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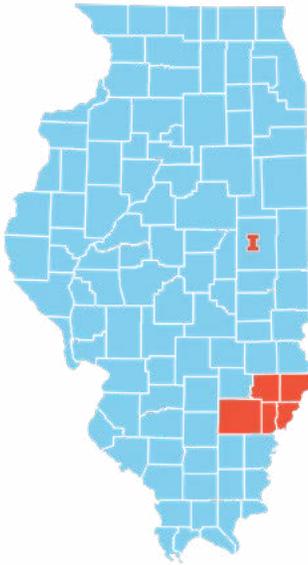


Serving Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, Wabash, and Wayne Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Tara Buerster
County Director



Partnerships, donors, and volunteers are a vital aspect of University of Illinois Extension's success

Another year has come and gone, and as I reflect on the past year, a common theme stands out: our partnerships, donors, and volunteers are instrumental within University of Illinois Extension. While our five-county team is at the helm of our programs, events, and projects, it truly takes a village to bring it all together and create meaningful impact within our communities.

At the core of our county 4-H programs are volunteers who lead clubs, judge at annual shows, host workshops, and more. It's because of their dedication and our staff members' passion that our county 4-H programs continue to thrive and have steadily increased 4-H membership over the last few years.

Similarly, the Local Food Systems and Small Farms program continues to expand its programs and offerings. Thanks to a continued partnership with Wayne County Farm Bureau, identification signs were purchased for the Wayne County pollinator garden. We look forward to installing these next spring so that visitors can easily identify plants and learn more about pollinators via QR codes.

While the SNAP-Ed program ceased operations in February 2026, our team still made significant strides in addressing needs within our communities. Of note, our SNAP-Ed educator successfully launched the Hunters Feeding Illinois program this fall to address food insecurity in our communities. Deer hunters and community members answered our calls for deer donations and monetary contributions to the program. As a result, 2,698 pounds of venison were delivered to local food pantries.

While the stories that follow may not mention them by name, our team is incredibly grateful for and appreciative of every volunteer, donor, and community partner—we could not do what we do without you.

Thank you for your support, and I hope you enjoy reading about our collective successes in the following report.

Tara Buerster
County Extension Director

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension programs, resources, knowledge, and dedicated staff that are responsive to eight strategic priorities:

-  Community
-  Economy
-  Environment
-  Food and Agriculture
-  Health
-  Partnerships
-  Technology and Discovery
-  Workforce Excellence

2025 Engagement

Extension leaders, staff, and stakeholders define priorities that create meaningful, mission-centered outcomes throughout the state:

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

Partnerships

Resource Generation

5,129 Program Volunteers	277 Community Gardens	2,830 School and Community Partners	\$15,026,392 Value of Volunteer Contributions	\$499,188 Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated	\$960K+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners
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On July 4, 2025, the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act eliminated all funding for Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed nutrition education program. Here's the impact by the numbers:

Up to \$135M Estimated Annual Loss in Future Economic Returns on Investment in Illinois	2 million+ Residents Lost Access to Food and Health Education	1,754 Partners Including Schools, Food Banks, Early Childhood Centers, Public Health Departments, and Local Agencies Impacted	200+ Staff Members Affected by Layoffs	30 Years of Infrastructure and Network Building for the SNAP-Ed Program Lost
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Twilight Series attendee cuts flowers for a personal flower arrangement at Wild Child Flower Farm.



Summer Twilight Series promotes local agriculture

Over the past decade, the Southern Illinois Summer Twilight Series has been a staple of the Local Food Systems and Small Farms program. Developed by Illinois Extension educators, the annual program offers a behind-the-scenes look into a variety of agriculture industries, farms, and businesses in the region. It provides entrepreneurs, business owners, and curious community members with the opportunity to network, tour local farms and operations, and learn more about production and marketing strategies from experts.

This summer, the series toured four businesses from May through August, including The Flock Farm in Anna, a southern Illinois farm and poultry processor with its own market, and the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center in Simpson, a University of Illinois research center. Locally, the series visited Weiler Enterprises, Inc. in Claremont and Wild Child Flower Farm in Sumner.

Weiler Enterprises, a family-owned and operated dairy farm, offered visitors a glimpse into the Michels family's 24/7 operation, which combines technology, recycling methods, self-reliant strategies, and family to ensure its success. What started in 2012 with two tractors and 50 cows has now grown into an operation with around 300 cattle from newborn to milking age. Altogether, the farm produces approximately 22,000 pounds of milk every other day for Prairie Farms.

The series wrapped up with a visit to Wild Child Flower Farm, another family-owned and operated business. Delores Weiss and Macee Hill, alongside their husbands Scott and Isaac, opened the flower farm in the summer of 2020. The flower farm sells tulips each spring, followed by their U-pick experience in the summer. Beyond the farm, the business has diversified to add additional revenue sources, including flower subscriptions and a pop-up flower cart. Together, they've created a unique experience for Lawrence County.

By visiting Weiler Enterprises, community members were able to witness the sophisticated technology used to operate a dairy farm while gaining a better understanding of how milk makes its way onto shelves at the local grocery store. At Wild Child Flower Farm, visitors learned how the business has evolved since its founding, the challenges the owners have overcome, and the importance of networking and partnering with other local businesses.

Ultimately, the Summer Twilight Series provided communities with the opportunity to network with successful business owners, learn more about Local Food Systems, and develop an appreciation for local agriculture.



Southeastern Agronomy Summit addresses farm challenges

Technology and research in agriculture are constantly progressing, while profits are trending downward; so, how do farmers and agriculture professionals keep up? Providing farmers with information about Illinois Extension resources, access to experts, and research-based information is crucial for helping farms thrive while enabling them to foresee and overcome the challenges they face day to day and year to year.

