



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

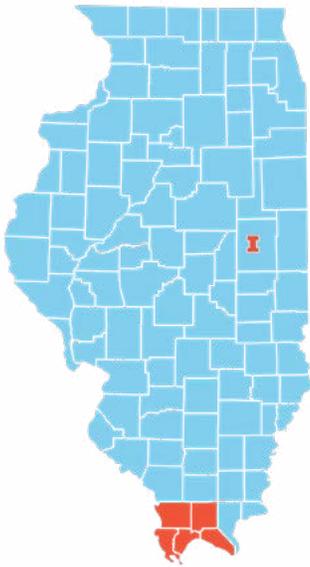


Serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Jody A. Johnson
County Director



Addressing the needs of our local communities to strengthen southern Illinois

Reflecting on the 2025 program year, I am both humbled and proud to be a part of the remarkable resilience and impact of University of Illinois Extension across southernmost Illinois. This past year brought significant change — most notably, the conclusion of SNAP-Ed funding, which supported nutrition education and outreach in our communities for years. While this loss was deeply felt, it also reminded us of the importance of adaptability and partnership. Our team has responded by strengthening local collaborations, integrating health education into new settings, and ensuring that our commitment to community well-being remains steadfast.

Amid these transitions, our 4-H Youth Development program continued to flourish. From in-school clubs and leadership conferences to the 4-H Teen Leader trip to the University of Illinois campus, youth in Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties gained real-world skills in teamwork, communication, and service. Their energy and innovation remind us why 4-H remains the foundation for growing the next generation of community leaders.

In Community and Economic Development, Illinois Extension played a pivotal role in convening stakeholders, guiding strategic planning sessions, and supporting local entrepreneurship, from grocery store assistance and food systems to site-readiness and workforce initiatives.

Our Natural Resources, Energy, and Environment programming also thrived, mobilizing volunteers through the Master Naturalist and Master Gardener programs, promoting conservation practices, and engaging local residents in stewardship projects throughout the Shawnee National Forest region.

Together, these efforts underscore what makes Extension invaluable — a trusted presence, rooted locally, yet connected to statewide innovation and impact. Please review some of the highlights from programming this year and consider working closer with Extension in the coming years.

Jody A. Johnson
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Extension, 4-H, and community partners plant trees at a new campground in Olmstead.

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 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|

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 |
|---|---|---|--|--|



Extension hosts inaugural Independent Grocer Summit

Independent grocers need support to stand out in a community where big-box stores are dominating the landscape. Small businesses cannot continue to thrive without proper resources, which can lead to shuttered doors and food deserts for local communities. Extension’s Community and Economic Development team hosted the first Southern Illinois Food Access Annual Independent Grocer Summit in October at John A. Logan College.

The summit welcomed 30 participants, including 12 grocers representing nine stores, as well as 18 speakers, sponsors, and exhibitors. The event brought together grocery store owners and managers to explore various resources that would help them thrive in a challenging marketplace.

Sponsored by Ameren Illinois Energy Efficiency Program, Winkler Wholesale Grocers, Prairie Farms, and Group 4 Retail Equipment, the event earned a 100% recommendation rate in post-summit surveys and sparked new collaborations on energy efficiency, local food sourcing, and workforce needs, such as meat cutter recruitment and training.

Presenters discussed a variety of topics throughout the half-day event, including grant and loan programs, digital marketing and artificial intelligence, energy efficiency opportunities, planning for transition, cooperating with local farmers, and new refrigerant regulations. The summit also featured a panel discussion on adaptability and resiliency led by three store owners with more than 100 years of combined experience.

We're excited to host this event to bring together grocery store owners and managers to explore resources to help them thrive in a challenging marketplace.

CED Educator John Shadowens



The CED team welcomes participants to the inaugural Independent Grocer Summit. Pictured (L-R): Eleazar (Ellie) Edwards, Destenie Sullivan, and John Shadowens.



30
Summit participants



12
Grocers representing nine stores



18
Speakers, sponsors, and exhibitors

Southern Illinois Food Access is a program offered by Illinois Extension in the lower 22 counties of Illinois to address food insecurity and combat food desert proliferation. The program works with local grocers and food system partners to strengthen retail food access in rural areas. The Extension team collaborates with more than 40 independent grocery stores and a dozen other food system partners to keep healthy, nutrient-dense foods on shelves in areas that are at risk of becoming food deserts.

The positive turnout for the first summit has set a strong foundation for what is to come. The planning team is looking forward to seeing the program grow year after year as it gains momentum and deepens its impact on the southern Illinois grocery community.



Partners address food insecurity

The Southern Illinois Food Security Summit addresses the growing issue of food insecurity in rural communities throughout the region. The fifth-annual event brought together partners, organizations, and community members dedicated to improving healthy food access and nutrition security. The Community and Economic Development team was among those who presented at the conference, sharing the challenges faced by rural independent grocers. The summit highlights a shared commitment: to ensure that no one in Southern Illinois goes hungry. When organizations work together, they can help close the gap for those struggling to access healthy food.



CED team members Ellie Edwards (L) and John Shadowens (R) speak at the Southern Illinois Food Security Summit.



Extension sparks placemaking ideas

The CED team helps community leaders, residents, and businesses build capacity for renewal and growth. This summer, Extension was invited to present to the Leadership Development Program known as Marion TWENTY39. The CED team presented on the topic of placemaking, which involves the engagement of citizens in partnership with the city government in the development of social infrastructure for a healthy community and the reimagining of community space uses. Examples include events that increase community participation and a sense of belonging, such as downtown concerts, art installations, block parties, cultural celebrations, and historical events. City leaders who attended engaged in discussions about how local departments and organizations can foster more placemaking opportunities, such as Third Thursday, Rock the Plaza, Show and Shine, Make Music Day, Farmer's Market, and the Very Merry Marion Celebrations.



