth high tunnel. Ag Gardener Julie Zakes and Program Coordinator Jennifer Warren welcomed school-aged youth to the tunnel, where participants were instructed on how to maintain the plants that are grown there. During the months of June and July, the weekly class helped care for plants by weeding, watering, pruning, and harvesting. Produce harvested in the youth tunnel was carefully weighed and donated back to the community through the blessing box located on-site at DSAC. In addition to learning about garden maintenance, students also learned about pollinators, succulents, and other topics through lessons taught by Extension staff and volunteers. In 2025, a total of 987 pounds of produce was donated back to the community from the youth tunnel area.



## PLANTING THE SEEDS OF KNOWLEDGE: GARDENING EDUCATION FOR HARDIN COUNTY YOUTH

In the spring of 2025, Master Gardener volunteer, Nancy Drone, had a vision to better educate local youth on where their food comes from and teach them the basics of growing their own food. With Program Coordinator Jennifer Warren's support, Drone taught gardening lessons to elementary students in Hardin County. Older students had the opportunity to stay after school once a month for gardening lessons. The after school group helped plant seeds and pull weeds in the garden bed at the school. They enjoyed watching the plants grow and sampling the vegetables at harvest. When students returned to school in the fall of 2025, Drone and Warren began delivering lessons to the kindergarten classes at Hardin County Elementary. These lessons have extended beyond the garden to include lessons on trees, apples, birds, the seasons, and seed saving. The students were excited to learn about their environment and how they can help grow food for their families.

## GIFT Gardens & Totals

Throughout the summer, garden class participants and 4-H members learned to care for a garden and feed their neighbors.

Donation gardens in White County and at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center provided produce to the Golconda Golden Circle, Salvation Army Food Pantry, Benton Food Pantry, Cambria Food Pantry, Good Samaritan Ministries, Herrin House of Hope, Murphysboro Food Pantry, Christian Community Compassion Center, Cherry Street Food Pantry, Grayville Senior Center and White County Senior Center as well as filled the donation box on site at DSAC.

Youth taking part in gardening classes in White County over the summer grew a variety of vegetables and melons. Participants helped weed, harvest, weigh, and wash produce. In addition to learning how to care for a garden, lessons including sun safety, pollinators, and weather were presented by Extension staff, volunteers, and White County 4-H Teen Teachers. Each week, produce was donated to Cherry Street Food Pantry, Grayville Senior Center, and White County Senior Center.

### Extension food donation gardens in 2025



**5**  
Active donation gardens



**5,838**  
Pounds of produce donated



**\$10,567**  
Value of produce donated



## Interdisciplinary workforce development, agriculture and nutrition education projects in Saline County

Community partnerships are fundamental to the mission of Illinois Extension. Collaboration with community organizations, schools, and local businesses enables staff to broaden their impact and create more opportunities for residents.

This year, a new partnership was formed with Sol Systems and the Eldorado Solar Project in Saline County. Thanks to funding from this project, Extension was able to cover Saline County 4-H registrations, purchase virtual reality simulators, acquire hydroponic towers for East Side Intermediate fourth grade in Harrisburg and Eldorado Elementary third grade, as well as support some local food insecurity initiatives.

Coordinating with Saline County school districts, classroom schedules were determined, and Extension staff began developing and delivering lessons to engage students in workforce development and agriculture and nutritional programming. Elementary students, grades four and younger, will have the opportunity to have the virtual reality welder simulator brought into their classrooms, introducing them to the basics of welding through an age-appropriate, interactive



Students in Saline County will be growing various greens and herbs during the spring of 2026 in hydroponic tower gardens. They will have the opportunity to experience hands-on learning of hydroponic food production and nutrition education.

experience. Along with creating and combining education on hydroponic production and nutrition education, unit educators also worked with classroom teachers to integrate the hydroponic towers into their own science, math, and English lesson plans. These learning opportunities represent a joint effort between the Local Foods, SNAP-Ed, and Youth Development teams.



SNAP-Ed staff deliver engaging nutrition education programs across communities, empowering participants with practical skills to support healthy choices and active lifestyles.





## SNAP-Ed makes learning exciting in the classroom

SNAP-Ed had so much fun this year working with local K-12 partners. From direct education, Policy System Environment interventions, and interdisciplinary projects, it has been a year to remember!

### OrganWise Guys

OrganWise Guys is one of the most implemented programs in SNAP-Ed. These lessons, tailored to students in kindergarten through second grade, include fun and engaging activities that teach children about healthy choices. Students enjoy these lessons because they have the opportunity to get up and move. Activities like “Wisersize” make learning fun by combining math, spelling, and other subjects with engaging physical activities, strengthening bodies and minds.