The inaugural Southeastern Agronomy Summit provided local farmers with the opportunity to learn from experts and stay current on topics affecting farms in Illinois. The summit invited representatives from University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Illinois Extension, Channel Seed, and a representative from Peoples National Bank to present. Speakers provided information, resources, and strategies to consider regarding management of insects, diseases, and weeds in crops, as well as a review of drone technology and information to assist with financial planning. One participant was appreciative of the sessions, noting:

"The best part of the day's sessions was the covering of the two issues that have most recently become front and center with regard to corn and soybean production. It was good to have experts present information on both the emergence of tar spot as a new yield robber with regard to corn production and drones as a new technology that provides new application and scouting opportunities."

Farmers left the summit with applicable strategies that could help increase their farm's profitability, efficiency, and longevity in a variety of ways. It also allowed them time for networking ahead of the 2025 planting season. The participant also added:

"It is extremely beneficial to have face to face meetings with the very experts that provide research, papers/articles, and experience in their fields, and provide a forum to ask individualized questions pertinent to one's own farm."

The program was hosted again in January 2026 to address emerging topics in the farming and agriculture industries.



Farmer examines a sample of tar spot provided by an agronomist.



Educator tackles resident's needs one-on-one

A founding principle of Illinois Extension is bringing research-based information into local communities. A hallmark of Illinois Extension education is the ability of educators to meet people where they are in their communities, educational journeys, and even in their backyards. Local Food Systems and Small Farms Educator Katie Bell has been assisting farmers and homeowners through one-on-one consultations. "Some issues are difficult to get to the bottom of over the phone, and I can provide a better quality of solution if I see the area for myself," says Bell. In the last year, Bell has consulted on new garden establishment, tree diseases, and fruit tree pruning. By visiting residents, Bell can provide educational resources and information about the specific challenges they are experiencing. While many questions can be answered via phone or email, site visits are a great way to tackle more complex issues, plan large garden projects, or gain hands-on experience with new techniques.



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Expert consultations via phone, email, office visits, and on-site visits

Pollinator Garden continues to flourish

The Wayne County pollinator garden is a collaborative project between Illinois Extension and Wayne County Farm Bureau. Thanks to a community impact grant from Wayne County Farm Bureau, Illinois Extension has been revitalizing the original pollinator garden on the Frontier Community College campus. In the spring of 2024, the area was converted to a landscaped garden featuring various types of native plants. Nineteen species of native pollinator plants were established along with six cubic yards of compost and 140 bags of mulch.



Currently, the pollinator garden features more than 25 species of Illinois native plants including little bluestem, prairie milkweed, and purple coneflower. With an additional donation from Wayne County Farm Bureau in 2025, more plants were added to the garden, and botanical signs were purchased that have informational QR codes linking to the Illinois Pollinators website.

The Wayne County pollinator garden is a space to educate the community about the importance of pollinators and showcase a variety of native plants. The garden has already attracted many different types of pollinating insects and birds, including monarch caterpillars enjoying the milkweed. The collaborative project allows for the continued improvement and expansion of the pollinator garden.



Learn more about pollinators:
illinoispollinators.org



County 4-H programs develop 4-H members who are Beyond Ready

In 2024, National 4-H launched a new 4-H campaign, Beyond Ready. This campaign strives to highlight how 4-H programs equip youth to be Beyond Ready for career, leadership roles, and life beyond 4-H.

Annually, the 4-H programs in Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, Wabash, and Wayne counties host a variety of workshops that not only prepare 4-H members for projects at the annual 4-H shows, but also introduce possible career paths or hobbies, refine hard and soft skills, foster self-confidence and teamwork, and more. In 2025, multiple programs and workshops were held to help 4-H members and local youth become Beyond Ready.



4-H programs host first unit-wide public speaking competition

As they say, practice makes perfect, and the same principle applies to public speaking. In 4-H, members are introduced to a variety of public speaking opportunities, which can include leading a club meeting, presenting to a judge, or representing 4-H on a leadership team. Each experience is an opportunity to become a more confident communicator.

To further challenge 4-H members and develop their public speaking skills, a unit-wide public speaking contest was held. 4-H members from Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, and Wayne counties selected their topics and prepared speeches in accordance with Illinois 4-H public speaking guidelines. Speeches ranged from poetry recitations to formal speeches, with members competing at beginner and advanced levels. The top five speeches were awarded as follows:

- First place: Levi Clodfelter, Richland County
- Second place: Alex Paul, Wayne County
- Third place: Seth Clodfelter, Richland County
- Fourth place: Kelly Hinderliter, Edwards County
- Fifth place: Titus Anderson, Lawrence County

All five, in addition to Naomi Anderson of Lawrence County, received the opportunity to advance to the state competition. Alex Paul and Kelly Hinderliter went on to compete at the Illinois 4-H Public Speaking Contest during the spring in Champaign. Hinderliter received second place reserve champion award in the formal beginner category.

Regardless of their individual placement, each 4-H member can proudly say they had the courage to speak in front of their peers and families, gained valuable feedback from judges, and improved upon a skill that can be used for a lifetime.

Livestock workshops prepare 4-H members and families for livestock projects

In summer 2025, the county 4-H programs hosted just over 50 animal and livestock shows during the county fairs, making livestock shows a significant aspect of the 4-H show season. So, what if a child joins 4-H and wants to show livestock? Where do parents begin if they've never raised or shown livestock before? 4-H livestock workshops are available to help families prepare.