CED Educator John Shadowens (back row, fourth from right) and the Marion TWENTY39 Leadership Development committee members.



Extension assists with strategic plan

Extension serves as a vital connector, linking partners with the support and opportunities they need to thrive. This spring, the Community and Economic Development team helped the Friends of the Shawnee National Forest develop a three-year strategic plan. The volunteer organization supports the work of the National Forest Service through a network of allied organizations to help build awareness, increase accessibility, promote good environmental stewardship, and increase participation in the Shawnee National Forest's many resources.

Extension facilitated a day-long planning retreat with the Board of Directors, which resulted in a five-point strategic plan. The plan provided a structure for seeking and increasing operating funds, growing membership, expanding programming, diversifying board membership, and growing and strengthening alliances. The Strategic Plan was officially adopted by the Board in July and now serves as the template for monthly board meetings and committee planning. The CED team can provide strategic planning services to any organization or local government unit upon request.



Extension staff meet with Friends of the Shawnee National Forest to develop a three-year strategic plan.

CED team develops toolkit to support rural independent grocers

The Community Economic Development team develops tools to support the success of rural independent grocers. Their New Store Start-Up Guide covers topics such as:

- brand awareness
- business setup
- case management
- human resources
- merchandising
- pricing
- refrigeration
- technology systems

The tools and resources shared can strengthen the local food system and increase resilience through the challenges faced by small communities and independent grocers.





4-H Teen Leader Program exemplifies the power of youth leadership

The 4-H Teen Leader Program continues to grow as one of the most impactful youth development initiatives in southern Illinois, engaging more than 200 teens from Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Union, Pulaski, Pope, and Hardin counties. These students share a mission to build leadership skills, strengthen communication, and serve as positive role models in their communities. The program equips youth with essential life and work skills while connecting them to future academic and career opportunities.

The Teen Leader Program operates year-round, offering leadership trainings throughout the school year, a spring trip to 4-H Camp, and a summer lake trip focused on team building and personal growth. Training sessions include lessons on leadership development, teamwork, professional behavior, youth engagement, diversity awareness, and problem-solving. After each session, teen leaders return to their elementary school partners to reteach the lessons—practicing public speaking, planning, and time management in real-world settings. This peer-to-peer model reinforces teen learning while positively influencing younger students. Through these efforts, the program has already reached more than 1,500 elementary youth across southern Illinois during the 2024–2025 4-H year.

Teen leaders also participate in immersive educational trips that broaden their understanding of higher education and careers. Forty-six leaders from Cairo, Cobden, Egyptian, Goreville, and Vienna high schools traveled to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign for a three-day college and career exploration experience. Hosted by Illinois Extension 4-H, the trip allowed students to tour academic departments, meet campus leaders, and gain firsthand insight into college life at the state's flagship land-grant university. Participants visited programs within the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, including Food Science and Human Nutrition, Animal Sciences, and Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences.



Students learn about careers in animal health, wildlife care, and scientific research during the College of Veterinary Medicine tour.



4-H Teen Leaders tour campus during a three-day college and career exploration experience.

Many students found the College of Veterinary Medicine tour especially impactful, as they explored laboratories, clinical areas, and diagnostic facilities while learning about careers in animal health, wildlife care, and scientific research. Conversations with faculty and current students helped them better understand pathways within science, technology, and health fields.

The experience also included campus dining, recreation center activities, and guided walks through iconic areas such as the Illini Union and Main Quad. Evening reflection sessions encouraged students to discuss college expectations, share insights, and set goals for academic achievement, leadership, and community service. A highlight of the trip was a meet-and-greet with Matthew Vann, the new associate dean and director of Illinois Extension, who welcomed the group and emphasized the importance of connecting local communities with university resources. Extension staff facilitated team-building exercises and group discussions throughout the visit, reinforcing the program's focus on experiential learning and leadership development.

Through year-round programming, mentorship, hands-on leadership, and experiential learning, 4-H Teen Leaders gain practical life skills and exposure to higher education and professional pathways. From classroom instruction to camp experiences, lake trips, and college visits, the program prepares youth to succeed academically, professionally, and personally. The Teen Leader Program continues to strengthen school-community partnerships, build confidence, and empower the next generation of leaders across southern Illinois.

The trip connects rural students with opportunities they might not otherwise experience to see that higher education is achievable and that career paths are plentiful.
County Director Jody Johnson



Volunteer inducted into Hall of Fame

Volunteers impact the lives of local 4-H youth. Jacob O'Neal was proudly inducted into the 4-H Hall of Fame, honoring his outstanding service, leadership, and lifetime commitment to the 4-H mission. As a dedicated Johnson County Shooting Sports volunteer, O'Neal has mentored countless youth in marksmanship, safety, responsibility, and sportsmanship, helping young people grow not only as skilled participants but as confident and capable individuals. His steady guidance, patience, and passion for youth development have made him a beloved mentor among members and volunteers. This prestigious recognition celebrates his personal achievements and promotes his legacy of inspiring future generations to learn, lead, and serve their communities.