**764**

Students participated in OrganWise Guys

### Cooking Classes

Each summer, Illinois Junior Chef and Teen Cuisine classes are in high demand. 2025 was no exception as available spots filled up quickly. These cooking classes give youth the opportunity to prepare their own food, the safe way. Students in these classes learn sanitation basics, how to read a recipe, measure ingredients correctly, and the importance of eating healthy and nutritious foods.



**80**

Cooking class participants



**5**

Partner sites



Teen Cuisine participant creates a Berry Purple Smoothie at Eldorado High School.

## Greater Wabash Food Council promotes eating local in area schools

This year, Illinois Extension was able to work with a new partner, the Greater Wabash Food Council, in a variety of ways, one being their Farm to School project with Carmi and Grayville schools. SNAP-Ed staff promoted Harvest of the Month activities, including preparing 4,000 ears of corn in July from local growers for freezing to be distributed for use in school lunches.

In the fall, the team also supported Great Apple Crunch and National School Lunch Week activities at Jefferson Elementary in Carmi. Great Apple Crunch celebrates seasonal produce and local growers, encouraging students to eat local. Extension staff provided fun facts and jokes about apples, offered an opportunity to vote on their favorite ways to eat apples, and helped students write thank-you messages to the food service staff.



SNAP-Ed Educator Lizz Cooley-Questelle leads a group of students in a My-Plate lesson.

## Strengthening partnerships with local schools

At Eldorado Elementary, SNAP-Ed staff implemented a fun book walk on the playground for all students to enjoy. The walk includes a seasonal book with fun physical activities as students move or “hop” to the next page.

A hydroponic gardening and nutrition ed program also began with third grade students. In November, school staff were trained on the basics of hydroponic gardening and how to put together and maintain their new hydroponic towers. Students received lessons on MyPlate, the importance of eating fruits and vegetables, where food comes from, how to grow food, and even got to see and taste the different parts of the plant. The program, an interdisciplinary project with Agriculture and Agri Business, will continue into Spring 2026. This program is also implemented at East Side Intermediate School in Harrisburg with two fourth grade classrooms.



## Eat. Move. Save. booths

Community Outreach Worker Nanci Berger presented Eat. Move. Save. Booths monthly at the Christian Community Compassion Center food pantry in Harrisburg. In addition to the booth, which provides nutrition education and food budgeting tips and resources, a recipe and a sample are provided. Prior to each visit, staff connect with the site director to find out what food/ingredient they have in abundance, and then a recipe is chosen from the Eat.Move.Save. website for pantry visitors to sample. These EMS booths and food samples have been a great success. The Director of 4C's and President of the Board, Mona Crim, has had nothing but praise and gratitude for this partnership and the monthly education opportunities for their guests. 4C's is a client-choice food pantry, which means that clients get to shop for and choose the items that they want that best fits their needs. Since the SNAP-Ed program began its visits to 4C's, certain items like beans, diced tomatoes, and other canned vegetables that typically go unselected are now being chosen. This partner also benefits from venison donations through Hunters Feeding Illinois.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Nanci Berger prepares "Veggie Tots" utilizing the Mobile Teaching Kitchen.

The SNAP-Ed team also had the opportunity to bring the Mobile Teaching Kitchen to accompany an Eat.Move.Save. booth at the Local Area Network #2 Block Party in Eldorado. The mobile kitchen is a regional resource provided through a partnership with the Region 5 Hospital Coordinating Center. The kitchen cart is equipped with a sink, stove top, oven, and additional outlets so staff can safely prepare a recipe from start to finish. The demonstration enabled the audience to witness the preparation of a recipe and sample the finished product. The featured recipe at the block party was 'Veggie Tots.' Recipe cards were provided so visitors could recreate the recipe at home.

## Retail interventions and partnerships



This year, SNAP-Ed was able to work a little closer with some of our local grocers. In Pope County, the opening of the Cornerstone Grocery store in February offered the first opportunity of 2025. The team attended the grand opening, bringing along the mobile teaching kitchen and providing education and recipe samples. Staff also implemented the Recipe of the Month intervention. This intervention consisted of a monthly highlight recipe complimented by an Eat.Move. Save. booth and nudges. Shoppers were able to visit the booth, obtain nutrition education and materials, try a sample of the recipe, and receive a copy of the recipe. Posters and shelf signage were also set up to direct shoppers to those ingredients. Recipes and signs were changed out monthly.