By hosting livestock workshops tailored to a specific animal, 4-H members and their families can learn how to select their show



animal, care for it, and prepare for showtime. In 2025, the unit hosted three unit-wide livestock workshops focusing on rabbits and goats. In the spring, Wabash County 4-H hosted a rabbit workshop while Richland County 4-H hosted a goat workshop, both providing 4-H members with the opportunity to prepare ahead for the summer 4-H shows.

In the fall, Wayne County 4-H hosted a goat workshop focused on raising, breeding, and showing Boer goats in collaboration with the Illinois Meat Goat Producers. Attendees came from within the five-county unit and beyond to hear from experts with Lowe's Pellets and Grain, Hoosier Embryo, Boers by Hobby, American Boer Goat Association, and additional experts in the boer goat industry. Topics ranged from goat nutrition to reproductive technologies and preferred breed characteristics for selecting and breeding show goats. Attendees also learned what's recommended to keep in a goat show box. To wrap up the workshop, a fitting demonstration showed participants how to groom a goat's legs and how to use specific grooming products.

Through comprehensive workshops like these, 4-H members gain a well-rounded experience that prepares them to be Beyond Ready for all aspects of raising and caring for their animal. While the workshops also open doors for opportunities outside of 4-H, they ultimately provide the fundamentals needed for members to impress at their county's 4-H show. Families also leave with a better understanding of the commitment involved with livestock projects, and 4-H members can gain more confidence in their caretaking and showmanship skills.



4-H shows help 4-H members develop critical skills

As young adults start their first job, take leadership roles in college, or venture into independence, they'll call on experiences throughout their lives to help guide them through new ones. 4-H offers experiences and skills that members can reflect on for a lifetime, preparing them to be Beyond Ready for their next adventure.

In particular, the annual 4-H general project, animal, and livestock shows provide youth with experiences that promote resilience, personal growth, confidence, teamwork, respect, and many other qualities that distinguish 4-H members. During this summer's 4-H shows, the 4-H members of Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, Wabash, and Wayne counties showed that they were not only Beyond Ready for their shows but that they were helping others become Beyond Ready as well.

Whether it was coaching fellow 4-H members on how to show an animal for master showmanship or helping a member show an animal in a class with multiple entries, they proved that showing livestock is a team effort among 4-H members. Inside the showing, it was also common practice for 4-H members to shake the judge's hand after each class. It was a small gesture,



Wabash County 4-H member grooms his pig during a 4-H show.

but one that went a long way in letting the judges know they respected their time and feedback, no matter their individual placement.

During the general project shows, it was evident that many 4-H'ers spent a considerable amount of time learning about their projects and preparing to present them. Their confidence and excitement exuded from them. For some, this earned their project a ticket to the Illinois State Fair.

Whether members chose to exhibit in the general project show or in the animal and livestock shows, 4-H members were able to delve deeper into their interests and showcase their best work with confidence. Afterward, members could reflect on their work and the feedback received to identify areas for improvement.

4-H members have the opportunity to build upon the skills they learn in 4-H. Whether it's life skills, confidence in public speaking, soft skills they go on to apply in the workforce, or otherwise, perhaps they can attribute some of their success to their time in 4-H.



42
4-H clubs in 2025



887
4-H members in 2025



Tech Fest equips students for success

Throughout the school year, 4-H programs regularly partner with schools to offer 4-H in-school programming for students in grades 3-12. These programs offer students unique learning opportunities in areas such as food safety, health and wellness, career planning, agriculture, and more. 4-H school programs can help address specific challenges facing an age group or build foundations for academic success, healthy living, and more.

Each fall, fifth grade students are invited for a fun yet educational experience that gets them excited about science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. For 17 years in Wayne County and 11 years in Edwards County, Tech Fest has been an annual school program aimed at helping students become more proficient in STEM concepts.

Tech Fest not only fosters problem-solving skills but also helps young participants develop teamwork and social skills essential for future success.

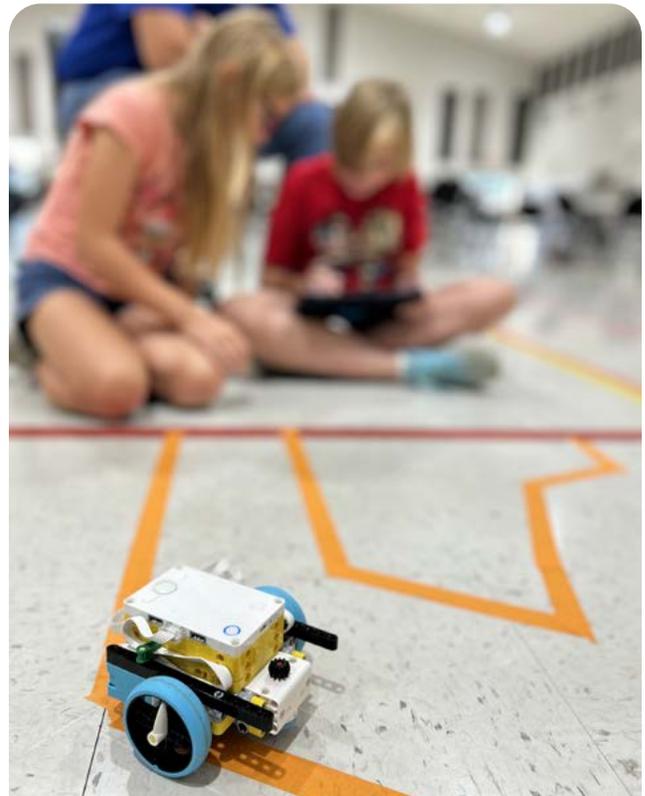
Samantha Gaither, 4-H youth educator

In recent years, a representative from Elastec, a manufacturing company headquartered in Carmi, has launched the program with a presentation about the company's founding and the diverse environmental products they manufacture. Students learn about the variety of technologies used to clean up oil spills and are able to interact with small models of some of their technologies.