4-H Hall of Fame inductee Jacob O'Neal



Youth showcase skills at animal shows

The 4-H animal shows across Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties gave youth meaningful opportunities to demonstrate hard work, dedication, and growing animal care skills throughout the 2025 season. At the Massac County Youth Fair, Small Animal Shows featured rabbits, chickens, cats, and dogs, with pullorum testing ensuring poultry health and strong participation from school club members. Large Animal Shows highlighted cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs; though some classes were small, judges praised the high quality of animals and exhibitors. The horse show was rained out twice, but county cattle winners advanced to Regional Shows. The 4-H Showdown brought together five counties for its second year, with more than 100 entries across all species. Matching shirts promoted unity, and college-aged judges appreciated seeing all species in one event. Supported by sponsors and a dedicated committee, the season showcased teamwork, resilience, and youth leadership across the unit.



Youth demonstrate hard work, dedication, and animal care skills during fair season.

Project addresses food insecurity

The 4-H Food Advocacy initiative, CAN Construction, encouraged clubs to collect canned food items and build creative visual displays that promoted community support and food security. More than 10,000 servings of food were distributed across five counties. Creations were created by Reaching for the Stars, Lick Creek Homegrown Leaders, Vienna Eagles with the Vienna Beta Club, Union County Robotics, and Clark Foundation Services. The Vienna Eagles earned first place, followed by Lick Creek in second and Clark Foundation Services in third, with Lick Creek also collecting the most cans. After the event, all canned goods were sorted by 4-H Teen Leaders and distributed to local food pantries, strengthening community impact.



Canned goods used during the event were sorted by 4-H Teen Leaders and distributed to local food pantries.

4-H'ers compete at general shows

The 4-H general project shows across Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties were a great success, with 165 projects exhibited in categories such as food and nutrition, visual arts, woodworking, photography, robotics, animal science, and leadership. Participants ranged from Cloverbuds to older members, showcasing creativity and skills built over months of project work. Many also exhibited at county fairs, and several advanced to the State Fair, proudly representing the local unit. Teen Leaders from school-based clubs assisted with judging logistics, supported younger members, and served as program ambassadors, demonstrating growing youth leadership. Both judges were 4-H alumni who brought meaningful insight to evaluations. Volunteers from school clubs, county committees, and homemaker groups helped check in projects, organize displays, and celebrate youth achievements. Staff were especially proud of the variety, quality, and enthusiasm reflected in every project.



165 projects were exhibited during the general shows.



Youth explore global diversity during 4-H International Night event

The 4-H Passport to the World program and cultural arts initiatives offer youth engaging opportunities to explore global diversity and broaden their understanding of international cultures. During 4-H International Night at Shawnee Community College, six 4-H clubs showcased the rich traditions of countries around the world through food festivals, traditional dress, and cultural exhibits. Two of the participating clubs had completed the Passport to the World program and competed for a state fair nomination, adding an exciting competitive element to the event.

Awards were presented in categories such as Most Knowledge of Country, Best Food Display, Most Creative, and Highest Club Participation, recognizing the dedication and enthusiasm of the youth. Shawnee College Ambassadors and Southern Illinois University International Student Council served as judges, lending their expertise and unique perspectives to the evening. Approximately 125 attendees explored the exhibits, sampled international dishes, and immersed themselves in the cultural celebrations.

Through these experiences, youth gained firsthand knowledge of the customs, traditions, and cuisines of countries beyond the United States, fostering global awareness, empathy, and respect for cultural differences. Understanding the world outside of their immediate communities helps young people develop critical thinking skills, an appreciation for diversity, and the ability to engage meaningfully in a global society. Programs like Passport to the World and cultural arts projects encourage creativity, teamwork, and communication while teaching youth about global citizenship. By connecting local experiences with international perspectives, 4-H empowers young people to become informed, open-minded, and culturally aware leaders prepared to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.



Youth participants show off the presentations they created, representing various countries for the 4-H International Passport to the World project.

4-H special interest clubs develop specialized skills and experience

Not all 4-H clubs follow the traditional multi-project model; some focus on a single area of interest, allowing youth to develop specialized skills and expertise. The 4-H Garden Club at Vienna High School gives youth hands-on experience in horticulture, plant science, and essential life skills such as responsibility and teamwork. Members plant and maintain gardens, learn sustainable practices, and manage pests while collaborating on creative garden designs. Thanks to donations and fundraising, the club purchased Benchmaster Waterbeds, grow lights, and flowers for the 2026 Spring Flower Sale. Members meet regularly to plan field trips, create fresh flower bouquets, and explore ideas for future projects. 4-H staff also plan a floriculture school exhibition to showcase their work. Through these activities, youth develop gardening knowledge, entrepreneurship, problem-solving skills, and confidence. The Garden Club shows how single-focus 4-H groups complement traditional clubs while providing meaningful, skill-building opportunities for teens.



4-H Garden Club members from Vienna High School create their own floral bouquets.

Teen leaders and staff meet with Illinois 4-H Foundation board members

The Illinois 4-H Foundation supports 4-H programs statewide by providing scholarships, program fee waivers, and funding for educational initiatives, ensuring all youth can participate in hands-on learning, leadership development, and community engagement. Recently, Vienna teen leaders Kylie and Grayson, along with 4-H staff Leslie Bradley, Brooke May, and Kristi Stout, represented the local Extension unit at the Foundation's Board Meeting to highlight the impact of the program fee waiver. During a dinner the night before the event, they connected with board members, building relationships with the supporters who make 4-H opportunities possible. During the meeting, the teens shared how 4-H has helped them develop career, leadership, and life skills, demonstrating the tangible benefits of the Foundation's support. Board members expressed how meaningful it was to see firsthand how their fundraising efforts directly impact youth and strengthen communities across Illinois.