SNAP-Ed developed a strong partnership with Egyptian Health Department over the last several years and has collaborated with them in many ways. The most recent was supporting them in setting up an emergency pantry as well as building partnerships to help establish an ongoing and reliable source of food donations. Screened clients are connected with this emergency food resource, receiving not just food, but a meal bundle, specific to their current emergent need. SNAP-Ed PSE staff worked with EHD to create a list of easy meals, ingredients, and printed recipes for each bundle. From this list, they worked with two local grocers, Big Johns in Eldorado and Little Giant in Carmi, to establish a system for purchasing of the meals. Each bundle is bagged, priced, and displayed at each site for shoppers to purchase. EHD then picks up the donated items to include in their inventory. To date, a total of 79 meals equaling 585 pounds of food have been donated through this project.



Meal bundles on display at Big Johns in Eldorado. Purchased meal kits go to the emergency pantry at Egyptian Health Department.



## Extension & Southern Illinois Center for Independent Living

When adults walk through the doors of Southern Illinois Center for Independent Living in Saline County, they are often looking for resources that can help them live healthier, more independent lives. This past year, University of Illinois Extension strengthened that mission by bringing two hands-on nutrition education programs directly to SICIL consumers—Healthy Cents and CREATE Better Health—ensuring that practical, accessible wellness tools are available to everyone who needs them.

The Healthy Cents series helped participants explore what it truly means to eat healthy on a limited budget. Through lessons on identifying nutritious foods, shopping smart for fruits and vegetables, and growing produce in small containers, participants learned how to stretch their food dollars without sacrificing quality. Each session ended with a food demonstration featuring simple, low-cost recipes like Turkey Sandwich Wraps, Apple Cabbage Slaw, and Pico de Gallo. For many, tasting a new recipe prepared by a SNAP-Education Community Outreach Worker was a first step toward trying healthier meals at home.

Building on that success, Extension also offered SICIL a more interactive learning opportunity through an additional SNAP-Ed curriculum called CREATE Better Health. This series empowered adults to prepare healthy meals using foods they already had on hand while setting realistic goals for increasing physical activity. With lesson topics ranging from MyPlate basics to meal planning, goal setting, and understanding the Nutrition Facts label, participants gained lifelong skills to support better health. Each class included a hands-on recipe creation—such as Create a Sandwich, Create a Smoothie, or Create a Fruity Dessert—made possible through Eat.Move.Save.; ingredients and supplies were provided at no cost.

Throughout both programs, participants received practical handouts, additional resources like the Illinois Find Food Map, and a useful kitchen incentive such as a cutting board, measuring cups, or spoons or a spatula. These tools help reinforce what they learned and encourage continued healthy habits at home.

The partnership between Illinois Extension and SICIL is creating measurable changes. Participants reported feeling more confident about choosing healthy foods, planning meals, and preparing simple recipes. Many shared that the hands-on activities made nutrition feel achievable, not overwhelming. By meeting people where they are and providing skills that fit real-life budgets and abilities, Extension is helping SICIL consumers take meaningful steps toward a healthier, more independent future.

## Healthy Lifestyles Action Team

Working with the Healthy Lifestyles Action Team, SNAP-Ed PSE staff collaborated with action team members to put together a community walking guide for the coalition's coverage area of Saline, Gallatin, and White counties. The guide was launched on April 2, National Walking Day. The guide was promoted by partners with the community to encourage individuals and families to get moving. It highlights local walking paths where community members can enjoy getting outdoors and being more physically active. This interactive document also provides additional health education and links to resources. The team plans to add to the guide in the future and continually assess its use and relevance. It can be found at [go.illinois.edu/Walking](http://go.illinois.edu/Walking).

The action team has also completed book walk “kits” and hosted events in Saline and White counties. A book walk is an interactive approach that encourages families to read and be active together while enjoying the outdoors. Books selected have a nutrition and/or physical activity theme. Each page also has a physical activity prompt, as well as links to community and partner health resources. Each event sparks new interest and excitement, expanding reach and requests for future events.



Book walk visitors enjoy *The Burpee Bears* book. Each page has a fun physical activity as participants move to the next page.





# County & State Fair Success for Hamilton, Hardin, Saline, Pope, & White counties



County fairs were bustling with energy, hard work, and incredible creativity as 4-H youth showcased their talents in everything from livestock and woodworking to photography and aerospace. This year, a total of 278 exhibitors presented an impressive 1,660 exhibits and projects across five counties, highlighting both the strength and diversity of our local 4-H programs.