Following, classes branch off into sessions where students complete challenges and projects related to STEM. This year's sessions included constructing roller coasters using foam noodles, tape, and a marble to complete various challenges; building boats for strength and speed using only cardboard, foil, and tape; testing the launching capabilities of their handmade rockets and catapults, and more.

Both counties also hosted a session about robotics. In Wayne, students programmed LEGO robots to maneuver through a custom maze. At the Edwards County Tech Fest, students were visited by Vincennes University instructor Jay Hillyard, who brought with him a Universal Robot for students to interact with. The robot was an excellent example of the type of robot used in repetitive tasks, such as those on an assembly line.

More than 250 students participated in this year's Tech Fest programs and had the opportunity to express their creative side, exercise critical thinking skills, and learn to work independently and collaboratively. Via 4-H programs such as this, student have the opportunity to explore new hobbies and potential careers while engaging in hands-on learning experiences.



Wayne County students work together to program directions for their LEGO robot after creating a custom maze for it to navigate.

After-school program sparks interest in 4-H projects

Following the pandemic in 2020, Richland County 4-H was looking for a new way to reignite workshops in Richland County. After partnering to host a program at the Olney Public Library, Spark at the Library was established as a monthly program for local youth. Following the programs success in 2021, it was expanded to Lawrence County in 2022.

Since then, Spark at the Library has been hosted October through May in both counties with each class featuring a fun topic and a hands-on activity. Activities correspond with a 4-H project that 4-H members can exhibit at the 4-H general project show. Examples of activities include building first aid kits before summer break, making homemade butter, learning about water and weather, and more. Many participants are of Cloverbud age, age 5-7, or are new 4-H members; so, the program provides an opportunity for participants to explore 4-H projects while potentially sparking an interest in something new.

A similar program is expected to launch in Wayne County in 2026. Furthermore, 4-H Educator Samantha Gaither, who has overseen the program since joining the unit in 2022, is working to assemble the lessons used over the lifespan of the program. Lessons will be made available to 4-H staff within the state so others have the opportunity to establish a similar program within their counties.



4-H connects with youth of all ages and interests

Lawrence County 4-H and Bridgeport Grade School partner to form new Cloverbud club

Youth seem to be busier than ever with activities; so, wouldn't it be easier to bring 4-H to them? Last year, second grade teachers at Bridgeport Grade School created the first in-school Cloverbud club in Lawrence County, creating a unique opportunity for students. Just like an after-school Cloverbud club, monthly programs were conducted. A Cloverbud Judging Night was held at the end of the year as well, similar to a 4-H general project show. Students chose which project they wanted to create or exhibit from previous lessons, and three judges discussed their projects with them at the event. Illinois Extension also spoke with parents about how students could continue in 4-H. Thanks to a generous donor, all 76 students were able to participate at no cost since all enrollment fees were paid in memory of Fred and Shirley Wright.



Richland County workshop teaches basic sewing skills

When was the last time you sought to learn a new skill? Was it learning to can foods, make sourdough, crochet, or something else? No matter, the sense of pride when succeeding in a new skill or replacing a store-bought item with something homemade is unmatched, and the same can be said for learning to sew. Illinois Extension staff and Paula West, family and consumer science teacher at Richland County High School, hosted a sewing workshop to introduce the fundamentals of sewing. During the workshop, participants learned how to use a sewing machine while creating a personalized pillowcase, a great beginner-level project. So, whether sewing becomes an enjoyable pastime, a skill used from time to time, a cost-saving alternative, or even a career, it's a skill worth developing.



Wayne County 4-H program coordinator and Richland County office support assistant help during sewing workshop.

4-H members bond with moms and mother figures over delicious charcuterie boards

The Wabash County charcuterie workshop was a highlight of the fall, bringing children and family members together for an evening of creativity, good food, and laughter. Led by Denise's Catering & More, participants learned how to create charcuterie boards that were as beautiful as they were delicious. Attendees enjoyed sampling a variety of ingredients while picking up simple tips for hosting and presentation. The workshop created a welcoming space where participants could connect, share stories, and discover new culinary ideas. Events like this are a reminder of how food can bring people together and strengthen a sense of community.



An example of a participant's charcuterie board, including the rose they learned to create using salami.

Wayne County 4-H cultivates young gardeners

As springtime arrived and gardeners began planning their gardens, Wayne County 4-H held the Spring into Cloverbuds workshop to teach youth ages 5-7 how to start their own gardens. Throughout the workshop, participants learned about the parts of a seed, what seeds need to germinate, and the lifecycle of plants. After learning how greenhouses work, they planted flower seeds in their homemade greenhouse to take home and watch grow. Participants also learned about the essential elements to growing a successful garden. Then, they started their own vegetable or flower garden by planting seeds in an egg carton. The workshop served to grow an interest in gardening among a younger generation while also providing a teaching opportunity for the two 4-H federation members who helped lead the class.

Cloverbud Camp introduces youth to 4-H

Cloverbud clubs and activities are a great way to introduce youth to 4-H. Edwards County 4-H hosted a half-day Cloverbud Camp in late spring for local youth ages 5-7. During the camp, youth personalized t-shirts with the 4-H clover on them, painted a four-leaf clover sun catcher, completed a scavenger hunt, and participated in additional activities and crafts at the Edwards County Fairgrounds. The workshop was facilitated with the assistance of county 4-H club members. In total, 18 youth had the opportunity to have fun, make friends, and learn more about Cloverbuds and 4-H.