Local 4-H unit shines at state training

The 4-H team serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties excelled at the All Team Meeting in Champaign, joining 4-H colleagues from all 102 counties across the state. The meeting served as a kickoff event for the new 4-H program year, offering opportunities for professional development, team building, and sharing innovative ideas. During the meeting, local staff presented training session information on two key programs: the school club model and the teen leader model, highlighting the strategies and successes that make these programs impactful. The local 4-H team is recognized as a leader in both enrollment numbers and innovative programming, providing a model for other counties to follow. Managing five counties with just three field staff members requires exceptional teamwork, dedication, and communication. Local 4-H staff rely on collaboration to coordinate projects, support teen leaders, and ensure that programming reaches every community. By developing and sharing detailed training session information, the team equips colleagues across the state with tools, resources, and guidance to replicate successful programs in their own counties. Participants engaged in collaborative sessions, learned about statewide initiatives, and connected with colleagues to strengthen networks and enhance program delivery. Through their commitment, creativity, and dedication, the local 4-H team demonstrates that even a small team can provide high-quality educational experiences that empower youth across multiple counties, inspire innovation, and strengthen communities throughout southern Illinois.



Vickie Taylor set to retire after 30 years of service to Illinois Extension

After more than 30 years of service to Illinois Extension, Vickie Taylor is preparing for her upcoming retirement in April 2026, leaving behind a remarkable legacy of dedication, leadership, and impact on youth across southern Illinois. Throughout her career, Taylor has been a tireless advocate for positive youth development, helping countless young people discover their potential, build confidence, and develop essential life skills. Her work has spanned numerous programs, but she is perhaps best known for her hands-on approach to 4-H events and her unwavering commitment to the Massac County Youth Fair. For many years, she worked tirelessly at the 4-H food stand, serving as a welcoming presence for fairgoers while mentoring teens in customer service, teamwork, and responsibility. Her guidance in this role not only supported the fair's operations but also created countless opportunities for youth to gain practical work experience in a supportive environment. Beyond the fairgrounds, Taylor brought life and energy to every youth development program she touched. She consistently modeled leadership and compassion, inspiring colleagues and volunteers.

Her commitment to empowering youth was evident in every project she supported, from classroom clubs to teen leadership initiatives. Through her mentorship, she helped foster the next generation of leaders, ensuring that young people had the skills, confidence, and encouragement to succeed in school, work, and community life.



4-H Extension Program Coordinator Vickie Taylor

As colleagues, volunteers, and youth reflect on Taylor's career, it is clear that her impact extends far beyond the programs she managed. She deserves a celebration as she nears the end of her 4-H work, leaving a lasting legacy of service, dedication, and passion for 4-H and youth development that will continue to shape communities across Illinois for years to come. Her career is a testament to the power of dedicated educators and the profound impact one person can have on the lives of countless young people. Her contributions have left an indelible mark on Illinois 4-H, and she will be fondly remembered as a leader, mentor, and champion for youth development.

4-H educator receives Inclusive Excellence Award

Kristi Stout, a 12-year youth development professional with more than 24 years in education, has made a lasting impact through innovative, inclusive learning opportunities. Her expertise in engaging youth and creating hands-on educational experiences has helped many students build critical life skills for academic, personal, and career success. Stout received an Extension Excellence Award for Inclusive Excellence and national recognition through the NAE4-HYDP program for a video promoting the Welcome to the Real World 4-H financial literacy curriculum. The video earned state, regional, and national honors for its effectiveness in preparing youth for real-life financial decisions such as budgeting, career planning, and managing expenses. It also serves as a resource for other states, demonstrating how the simulation works and supporting broader financial literacy initiatives. Stout also contributes to the Better Together 4-H team, educating staff on breaking barriers, addressing cultural bias, and fostering inclusive environments. Through her leadership, mentorship, and commitment to equity, she exemplifies positive youth development, preparing young people to thrive as confident, capable, and responsible individuals.



4-H Educator Kristi Stout



4-H Classroom Clubs: Opportunities for youth to learn, lead, and thrive

The 4-H Classroom Clubs program provided hands-on, engaging learning opportunities for students across southern Illinois. During the past year, many Classroom Clubs took part in completing enrollment and project work in schools across Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. By bringing 4-H directly into classrooms, the program met youth where they were, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds and communities had access to high-quality, project-based learning experiences that promote both academic and personal growth. Throughout the year, students participated in a variety of projects designed to spark curiosity and develop essential life skills.

Projects included creative writing paired with desk pets, roller coaster creation exploring physics concepts, Cloverbud activities for younger youth, Passport to the World cultural experiences, and citizenship-focused projects. These projects gave youth opportunities to practice problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and responsibility, while exploring topics that aligned with their individual interests and passions.

4-H Classroom Clubs were part of a larger, year-round approach to youth development. In addition to school-based projects, students participated in spring 4-H Camp and summer lake trips designed for team building, networking, and leadership development. Teen leaders from local high schools mentored younger participants, helping them practice public speaking, planning, and peer teaching that connect directly to future academic and career readiness. These year-round experiences reinforced positive youth development principles, giving youth confidence, resilience, and practical skills to thrive in school, work, and community life. By embedding 4-H in schools and offering supplemental programs outside the classroom, the local 4-H unit ensured that every child had access to meaningful educational experiences.



Youth learn about the laws of motion and put their creativity to work designing a roller coaster.

As more clubs joined throughout the year, the program's reach grew, allowing hundreds of youth to benefit from experiential learning, mentorship, and guidance. Through these efforts, 4-H demonstrated its role as a solution for helping youth succeed, providing hands-on experiences that built leadership, fostered curiosity, and prepared students to reach their full potential.