Each fair reflected the dedication of youth who spent months preparing their projects, as well as the volunteers, families, and judges who helped make each show ring and each exhibit hall a place of learning and celebration. The fairs continue to serve as an essential platform for youth to build confidence, demonstrate mastery, and share their passions with the community.

Our counties were also well represented at the Illinois State Fair. Twenty-seven youth advanced to state-level competition, bringing home outstanding honors:

- 13 State Fair Champions
- Seven State Fair Reserve Champions
- Eight Inspire Awards, recognizing exhibitors who presented inspirational, innovative, or unique exhibits.

These accomplishments are a testament to the dedication of local 4-H members and the strong support system surrounding them. The 2025 fair season was truly a celebration of achievement, growth, and the spirit of 4-H.



Saline County 4-Her Laney Mondino presents her formal speech "Light Up the Night" at the 2025 4-H Public Presentations contest.

## 2025 4-H Show Stats



**278**  
Participants



**1,597**  
Entries



**60**  
State Fair Entries





4-H members visit the Ronald McDonald House, touring the facility and delivering donated supplies they collected to support families staying there--demonstrating service, compassion, and community leadership in action.

## 4-H Community Service: Growing Leaders Through Giving Back

Community service has always been at the heart of 4-H, and this year, youth continued that tradition by stepping up to support families, neighborhoods, and local organizations. 4-H members demonstrated leadership, compassion, and a deep commitment to improving the places they call home.

One of the year's standout projects was a service trip to the Ronald McDonald House of the Ohio Valley. In the weeks leading up to the visit, 4-H clubs collected and delivered a wide variety of items the House relies on every day, including toiletries, first aid supplies, laundry products, shelf-stable food and snacks, gift cards, washcloths, bath mats, and batteries. During their visit, youth toured the facility and learned firsthand about the House's mission to support families with children receiving medical care. After completing their service project, the group traveled to Evansville's Countryside Orchard, where they learned about agricultural production, fruit farming, and the role orchards play in local food systems. The experience blended community service with hands-on learning, giving youth a deeper appreciation for giving back and understanding where food comes from.

In Pope and Hardin counties, Hardin County Teen Teachers organized a food drive to support their Teen Teachers training. Youth collected boxed and canned goods, which were then donated to local food pantries. This project helped students recognize the importance of addressing food insecurity while reinforcing their leadership roles as Teen Teachers.



In Hamilton County, 4-H members helped celebrate National Ag Day by assisting with the Farmer's Share Breakfast. Working alongside the Hamilton County Farm Bureau, youth helped serve more than 275 meals to community members. Their participation supported local agriculture awareness efforts and offered youth a hands-on opportunity to give back to those who help feed their community.

In White County, 4-H clubs collected new children's books to be donated to Carmi and Norris City Angel Trees, as well as Grayville's Tina's Wish organization. This project was part of the statewide 4-H for Good challenge, encouraging youth to support literacy, spread joy during the holiday season, and help ensure local children receive meaningful gifts.

In Saline County, members joined Heaven's Kitchen volunteers during National 4-H Week to assist with food distribution. Through their support, Heaven's Kitchen was able to provide groceries to 154 households, reaching 341 individuals, including 104 children. The youth played a valuable role in helping the organization serve families experiencing food insecurity, reinforcing the importance of giving back to their community.



Make a difference in your community by joining 4-H  
[4h.extension.illinois.edu/join-4-h](https://4h.extension.illinois.edu/join-4-h)

## 2025 4-H Year in Review

4-H Youth Development by the numbers



**39**  
Clubs



**507**  
Memberships



**5,452**  
4-H Affiliations (4-H Experiences)



**\$266,742**  
4-H Adult Club Volunteer Valuation



## 4-H Programming Spotlights

4-H continues to deliver high-quality, hands-on programs that build skills, spark curiosity, and connect youth with meaningful learning opportunities. Across all five counties, young people explored new interests, challenged themselves, and represented their communities through innovative clubs, statewide competitions, and outdoor adventures. The following spotlights highlight one standout program or achievement from each county, showcasing the diverse experiences that 4-H youth are embracing across our unit.

### White County – Eli Bryant Represents Illinois on the National Stage

White County 4-H member Eli Bryant was one of only five Illinois youth qualified to compete at the National 4-H Shooting Sports Championships in Grand Island, Nebraska. The week-long competition tested athletes in sporting clays, skeet, and trap.

Bryant delivered an exceptional performance, placing 13th in the nation in trap after hitting an impressive 97 out of 100 birds. His hard work highlights the dedication of our local shooting sports program and the strength of White County 4-H.