Hunters Feeding Illinois donates 2,698 pounds of venison to food pantries



According to **Feeding America**, “Food insecurity is when people can't access the food they need to live their fullest lives.” Within the local five-county unit, 14% percent of residents in Wayne and Richland counties, 15% of residents in Wabash County, and 16% of residents in Lawrence and Edwards counties, are considered food insecure, which is slightly more than Illinois' average of 13%, according to 2023 data from **Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap report**.

In May 2025, Illinois Extension welcomed Alizah Harper, the unit's first SNAP-Ed educator, who was eager to begin making a difference within local communities. One priority was launching the Hunters Feeding Illinois program to address food insecurity locally.

Hunters Feeding Illinois provides food pantries with ground venison from hunters who've donated their legally harvested deer. Illinois Extension facilitates this program in partnership with participating meat processors and with the support of program partners, donors, and deer hunters. Processed venison is then delivered to local food pantries along with Illinois Extension resources such as cookbooks, educational handouts, hot pads, and meat mashers to help food pantry patrons incorporate venison into their meals. The venison and resources are provided to the food pantries and patrons at no cost.

In 2024-2025, the Hunters Feeding Illinois program was active in 44 central and southern Illinois counties, leaving a gap represented by the five-county unit. Hitting the ground running, Harper was able to secure partnerships with two meat processors for the first year of the program: Charlie's Deer Processing and Smokehouse in Bridgeport and Legacy Meats

in Sumner. To ensure the local program could be managed logistically while striving to make a notable impact, five food pantries within the Feeding Illinois network in Lawrence, Richland, and Wabash counties were identified to receive ground venison.

With processors and food pantries secured, Harper began the hunt for financial contributions for the local program. Processors are reimbursed \$100 for each deer processed. For the 2025-2026 program year, Feeding Illinois matched every donation, meaning a \$50 donation would process one deer. The capacity to accept deer donations relied directly on the amount of money available to cover processing.

In its first year, 83 deer were donated by local hunters. In total, 2,698 pounds of venison were delivered to the Sign of the Kingdom in Sumner, The Master's Hands in Olney, Giving Hope Food Pantry in Olney, The Good Samaritan of Richland County in Olney, and Circle A Servolution in Allendale. It's estimated that one pound of venison yields four servings, which translates to approximately 10,792 servings of protein provided to help address food insecurity in local communities.



83
Deer donated to the program



2,698
Pounds of venison provided to food pantries



10,792
Servings of protein (one pound of venison is estimated to equal 4 servings)



SNAP-Ed cooking school develops cooking skills in over 50 young chefs

Each summer, SNAP-Ed community workers join forces to host the Illinois Junior Chefs cooking schools across the unit. The cooking schools focus on key concepts such as the five MyPlate food groups, balanced nutrition, kitchen and food safety, basic cooking skills, and how to prepare a recipe. The goal is to equip participants with the knowledge and skills needed to become more proficient in the kitchen and increase their understanding of nutrition through hands-on experiences. Illinois Junior Chefs is a week-long program for youth ages 8-13.

Each day follows a similar format and is structured to introduce new concepts while building upon those learned in previous lessons. Skills introduced throughout the week include proper hand washing, how to prepare food safely and avoid cross-contamination, measuring liquid and dry ingredients, knife safety and cutting techniques, herb and spice identification, and using various kitchen tools such as a lemon juicer. As participants work through a recipe, they gain real-world experience following steps in a recipe, selecting the necessary cooking utensils, and measuring ingredients. Following, they get to taste their creations.

For example, one class day highlighted dairy as an element of the five food groups. The class tried different types of milk—oat, almond, and 1%—and then learned about the fat content in each. Students worked together to prepare chocolate mousse, fruit parfaits, and a fruit or vegetable dip by following recipes with dairy as a main ingredient. The instructors also demonstrated fundamental mixing techniques, such as stirring, beating, creaming, folding, tossing, and whipping ingredients, which students then applied as they prepared the recipes.

As each cooking school concluded, participants were given a certificate of completion, a take-home cookbook, a spatula, measuring cups and spoons, and a cutting board to ensure they were equipped to continue building upon these skills at home. Via four, five-day cooking schools, over 50 youth were empowered with the knowledge needed to make balanced nutrition choices. They also gained the confidence to safely prepare delicious meals and snacks at home.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Kirby Hunt helps a student identify cooking utensils needed for a recipe.

Program concludes after serving communities for 25 years

In fiscal year 1999, the five-county unit began administering a new program, known then as the Family Nutrition Program. Since then, the program has evolved and operated recently as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education, commonly referred to as the SNAP-Ed program. SNAP-Ed strived to help individuals and families who are eligible for SNAP benefits achieve a more healthy lifestyle through nutrition education, promoting physical activity, programs to improve food access, partnerships, and more. At the same time, the program sought to reduce negative health outcomes as a result of healthier choices.

Locally, SNAP-Ed community workers provided education and resources through programming in local schools, housing units, food pantries, and community organizations. For school-aged youth, signature programs included The OrganWiseGuys, Serving Up MyPlate, Color Me Healthy, Healthy Kids Out of School, and Illinois Junior Chefs. Each program was targeted toward a specific age group to introduce balanced nutrition concepts, physical activity lessons, or both, relevant to their development.