4-H Classroom Clubs exemplified how consistent engagement, supportive mentorship, and relevant, hands-on learning experiences empower youth to become capable, confident, and engaged members of their communities. By meeting youth where they were and providing a year-long continuum of growth opportunities, 4-H ensured that young people not only learned but thrived, ready to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the future. Over 80 clubs participated in the 2024-2025 4-H year.

4-H Youth Development



83
4-H clubs



5,237
4-H experiences



1,070
Club memberships



14.95%
Minority youth engagement



639
Fair exhibits



2.70%
Hispanic youth engagement



Get involved with 4-H!
4h.extension.illinois.edu



Cloverbuds complete a classroom activity on pumpkins.



MyPI teaches teens emergency preparedness and leadership skills



Natural disasters and emergencies can happen at any time. Being prepared and having a plan in place is vital for communities because it saves lives, reduces damage, and strengthens resilience against disasters. It ensures that people, organizations, and local governments can respond quickly and effectively when crises occur.

Extension's My Preparedness Initiative Illinois (MyPI) program is an award-winning youth preparedness and educational outreach program. It trains youth ages 13 to 19 in essential disaster response skills, equipping them with the knowledge needed to protect themselves and their communities in times of crisis. As part of the program, students complete Teen Community Emergency Response Team training, which includes certification in disaster preparedness, fire safety, disaster medical operations, light search and rescue, disaster psychology, and terrorism response.

Through MyPI Illinois, teens have an opportunity to become leaders in emergency preparedness, making a positive impact in their communities through hands-on involvement. With a focus on education and action, MyPI equips youth with skills that not only benefit them personally but also make a lasting impact on the safety and well-being of their neighbors.



MyPI participant learns how to use a fire extinguisher during one of the disaster preparedness training sessions.



Massac County high school students filled sandbags to assist with flood prevention and help fortify local homes.

Community volunteers led engaging sessions for the training, including medical operations, terrorism awareness, disaster psychology, and the structure and function of community emergency response teams. The Metropolis Fire Department played a key role in hosting modules on fire safety and search and rescue, providing students with critical, real-world context and access to experienced emergency responders.

During Massac County High School certification and training, students were able to use their skills to make a direct impact on their community due to flooding in the area. They filled sandbags in Metropolis to assist with flood prevention efforts and help fortify homes in Massac County. The Massac County High School students' efforts exemplify the power of youth involvement in local disaster relief and showcase the importance of being prepared for any emergency.

Upon graduating from MyPI, students receive a fully outfitted disaster recovery backpack filled with essential emergency supplies, thanks to generous support from Shawnee Preparedness and Response Coalition and Extension. These kits will serve as a first line of defense should a disaster strike.



Teaching youth lifelong skills, one recipe at a time

When young people understand how to prepare nutritious meals, they gain independence, confidence, and practical life skills that can carry into adulthood. Illinois Junior Chef is a fun and engaging program that allows youth to learn about nutrition, try new healthy recipes, and develop kitchen skills. The 2025 summer programs provided hands-on nutrition education to youth across Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties, equipping the next generation with the knowledge and skills necessary to cook healthy meals and make informed food choices.

Cooking school sessions were hosted in a variety of accessible community settings, including Vienna High School, Cairo High School, Mounds Housing Authority, Cobden High School, and several other local community centers. These locations helped reach youth in rural and underserved areas, creating inclusive opportunities for learning. Each session was designed to engage youth in a fun, supportive environment where they could explore basic cooking techniques, kitchen safety, and the importance of balanced meals.

Participants practiced measuring ingredients, reading nutrition labels, and using fresh produce. Guided by trained educators and supported by SNAP-Ed curriculum resources, students gained confidence in the kitchen while learning the “why” behind healthy eating habits.



Students proudly display their Illinois Extension aprons and chef hats during the summer Illinois Junior Chef cooking program.



Students show off their favorite vegetables during the Illinois Junior Chef program hosted at Vienna High School.

One of the most impactful components of the program was the emphasis on family engagement. At the end of each cooking school, participants received a set of take-home recipes and informational materials that allowed them to recreate what they learned at home, often preparing meals for their families using new skills and local ingredients. In total, Illinois Junior Chef impacted dozens of youth across multiple counties this summer, fostering not just better eating habits but a sense of independence, creativity, and pride.

A youth in my IJC told me, “I don’t like green peppers. I really like cutting them up, so I tried a small piece and found out I like them now.”

SNAP-Ed Community Worker Patsy Bishop

SNAP-Education



309

Nutrition education classes



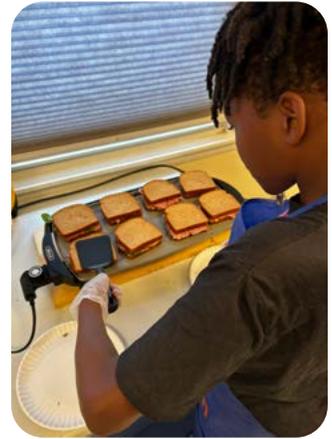
1,071

Nutrition education participants



35

SNAP-Ed partnerships (K-12 schools, early childhood centers, emergency food sites, and other organizations)



Through Illinois Junior Chef, youth try healthy recipes as they gain kitchen skills.