Eli Bryant pictured (far right) with the other Illinois 4-H youth competitors.

### Hamilton County – Gracie Walker Earns Top Honors in State Competition

Hamilton County 4-H member Gracie Walker excelled at the 2025 Illinois Superior Young Livestock Producers Contest, which featured a record 63 competitors from across the state. Participants completed livestock management, marketing and hedging, and skillathon challenges.



Gracie Walker, Hamilton County 4-H

Walker earned a \$1,000 scholarship and was named winner of the Livestock Management phase, demonstrating impressive knowledge and leadership. Her achievements highlight the strong foundation that Hamilton County 4-H programs provide in agriculture and youth development.

### Pope County – Youth Explore the Shawnee National Forest Through Hiking

Pope County launched an exciting new summer initiative: the 4-H Hiking Club. Youth explored scenic and historic locations within the Shawnee National Forest, including Ghost Dance Canyon, Bell Smith Springs, Lake Glendale, Rim Rock, Pounds Hollow, Hayes Canyon, and a special fall hike at Heron Pond to visit the state champion Cherrybark Oak tree.

With each several-mile hike, members gained experience in trail safety, plant and tree identification, wildlife observation, and environmental stewardship, turning every adventure into a powerful outdoor education experience.



Members of the 4-H Hiking Club (Sophia Shell, Kinley Graves, Taylor Graves and Cooper Shults), pause for some rock exploration and to test their rock-skipping skills on a beautiful day at Bell Smith Springs.



4-H members explore creativity and problem-solving during a new Building Bricks club, building hands-on skills in engineering, teamwork, and innovation through interactive learning.

### Saline County – New Building Bricks Club Sparks Creativity and STEM Skills

Saline County introduced the new 4-H Creating with Building Bricks Club, offering youth a fun and accessible way to explore engineering, design, and creative problem-solving. At each meeting, members take on themed building challenges using LEGO®, MEGA BLOKS®, and other plastic brick systems.

The club has already inspired a wave of creativity, and this enthusiasm is reflected in the new building bricks exhibit categories added to the county and state fairs. Youth can now showcase artistic builds, original architectural designs, imaginative creatures, mechanical creations with moving parts, functional items, real-world object replicas, storytelling scenes, vehicles, and even digital builds created through virtual design software.

The expanded fair categories give young builders more ways than ever to express their ideas and celebrate their achievements, a major milestone for Saline County's growing STEM programming.



4-Her Bryden Stricklin works on his build during a club meeting at the Harrisburg District Library.



Hardin County Teen Teachers spend training days at Shawnee Community College learning fresh material to teach elementary students and strengthening their leadership and community service skills.

### Hardin County – Teen Teachers Growing Leaders and Teaching Local Youth

The Teen Teachers program in Hardin County took an exciting new direction during the 2024–2025 school year. Through a partnership with a neighboring Extension unit, five Teen Teachers attended training at Shawnee Community College and then entered Hardin County elementary classrooms to deliver hands-on lessons they developed.

These teens also had opportunities to broaden their college and career readiness skills, including university campus tours in Chicago and Champaign, and a multi-day leadership retreat at 4-H Memorial Camp. Interest in the program continues to grow, with 21 Teen Teachers participating in the 2025–2026 school year.

Teen Teachers has been so much fun already and I can't wait to continue through this next year by being more involved in classes and teaching lessons to elementary school students.  
Kenna Gunderson - Hardin Co. 4-H Teen Teacher



Learn about leadership opportunities in 4-H  
[go.illinois.edu/4-HLeadership](https://go.illinois.edu/4-HLeadership)



## New 4-H program encourages youth to make healthy decisions

Health Rocks! is a national 4-H program designed to help youth build the knowledge and life skills needed to make healthy, responsible decisions, especially around tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. Through interactive activities, positive youth–adult partnerships, and research-based curriculum, Health Rocks! empowers young people to understand the consequences of risky behaviors and develop the confidence to choose a safer, healthier path.



In 2025, Illinois Extension expanded its commitment to youth health education by bringing Health Rocks! into local programming. To launch the program, Youth Development Educator Lindsay Adams collaborated with Extension Program Coordinator Abbey Reeves, who serves Hardin and Pope counties. Together, they attended program training, selected age-appropriate lessons, and developed a plan to take Health Rocks! directly into the community, starting with a fun, fully mobile display.



4-H Extension program coordinator Abbey Reeves and White County 4-H'ers Kayla and Erin Wuornos try out yoga moves during their visit to the Health Rocks! station at the White County Fair.