For adults, the Healthy Cents, MyPlate for My Family, and CREATE Better Health programs focused on balanced nutrition, physical activity, and budget-friendly grocery shopping and meal planning. In 2025 alone, the units' SNAP-Ed program hosted 348 nutrition education classes and partnered with 54 food pantries, early childhood centers, and other organizations. Altogether, the program reached more than 1,400 participants.

Furthermore, the SNAP-Ed program was able to broaden its scope with the addition of the local Hunters Feeding Illinois program in fall 2025. This program was spearheaded by the SNAP-Ed educator, a new position for the unit in spring 2025. Hunters Feeding Illinois provided food pantries with access to lean protein at a critical time when communities saw an increased need for food resources.

In July 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act cut all funding for the SNAP-Ed program. In Illinois, the SNAP-Ed program ceased operations in February 2026. While future strategies to close the gap in nutrition education left by this change is undetermined within the five-county unit, one thing remains the same: in 2024, food and agriculture, as well as health, were identified as two of the eight strategic priorities outlined for Illinois Extension over the next decade. In the meantime, we celebrate the achievements of the unit's SNAP-Ed program, alongside dedicated staff, which had served local communities for 25 years.





Master Gardener recruits volunteers for community-wide project



Illinois Master Gardeners are an incredible asset to Illinois Extension. Master Gardeners facilitate the mission of “helping others learn to grow” through community gardens, educational and mentorship opportunities, and other projects they choose to develop. Debbie Fearn, Master Gardener in Edwards County, is no different.

Fearn is a member of a local church, and when the church bought a building in downtown Albion for church gatherings and youth meetings, Fearn saw potential in the window box planters out front. Thus, she did what any Master Gardener would do and planted flowers in them. She then seized the opportunity to brighten other nearby businesses with flowers in their outdoor planters.

The following year, 2024, Fearn built upon that initial idea and planted flowers at 16 businesses, totaling 34 planters. Additionally, she took on the Edwards County Memorial Plaza flowerbeds, three planters at the Edwards County Courthouse, and donated an additional four planters. The project received overwhelmingly positive response from the community, which enjoyed seeing downtown Albion adorned with the beautiful flowerpots and growing flowerbeds. The same summer, she continued to maintain the pollinator garden, flowerbeds, and planters at the Edwards County Fairgrounds, which also began in 2023 with the help of other local Master Gardeners.

Going into 2025, Fearn put out a call for support on Facebook with no shortage of responses to help with the project. Volunteers helped clean flowerbeds, plant flowers, or joined the group that would manage caring for the planters and flowerbeds on a daily basis.

Logistically, Fearn and volunteers developed routes to manage the monumental undertaking. Teams of two volunteers rotated specific routes weekly, while a few volunteers had routes assigned to them individually. Any time they needed a break for life events or even fair season, they would substitute in on each other’s route. While Fearn provided training along the way, specifically regarding trimming flowers, she ultimately trusted the group to succeed independently.

“I just want to say that the ladies who volunteered this year to help in this endeavor are priceless to me,” notes Fearn. “We have laughed, cried, and definitely sweat together all summer! It’s a bond that will not be forgotten!”

This year’s project began in April and continued until mid-September. In total, the team maintained 38 planters for 18 businesses and one individual, the flowerbeds and pollinator garden at the Edwards County fairgrounds, three planters at the courthouse, the Memorial Plaza flowerbeds, and five donated planters; they even helped with a few plants at local businesses that happened to be along their routes.

Fearn reported 112 volunteer hours for this project. Now, considering volunteers helped maintain five additional routes, there's no doubt that collectively this project amassed hundreds of volunteer hours and was truly a group effort.

The project has been an excellent way to enhance the beauty of downtown Albion and the fairgrounds. Fearn looks forward to continuing the project in 2026 and encourages anyone interested in volunteering or learning more about flower gardening to join in on the project.



Workshop helps local residents maintain landscaping, gardens, and plants

Fall is the perfect season for gardeners and homeowners to tend to flowerbeds, landscaping, and yard work. To help community members tackle their fall to-do list and help them prepare for spring, Master Gardener Debbie Fearn and Illinois Extension hosted the workshop Fall Focus: Gardening and Groundskeeping.

The workshop included local experts Joy Hocking of Hocking's Green Thumb Nursery and Doug Krajec with Krajec Landscaping. The workshop allowed participants to ask questions and take part in discussions regarding landscaping, soil testing, planting and caring for specific plants and trees in our region, how late to plant in the fall, cleaning and storing gardening tools for winter, and tips for bringing plants indoors, among other topics.

Ultimately, participants were better prepared to address challenges in flowerbeds and gardens, consider recommendations for landscaping practices, and know what they needed to accomplish this fall to better prepare for springtime projects.



4
Master Gardener volunteers



161
Master Gardener volunteer hours donated



150
pounds of produce donated by the West Salem Community Garden



Illinois Extension connects with public at community events

The Illinois Extension mission states, "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." This year, the five-county unit took the opportunity to connect with communities and move forward in ways that meet community needs, further supporting Illinois Extension's mission.

Wabash County Extension Office expands offerings

For years, the Wabash County Extension Office was only open three days per week. As staffing shifted, it was the perfect opportunity to reevaluate the needs of Wabash County and how Illinois Extension could better serve that community. So, the office announced that it would be open five days a week beginning late summer, following the hiring of a full-time office support assistant.

The office not only expanded its office hours and welcomed new staff, but also added the neighboring office space to its operations. With the addition of more space, the office now has the capacity to host larger workshops and accommodate 4-H club meetings at their location, a solution to a challenge many 4-H clubs were facing. The Wabash County Extension Office looks forward to being able to serve 4-H and community members with more convenience and hopes it'll encourage growth in the utilization of Extension resources.