EAT.MOVE.SAVE. MAKES THE HEALTHY CHOICE THE EASY CHOICE

Through Eat.Move.Save. booths, the SNAP-Ed team meets individuals where they are. Setting up at partner sites like food pantries, health departments, housing, or health fairs, they bring programs to low-income audiences, engaging youth and adults with simple, budget-friendly recipes. Recipes emphasize healthy choices like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, protein, dairy, and low-sodium options. The booths sometimes feature tips for storage and meal planning to stretch their budgets. Eat.Move.Save. booths provide nutrition education materials to community members on how to prepare healthier meals, which helps to improve dietary quality. Some booths offer opportunities for physical activity. The booths also help eligible families increase access to available education and resources with the goal of improving health, maintaining a healthy body weight, and reducing chronic disease.



MOBILE FOOD PANTRY ADDRESSES COMMUNITY HEALTH

As food insecurity continues to affect families across southern Illinois, Food on the Move is delivering nutrition, education, and hope by meeting the need, one stop at a time. Powered by a network of community partners, including Illinois Extension, this mobile outreach program brings healthy food and vital nutrition education directly to areas with limited access to grocery stores and meal services. Illinois Extension proudly partnered with Food on the Move to provide hands-on nutrition lessons, food demonstrations, and resource guides at several mobile distribution sites. These events connected hundreds of families to fresh produce and practical knowledge, helping them stretch their food dollars while learning to prepare healthier meals at home. By linking food access with nutrition knowledge, Food on the Move is building more resilient, food-secure communities across the region.



PROGRAM EMPOWERS YOUTH TO BE HEALTHY FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Illinois Extension regularly partners with local early childhood centers and K-12 schools to build healthy eating habits and encourage movement. Improved dietary habits and physical activity can reduce obesity and chronic disease among youth, and Organ Wise Guys is a popular program that empowers students to be healthy and smart from the inside out. Local youth love when SNAP-Ed staff stop by to teach them about nutrition and health. A favorite Organ Wise Guys activity is drawing pictures of their favorite fruits and vegetables, which allows children to express themselves artistically while learning why these foods are important for their growth and well-being. They also engage in fun exercises that get their hearts pumping. For youth, staying active strengthens social skills, promotes teamwork, and helps establish lifelong healthy habits. Building a solid foundation can help set students on a path to health as they grow and develop.



ADULT SNAP-ED PROGRAMMING MEETS PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

Making healthy choices is not always easy, especially when families are struggling financially. SNAP-Ed provides engaging, face-to-face or virtual classes and events, online resources, and healthy messaging strategies to help Illinois families choose healthier foods, beverages, and activities. Curriculum for adults covers topics like saving money at the grocery store, container gardening for vegetables and herbs at home, and making healthy food choices. The lessons help people create healthy meals on a budget by utilizing the foods they already have on hand. Lessons also include tips to help participants add more physical activity to their busy lives. Participants enjoy the hands-on learning and physical activity experience offered through these programs. Through partnerships, organizations working together can meet people where they are, both physically and educationally, to transform the health of local communities.





SNAP-Ed team highlights

For over 30 years, SNAP-Ed programs have been a staple for Illinois Extension. The loss of SNAP-Ed funding and the elimination of key programs will be deeply felt by low-income residents. The staff who have worked alongside community partners and with SNAP recipients will be greatly missed. Extension is grateful for their dedication, and their commitment to meeting people where they are to promote nutrition and health.



Tiffney Stewart (R) and Ife Adesoye (L) work a community event.

Sarita Sawyer

With over 18 years of experience working with SNAP-Ed, Sarita Sawyer has had many great experiences as a community worker. This field of work allowed her to educate many low-income families on various topics, including eating healthier on a budget, stretching food dollars, and container gardening. She has taught basic hands-on cooking, after-school and summer programs, the importance of physical activity, and increasing intake of fruits and vegetables. Partnerships with schools, food pantries, women's shelters, libraries, and housing authorities have enabled her to effectively reach a wide range of audiences. SNAP-Ed has positively impacted the lives of participants and communities by improving food security and promoting healthy eating patterns and physical activity.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Sarita Sawyer

I never want to judge any SNAP participant because I don't know anyone's personal situation, and I do not know their needs.
SNAP-Ed Community Worker Sarita Sawyer



The SNAP-Ed Team: (L-R): Sarita Sawyer, Ife Adesoye, Kaylee Leach, Tiffney Stewart, and Patsy Bishop.

Patsy Bishop

During her 12 years as a SNAP-Ed community worker, it didn't take Patsy Bishop long to recognize she was not fully applying the key principles she was teaching. A key component of her role involves offering taste tests, allowing clients to sample foods before deciding to purchase them. For individuals with limited food budgets, buying an unfamiliar product can feel risky—if they do not like it, they may feel they have wasted resources that could have supported another meal. Through this process, Bishop saw firsthand how taste testing can help clients broaden their meal options. In many ways, it also encouraged her own family to diversify the foods they incorporate into their meals. Some of the highlights for Bishop during her time with Extension also include receiving the Illinois Extension Unit Team Award and the Illinois Nutrition Education Programs Team Award.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Patsy Bishop

Kaylee Leach

One of the highlights of Kaylee Leach's time with SNAP-Ed has been working at Eat.Move.Save. booths. She finds it rewarding to see people stop by and walk away with new resources, such as a new recipe, a nutrition handout, or just a helpful conversation about healthy eating on a budget. These events also help build connections in the community and remind Leach why outreach and education are so important. Working with SNAP-Ed has given her the opportunity to connect with people in local communities and see firsthand how education and access to resources can make a difference in someone's health and well-being. She has become more aware of the challenges families face when it comes to budgeting, meal planning, and making healthy choices on a limited income. Her work has also made her mindful of her own food choices and how to communicate about nutrition in a supportive, nonjudgmental way.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Kaylee Leach

I've learned that SNAP participants come from all walks of life and that anyone can face tough financial situations. Many are hardworking parents, seniors, or individuals trying to make the most of what they have.
SNAP-Ed Community Worker Kaylee Leach



Food donation gardens surpass 10,000 pounds donated since inception

Year after year, the Illinois Extension unit serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties helps fight food insecurity in the southernmost part of the state. Since 2018 in Metropolis and 2021 in Cairo, local staff and volunteers have managed food donation gardens to grow produce for two food pantries: COPE and Daystar Community Program. This year, Extension celebrated a milestone: together, the gardens have grown over 10,000 pounds of produce since their installations. The gardens operate on an adopt-a-day approach, with different volunteers and organizations adopting a different day of the week to visit the gardens. These volunteers give hundreds of hours of time to the gardens--watering, harvesting, and delivering produce.