Program Coordinator Abbey Reeves stands in front of the Health Rocks! traveling booth, showcasing youth-focused prevention education on healthy habits and substance-free choices.

The Health Rocks booth came to life at this summer's 4-H fairs providing meaningful, hands-on learning opportunities, demonstrating the impact of smoking on lung function through interactive breathing activities and promoting healthy movement through engaging yoga poses.

Abbey Reeves, 4-H Extension program coordinator

Over the summer, the team created a traveling Health Rocks! booth for the county fairs. The booth featured hands-on demonstrations, visuals from the curriculum, and conversation starters that encouraged youth and families to think critically about peer pressure, substance use, and healthy coping strategies. To make the experience even more engaging, the booth also included “4-H Pledge Yoga” stations, pairing each line of the pledge with simple yoga poses that promoted mindfulness and healthy stress management. Another popular activity invited youth to simulate the effects of smoking on the lungs by breathing first through a regular straw and then through a narrow coffee stirrer, allowing them to feel how smoking can restrict airflow in a very real way.

The traveling booth allowed staff to reach a wider audience. By meeting families where they are, the 4-H team built awareness, sparked conversation, and laid the foundation for future school and club-based programming. Health Rocks! continues to grow, strengthening our mission to support youth in making informed, confident, and healthy choices.



Learn more about Health Rocks!  
[go.illinois.edu/HealthRocks](https://go.illinois.edu/HealthRocks)



## Annual event continues to provide outdoor educational opportunities for hundreds of area students

Stewardship Week at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center is a cherished tradition, attracting hundreds of students from nearby schools and home-school programs. Each year, numerous educational stations offer insights into the significance of environmental stewardship.

These lessons frequently include hands-on learning experiences and demonstrations, providing an engaging atmosphere for all participants. Alongside local agencies and organizations that share their knowledge, our 4-H Teen Teachers are also given the chance to conduct a lesson, allowing them to gain valuable experience beyond the traditional classroom environment.



Hudson Jacobs checks out the Earth model during Stewardship Week.

Events like Stewardship Week provide opportunities for students to learn outside of the classroom from educators in many land management and academic institutions. We also find the social aspects of group learning outdoors provides learners new ways of relating to each other and considering each other in new ways not often possible in the regular routine of in-school learning. Learners need new experiences outside the classroom to connect curriculum to the real world.

Steve Gariepy, outreach coordinator/ experiential education specialist, Southern Illinois University



**988**

Student attendees in 2025

### 2025 presenters included:

- Mycah Scroggins, United States Forest Service
- Steve Gariepy, Southern Illinois University
- Tayrn Bieri, Illinois Department of Natural Resources
- Kamden Summers, United States Forest Service
- Mary Garner, Ag In th Classroom
- Krescence Holscher
- Madilynn Brummer
- Shane Teas, ASGT Illinois Department of Natural Resources
- Vincent Gonzalez, United States Forest Service
- Katie Bell, U of I Extension
- Molie Oliver, Master Naturalist, Illinois Extension
- Joe Devera, Illinois State Geological Survey
- Anne Townsend, Illinois Extension
- Hardin County 4-H Teen Teachers
- Chris Evans, Extension Forester
- Paul Conn, United States Forest Service
- Southeastern Illinois Electric Coop
- Kathleen Gaare-Wiese
- Debbie McVey, Master Gardener, Illinois Extension
- Kim Rohling, Illinois Extension
- Raegan Smith, Ag in the Classroom
- Jodi Vandermyde, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
- Whitney Jiter, United States Forest Service
- Todd Carr
- Kate Shawkey, National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration
- Herb Klickner, Master Gardener - Illinois Extension
- Keith Brown, Master Gardener - Illinois Extension
- Alyssa Macuiba, United States Forest Service
- Southern Illinois University Grass
- Touch of Nature
- Kevin Rohling, Extension Forestry Specialist
- Seth & Gary Graves
- Nick Seaton, United States Forest Service
- Clarice Esch, United States Forest Service
- Maria Farris, Ag in the Classroom
- Lisa King, Southern Seven Health Department



Master Gardener Debbie McVey teaches students about beekeeping and the important role bees play in nature. Students even have the opportunity to try on a bee keepers suit.



## Strengthening Skills Through Partnership: Welding SPIN Clubs with Southeastern Illinois College

This year, 4-H strengthened its commitment to career readiness and workforce development through an expanded partnership with Southeastern Illinois College.