Wabash County Extension hosts open house and trick-or-treating

In celebration of the updates in Wabash County, the office hosted an open house for the community, which allowed staff to network with community members and provide information about Illinois Extension programs. Following the open house, local youth and families were invited to stop by during Mt. Carmel's trick-or-treating hours. During trick-or-treating, 4-H club leaders represented their clubs, 4-H members supplied examples of general projects, and the office provided information about 4-H, cloverbuds, and school programs. The event was an incredible success with numerous families and youth stopping by the office.



Illinois Extension staff at the Wabash County Extension Office Open House.

Staff represent Illinois Extension during county fairs

Out of sight, out of mind? Not for Extension. To raise awareness about Illinois Extension programs in local communities, members of the Extension team set up and attended booths for one night at each county fair this summer. Staff provided information about each county's 4-H program, shared Real Colors training information with local businesses, and promoted upcoming programs. In doing so, Extension aimed to increase awareness of Extension resources and local programs as well as increase participation in events.



Visit the unit website:
extension.illinois.edu/elrww



Certified facilitators host Real Colors professional development trainings

When a team fails to understand how to work together and overcome differences, the road to overcoming challenges, meeting goals, and finding success can be long. Through Real Colors professional development workshops, Illinois Extension helps teams and coworkers find harmony to accomplish their mission.

Real Colors associates personality traits and characteristics with a specific color to help individuals recognize their own strengths and weaknesses as well as the best way to communicate and collaborate with others. The five-county unit has three certified Real Colors facilitators who administer the personality test and help teams understand and apply the results. Throughout the year, facilitators provided Real Colors workshops for a variety of groups including an Extension unit, 4-H leaders, Annie's Project attendees, a student organization, and a professional business firm.

Following the trainings, participants noted that they not only understood themselves better, but also recognized how they could apply this information within the workplace and other settings. According to one facilitator, those who participated in advanced modules within the Real Colors curriculum also exhibited more ease amongst their team in subsequent trainings. Businesses and organizations who are interested in providing a Real Colors training for their team are encouraged to contact their Illinois Extension office to schedule a workshop.



Unit staff recognized for their contributions and commitment

Staff attend NAE4-HYDP conference

4-H Educator Samantha Gaither and Wayne County 4-H Program Coordinator Ryan Littlejohn attended the National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals conference in Georgia to present on local programs, learn from others who work in 4-H across the country, and celebrate their achievements. During the conference, Gaither presented on the five-county unit's No Limits Livestock Show, an all-inclusive swine show where youth 4-H swine exhibitors and individuals with disabilities team up to show a pig. Littlejohn spoke during the conference about the fair resource binder he helped create with the fair resource group. Additionally, Littlejohn was recognized as part of the Illinois 4-H professional development team, which received the Excellence in Peer Professional Development Award, and was recognized alongside Extension staff who host the podcast "Behind the Clover," which received the National Communicator Award for an outstanding Radio/Audio Program. The conference provided an excellent professional development opportunity while also recognizing their commitment to local 4-H programs.

Katie Bell receives award at annual conference

Katie Bell, Extension educator within the Local Food Systems and Small Farms program, was recognized at Illinois Extension's annual conference with the Individual Extension Excellence Award. Bell joined Extension in 2020 and transferred to the five-county unit in 2023, which introduced the Local Food Systems and Small Farms program to the area. Since then, Bell has introduced numerous programs and developed partnerships to connect the Local Food Systems and Small Farms program with communities. She has established herself as a go-to resource and expert for agriculture-related needs. Bell's professionalism, leadership, and willingness to assist in other program areas when needed have been instrumental to the unit's success.

Unit celebrates years of service

The five-county unit has started a new tradition, celebrating years of service with Illinois Extension. Moving forward, staff will be recognized annually for 5, 10, 15, and 20 years of service. This year, staff members were recognized for meeting those milestones.

5 years of service:

Katie Bell, Local Food Systems and Small Farms educator
Tara Buerster, county Extension director
Debra Collier, Edwards County 4-H program coordinator

10 years of service:

Samantha Gaither, 4-H youth development educator
Sheri Pitts, Richland County office support assistant
Jessica Simpson, Wayne County office support associate

15 years of service:

Debbie Buchanan, Lawrence County office support assistant
Theresa Reid, office support specialist-fiscal



Extension staff hold their years of service awards at the December team meeting.

Illinois Extension welcomes new staff

Jess Jennings, Richland County 4-H Program Coordinator

Jess Jennings joined the Illinois Extension team as the Richland County 4-H program coordinator in December. Jennings earned her Associate of Arts and Science degree from Olney Central College and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She also works as a licensed real estate broker. Jennings is married with three children and is a 4-H mom. With family members serving on the Richland County Fair Board for many years, she's been a long-time supporter of the Richland County Fair and looks forward to next summer's 4-H show and fair season.

Alizah Harper, SNAP-Ed Educator

Alizah Harper served as the SNAP-Ed educator serving Edwards, Lawrence, Richland, Wabash, and Wayne counties in 2025. Harper joined Illinois Extension in 2023 as the Wabash County office support assistant before transitioning to the SNAP-Ed role in May 2025. While serving in this position, Harper was instrumental in launching the Hunters Feeding Illinois program within the unit. Harper earned her Master of Public Health from Indiana University and her Bachelor of Science in biology from Indiana University Southeast. She is a member of the American Public Health Association and the Delta Omega Honorary Society in Public Health. Harper is also a certified food protection manager and Illinois farmer's market food sampling handler, an Illinois poison prevention educator, and a Go NAPSACC technical assistance consultant. She resides in Albion with her husband, dog, and two cats.