The Plant a Row, Watch COPE Grow Food Donation Garden continued to thrive in its current location on 5th Street in 2025. Returning volunteers included Jordan Strong and Lasha Vincent of Massac County Drug Awareness Coalition, Kara Sullivan of Thrive's Green Team, and Robin Mizell. Local resident Matthew and mother-daughter duo Brittney and Maci Howard joined the garden volunteer team.

The Pilot Garden: Cairo's Food Donation Garden entered its fifth year of growing. Master Gardener Tammy Horn joined the volunteer team, along with returning volunteers Deb Davis and Derek and Retha Eurales. Several volunteer groups, including Loyola Academy, Shawnee Development, and NAACP, participated in workdays at the garden.

Plant a Row, Watch COPE Grow Food Donation Garden



Follow the garden's progress on Facebook facebook.com/PlantaRowWatchCopeGrow



Derek and Retha Eurales harvest native plants that self-planted in the gravel at the Pilot Garden in Cairo. The plants were collected and shared with the community at the Magnificent Moths event.

The Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy team continued to offer Garden Tales to Cairo Elementary students during select months of the school year. Between 50 and 150 students attended each month. This year, classes voted to plant different themed beds, such as:

- a rainbow bed, growing red, orange, yellow, green, and purple vegetables
- a salsa bed, growing vegetables to make salsa
- a pizza bed, growing vegetables commonly put on pizza
- a miniature bed, growing mini versions of plants like popcorn, cherry tomatoes, and cucamelons.

SNAP-Ed staff offered youth different dips and seasonings to try on the fruits and vegetables they grew during tasting days, introducing them to fresh produce straight from the garden.

The Pilot Garden: Cairo's Food Donation Garden



Follow the garden's progress on Facebook facebook.com/ThePilotGarden



The Wild World of Woolly Worms was presented to five libraries, four schools, and the Conservation Fair, reaching 440 participants.



The wild world of woolly worms

Connecting youth to the environment in fun and exciting ways can spark an interest in the world around them. This fall, the Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy team developed a program about woolly bear caterpillars called the Wild World of Woolly Worms. They brought the program to five libraries, four schools, and the Conservation Fair in DuQuoin, reaching 440 participants. Through stories, crafts, and activities, youth learned about different woolly caterpillars, the moths they become, and about the folklore surrounding woolly bear coloration predicting winter weather.

The team also trained 190 Teen Teachers on how to teach this program to elementary school students and equipped the teens with kits to take to schools to teach this program. 4-H Teen Teacher opportunities provide personal and professional growth for local youth as they gain valuable leadership skills, build confidence, and earn community service hours.



Extension Educator Erin Garrett (R) trains 4-H Teen Teachers so they can lead the woolly worm program.



Master Naturalist volunteers read stories to local participants as they learn about dragonflies.

Discovering dragonflies: Nature's flying acrobats

Illinois Extension volunteers donate their time and energy in many ways, including environmental education programs. Dragonflies are acrobats in the air, and this summer, Master Naturalists Patti Powell and Beckie Wisdom led a library program to teach youth about dragonflies and which ones can be found in southern Illinois. These volunteers brought this program to nine libraries this summer, engaging 135 participants in the world of dragonflies through stories, crafts, and activities.

Lots of children today grow up afraid of insects and other animals in their environment. I enjoy sharing information on the benefits of insects in our world and why we should appreciate and protect them.

Master Naturalist Volunteer Patti Powell



Master Naturalists Beckie Wisdom (L) and Patti Powell (R) pose with a paper dragonfly at a local library during their summer youth program.

Master Naturalist and Master Gardener Volunteers



18
Active Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



1,035
Volunteer hours recorded



\$36,007
Value of volunteer time



New Master Naturalist graduates get ready to volunteer

Eleven volunteers completed Master Naturalist training this summer, with five from the Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties unit. Tammy Horn, Jeff Konzal, Brenda Tripp, Nancy Macdonald, and Sharon Suchecki completed the 10-week program, deepening their connection with nature and gaining valuable knowledge and experiences to guide them in their roles as environmental stewards.

Now Master Naturalist interns, these graduates have a period of up to two years to complete 60 hours of volunteer service, the next step in earning their full Master Naturalist certification. Their dedicated efforts will not only support vital environmental education initiatives but will also contribute to community science and conservation projects.



Eleven volunteers completed the Master Naturalist training.



Master Gardener volunteer wins award for garden project

Congratulations to local Master Gardener Sasha Milburn and the exceptional team from Williamson County — Tracy Hosman-Kaytor, Joe Powers, and Kim Rohling — for receiving a State Master Gardener Teamwork Award. This recognition celebrates their collaboration and dedication to community service. Through their inspiring work on the Cultivating Care Garden and Food Pantry Project, the team has shown what's possible when compassion meets commitment. In the 2024 garden season, this Master Gardener team helped community members grow 22 different herbs, fruits, and vegetables on site and donated 864 pounds of produce that they harvested to the Salvation Army Food Pantry, feeding local friends and families in need.