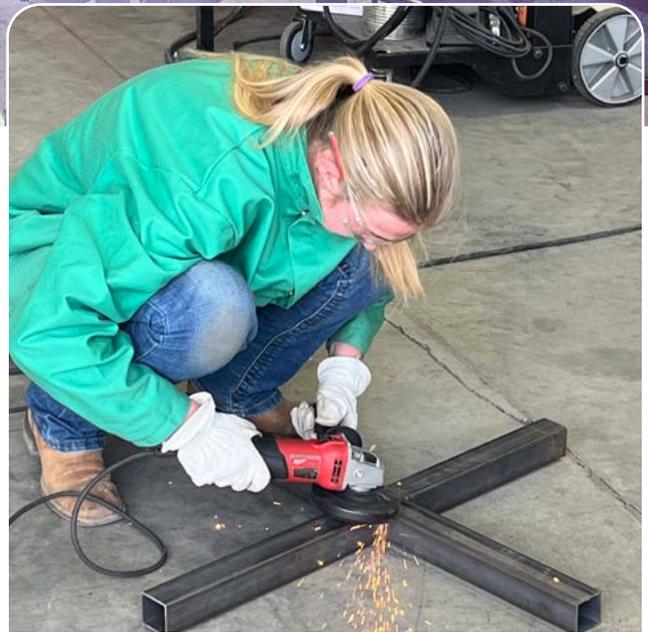
Working together, Illinois Extension and SIC launched a Welding special interest club in Carmi, giving youth hands-on experience in a high-demand trade. Over several sessions, participants learned welding basics, practiced safety procedures, and built their skills under the guidance of trained instructors and supportive volunteers.

SIC has been an outstanding partner throughout the process, generously loaning us their virtual welder so youth can practice safely and build confidence in their elementary classrooms.

Thanks to additional funding secured through SOL Systems and the Eldorado Impact Project, 4-H is now able to purchase its own virtual welders, expanding access to even more youth. Beginning this year, elementary students in Saline County (grades four and younger) will have the virtual welder brought directly into their classrooms, introducing them to the basics of welding through an age-appropriate, interactive experience.



Learn what it's like to be in a 4-H Club  
[4h.extension.illinois.edu/participate/clubs](https://4h.extension.illinois.edu/participate/clubs)



White County 4-H member Grace McCarty practices hands-on welding skills while gaining technical experience and confidence.

Older youth will continue to have expanded opportunities as well. Students in both Saline and White counties will be able to sign up for Welding SPIN Clubs at their nearest SIC campus, giving them hands-on sessions, industry exposure, and early career exploration in welding and skilled trades.

This partnership showcases the power of community collaboration, combining Extension education, industry tools, and college expertise to help young people explore their future careers in a safe, engaging, and supportive environment.



# Forestry at the Dixon Springs Ag Center



University of Illinois Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences Extension Forestry Program held 28 events or programs at DSAC or nearby, with 562 people in attendance. Extension Forestry also maintains a demonstration forest, pollinator prairie, and sugar bush that are used in educational programs and as a self-guided learning opportunity.

## Dixon Springs Ag Center: A unique setting for advanced forestry training

In 2025, Extension Forestry hosted 12 beginner chainsaw safety trainings across the state with 121 in attendance. An Advanced Chainsaw and Tree Felling course was held at Dixon Springs Ag Center in May, targeting natural resource professionals. Over a two-day field course, the full house of 12 participants received instruction and experience felling complex trees, such as those with hard side or back leans. The forests at Dixon Springs Ag Center allow for this type of hands-on professional development opportunity that is difficult to come by anywhere else.

Extension Forestry continues to develop and expand its chainsaw training programs with Dixon Springs being a crucial component of that effort.

## Training for safer, smarter prescribed burns

Extension Forestry partners with groups such as Southern Illinois Prescribed Burn Association to host prescribed fire trainings. Fire is used as a management tool in both forested and open settings. Many landowners lack the knowledge, experience or comfort level to conduct burns on their land. These hands-on trainings use a combination of

classroom presentations, tool demonstration, and in-the-field implementation to instruct participants in the rules and regulations involved with prescribed fire, the techniques and tools used during fire, and the parameters needed for a safe and effective burn.



During spring break, students from the University of Illinois spent the week at the Dixon Springs Ag Center for field practices in the Forest Management Course, where they conducted a prescribed fire and finished their federal fire certifications.