Tori Thompson, Wabash County 4-H Program Coordinator

Tori Thompson joined Illinois Extension in May as the Wabash County 4-H program coordinator. Thompson previously interned with Illinois Extension for two years and was a member of the Blue Ribbon 4-H Club in Edwards County. Thompson attends Murray State University and is working toward her bachelor's degree in agricultural science/agribusiness.

Carrie Tennis, Wabash County Office Support Assistant

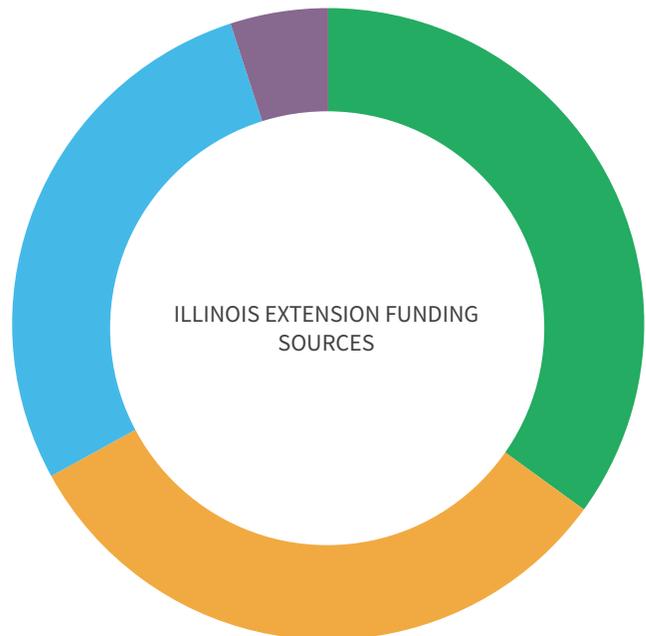
Carrie Tennis is the new office support assistant for the Wabash County Extension Office. Tennis previously worked as an office manager in the retail and health care industries and earned her associate degree in interpersonal communications from Frontier Community College. Tennis began volunteering as an Allendale Twisters 4-H club leader in Wabash County in 2022. She resides in Wabash County with her husband Jason, and together they have two children, Andrew and Addison. Tennis and her husband have been involved with 4-H through their children for more than 15 years. Dairy cattle have been central to the Tennis family's 4-H projects, which can be attributed to Jason and his family's dairy farm, Tennis Dairy.



Illinois Extension council members participate in Real Colors.

Illinois Extension Council Members

Michelle Piller Edwards County	Julie Clodfelter Richland County	Vacant Wayne County
Abby Shelton Edwards County	Levi Clodfelter Richland County	Ethan Keyser Wayne County
Matthew St. Ledger Edwards County	Andrea Puckett Richland County	Lily Simpson Wayne County
Kimberly Fisher Lawrence County	Karissa Anderson Wabash County	
Jerrie Roark Lawrence County	Audra Spray Wabash County	
Molly Seals Lawrence County	Tammy Ochs Wabash County	



Amount	Source
35%	County Board Funding
32%	Federal Funding
28%	State Funding
5%	Local Funding

STAFF

Tara Buerster County Director	Ryan Littlejohn 4-H Program Coordinator	Theresa Reid Office Support Specialist, Fiscal	Extra Help Office Support
Katie Bell Local Food Systems & Small Farms Educator	Maisie McClure 4-H Program Coordinator	Dana Hart Office Support Associate	Annie Buckles
Samantha Gaither 4-H Youth Development Educator	Tori Thompson 4-H Program Coordinator	Jessica Simpson Office Support Associate	Kit Graves
Alizah Harper SNAP-Ed Educator	Kirby Hunt SNAP- Ed Community Worker	Debbie Buchanan Office Support Assistant	Lauren Russell
Debra Collier 4-H Program Coordinator	Jane Jones SNAP- Ed Community Worker	Sheri Pitts Office Support Assistant	Renee Smith
Jess Jennings 4-H Program Coordinator	Raleigh Lear Marketing & Communications Program Coordinator	Carrie Tennis Office Support Assistant	Deb Sterchi
			Debbie Webb

OFFICE INFORMATION

Edwards County Extension Office

7 N. Fifth St.
Albion, IL 62806
(618) 445-2934
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
(Closed 12-1 p.m.)

Lawrence County Extension Office

10722 Cherry Blvd.
Lawrenceville, IL 62439
(618) 943-5018
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
(Closed 12-1 p.m.)

Richland County Extension Office

306 S. Fair St.
Olney, IL 62450
(618) 395-2191
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
(Closed 12-1 p.m.)

Wabash County Extension Office

738 N. Market St.
Mt. Carmel, IL 62863
(618) 262-5725
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
(Closed 12-1 p.m.)

Wayne County Extension Office

2B Frontier Dr.
Fairfield, IL 62837
(618) 842-3702
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
(Closed 12-1 p.m.)

ONLINE



Edwards County 4-H
facebook.com/EdwardsCounty4H

Richland County 4-H
facebook.com/RichlandCountyIllinois4H

Wayne County 4-H
facebook.com/wayne.county.il.4h

Lawrence County 4-H
facebook.com/4HLawrenceCounty

Wabash County 4-H
facebook.com/WabashCounty4H

Master Gardener
facebook.com/MasterGardenerELRWW

Five-County Unit Page
facebook.com/UIExtELRWW



Illinois Extension
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College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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