Sasha Milburn (second from left) receives a State Master Gardener Teamwork Award at the State Master Gardener Conference.



Youth enjoy pumpkin-themed activity stations.

Pumpkin Extravaganza returns with fall fun for all ages

For five years, Pumpkin Extravaganza has been an afternoon dedicated to connecting volunteers and community organizations to Union County residents for a fun-filled day celebrating pumpkins. This year, the event attracted more than 115 participants who learned about pumpkins through educational stations, games, and crafts. This youth pumpkin event is a collaborative effort between SNAP-Education, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, 4-H, and the Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy team. Collaborations with community partners continued this year, including Jonesboro Public Library, Stinson Memorial Library, Union County Ag in the Classroom, and the City of Jonesboro.



Extension hosts wreath making workshop

In December, the Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy team offered a free wreath making workshop at Giant City Visitor's Center. During this fun, annual event, 29 participants learned about wreath making and then let their creativity soar as they made their own holiday wreath creations out of fresh cut greenery and other foraged materials. Using native greenery encourages awareness of local ecosystems and seasonal biodiversity through the creation of a beautiful wreath that can be enjoyed all holiday season.



Participants show off beautiful wreaths that were created during the wreath making workshop.



Partnerships support stewardship of the Shawnee National Forest

A collaboration between the Shawnee National Forest, Friends of the Shawnee National Forest, and Illinois Extension plays an important role in maintaining the health and balance of local ecosystems throughout the forest.

These partnerships help the Shawnee National Forest make meaningful progress toward long-term conservation goals. The shared commitment leads to responsible land management and community engagement.

Despite several rainout events and postponement of fall events due to circumstances beyond Extension’s control, this year’s collective accomplishments highlight the strong impact of these ongoing partnerships. In 2025, volunteers and partners:

- Removed 2,684 pounds of trash from the forest
- Properly disposed of 372 tires with assistance from the Illinois EPA and local partners
- Cleared 189 pounds of garlic mustard from the East Trigg Trailhead
- Removed 22 pounds of beefsteak plant and treated five miles of habitat to prevent spread of invasive species along Snake Road
- Engaged 82 community scientists through the Snake Road Sentinel program

These efforts demonstrate the continued dedication of volunteers, community members, and agency partners working together to protect and preserve public lands for future generations.

We’re proud of what we’ve achieved together and look forward to continuing this important work. The dedication of our volunteers and partners ensures that, even during pauses, progress continues toward healthier lands and stronger communities.

Extension Program Coordinator Anne Townsend



Volunteers cleared 189 pounds of garlic mustard from the East Trigg Trailhead.



FUNDING FOR ALEXANDER, JOHNSON, MASSAC, PULASKI, AND UNION COUNTIES

| Amount | Source |
|--------|---|
| 37% | Federal - SNAP |
| 18% | Federal - Healthy Food Financing Initiative |
| 17% | Federal - Smith Lever |
| 12% | State - Match |
| 14% | Local - Contributions |
| 2% | Donations |

STAFF

Jody Johnson
County Director

Erin Garrett
Natural Resources,
Environment, and
Energy Educator

Anne Townsend
Natural Resources,
Environment, and Energy
Program Coordinator

Kristi Stout
4-H Youth Development
Educator

Vickie Taylor
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

Dena Wood
4-H Youth Development
Program Coordinator

John Shadowens
Community and Economic
Development Educator

Eleazar Edwards
Visiting Community and
Economic Development
Outreach Associate

Destenie Sullivan
Visiting Community and
Economic Development
Outreach Associate

Ife Adesoye
SNAP-Ed Educator

Patsy Bishop
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Kaylee Leach
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Kristina Perry
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Sarita Sawyer
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Tiffany Stewart
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Monica Meyer
Office Support Specialist

Barb Britton
Office Support Assistant

Shannon Pulliam
Office Support Assistant

Amy Shuck
Office Support Assistant

EXTENSION COUNCIL MEMBERS

Massac County

Tracie Key
Orlando McReynolds
Don Robbins
James Walton

Johnson County

Evan Coulson
Amy Johnson
Emily Myrick
Chesley Williams
Kylie Vaughn (Youth)

Union County

Kendel Boysen
Kristen Cameron
Ruby Lingle
Chuck Weilmuenster

Pulaski/Alexander County

Curtis Marshall
Shawna Rhine
Denna Williams
Patricia Wilson
Ethyn Bradley (Youth)

OFFICE INFORMATION

Johnson County Extension

208 E. Main, PO Box 158
Vienna, IL 62995
(618) 658-5321

Massac County Extension

1438 W. 10th St.
Metropolis, IL 62960
(618) 524-2270

Pulaski/Alexander County

Extension
502 Oakley Lane
Mounds, IL 62964
(618) 745-5200

Union County Extension

521 E. Vienna St.
Anna, IL 62906
(618) 833-6363

Shawnee Community College

By Appointment Only

Extension offices are open
Monday-Friday, 8AM - 4:30PM
(Closed Noon - 1PM)

ONLINE



extension.illinois.edu/ajmpu



facebook.com/ThePilotGarden



facebook.com/AJMPU.Unit



facebook.com/PlantaRowWatchCOPEGrow



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs were funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.

©2026 University of Illinois Board of Trustees. For permission to reprint, revise, or otherwise use, contact extension@illinois.edu.