Learn about Extension's Forestry program  
[extension.illinois.edu/forestry](https://extension.illinois.edu/forestry)



# Animal Science at the Dixon Springs Ag Center



Department of Animal Sciences at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center plays a vital role in innovative research, hands-on education, and impactful outreach. DSAC manages approximately 900 beef cows and their offspring, all of which contribute to research focused on genetics, feed efficiency, reproduction, and nutrition.

A key research asset at DSAC is the GrowSafe system, which allows for precise measurement of individual feed intake that supports cutting-edge research aimed at improving production efficiency and sustainability. The herd is managed entirely on pasture-based systems, with fall calving and forages consisting primarily of tall fescue, supplemented by legumes and limited acreage of warm-season grasses. This management approach reflects real-world production systems across the Midwest, making DSAC research highly applicable to Illinois beef producers.

Beyond research, DSAC serves as a hub for teaching and workforce development. The facilities support training for undergraduate summer interns, graduate students, and visiting classes. Illinois Extension further strengthens this mission by housing a Livestock Educator Teresa Steckler at DSAC, who leads Extension programs annually to connect research outcomes with beef producers across the state.

The Illinois Beef Experiential Learning and Industry Exposure Fellowship also known as I-BELIEF is a 10-week paid internship that provides undergraduate students from Illinois universities

and community colleges with immersive experiences in beef production, research, and producer outreach. In addition to on-farm learning, fellows participate in professional meetings, technical writing, and personal development activities. Kiley Sons, Kylee Ogelsby, and Bailey DuChene were the interns placed at DSAC this year. They lived onsite in an Animal Science student house throughout the summer.

Through programs like I-BELIEF, DSAC continues to bridge research and education ensuring that students gain meaningful, real-world experience while contributing to the future success of Illinois' beef industry.

This summer I had the wonderful opportunity to be placed at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center on the beef production side as an intern with the University of Illinois through the I-BELIEF program. During my time at Dixon Springs, I conducted a research project studying heat stress in cattle and gained hands-on experience bucket feeding heifers, moving cattle to different pastures, and freeze branding.

Kiley Sons, 2025 I-BELIEF intern



Learn about DSAC's Livestock program  
[extension.illinois.edu/dsac/livestock](https://extension.illinois.edu/dsac/livestock)



## University of Illinois Extension

As part of the land-grant system, University of Illinois was established not only to provide world-class education and pioneer research and discovery, but to put learning and discovery into practice, to benefit the health and wellbeing of residents and communities in every part of Illinois. Extension is the university's statewide network of educators, faculty experts, and staff dedicated to that mission.

Communities are directly served by Extension staff in 27 multi-county units located throughout Illinois. Extension educators in local offices and specialists located on University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign campus develop and deliver in-depth programming locally, in regional venues, and through distance-learning technologies.

As part of the nationwide Cooperative Extension System, Illinois Extension is able to draw on research-based expertise from land-grant universities all across the country. Volunteers who serve on local advisory councils provide direction for Illinois Extension programming, ensuring that programs continue to meet critical needs.

Illinois Extension is based in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences and works with all colleges and units of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

## Community Sponsors

- Hamilton County Board
- Hamilton County 4-H Federation
- Hamilton County Home & Community Education
- Hardin County Board
- SGHP 4-H Extension Foundation
- Pope County Board
- Rotary Club of Golconda
- Saline County Board
- Shawnee RC&D
- White County Board
- White County 4-H Support Committee
- White County 4-H Federation
- White County Association for Home & Community Education

## The Illinois Extension Strategic Plan

Illinois Extension engaged in a strategic planning process throughout 2024 that created opportunities for many voices to contribute their own vision for Illinois Extension's future. We are confident that this process has synthesized the ideas of our entire community to create a compelling and forward-thinking strategic plan.

### Vision

University of Illinois Extension will be a leading force in fostering a legacy of sustainable development, lifelong learning, and community resilience regarding environment, food and agriculture, health, community, and economy via technology and discovery, partnerships, and workforce excellence.

Extension will leverage innovative research, cutting-edge technology, and collaborative partnerships to build a future where every community member is equipped to thrive in an evolving world.

Our commitment to excellence, inclusivity, and transformative education will be the catalyst for positive societal change.

### Mission

Our mission is our broad and enduring purpose. University of Illinois Extension develops educational programs, extends knowledge, and builds partnerships to support people, communities, and their environments as part of the state's land grant institution.



Amount	Source
45%	Local Including County Governments
43%	State Match and Ag Premium Fund
8%	Federal Funds Including SNAP
4%	Gifts and Donations

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### Saline County Extension

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### Dixon Springs Agriculture Center

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## ONLINE



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**Illinois Extension**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

### College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

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