



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

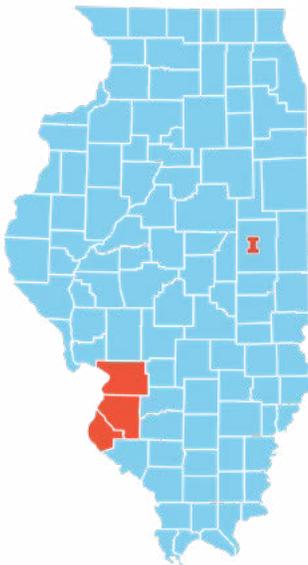


Serving Madison, Monroe and St. Clair Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





William Catalano
County Director



Endings & Beginnings

When I reflect on my opening in last year's annual report, I cannot help but initially feel I was a year ahead. "Changes" was the title of that segment, and there were absolutely changes in University of Illinois Extension in 2025. These changes were extremely challenging and left us with tremendous optimism for 2026. So, for this year, I want to focus briefly on what ended and what is set to begin. The local staff of Illinois Extension serving Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties faced the challenge and served the people and partners with the passion that is their hallmark. And because of that, Extension once again showcased why it is a critical asset to our communities and the best investment in making positive changes across social, economic, political, racial, and ethnic boundaries.

In 2025, federal funding was eliminated for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education, commonly referred to as SNAP-Ed. This program touched lives in both Madison and St. Clair counties. While never a total solution to eliminating the nutritional deficiencies plaguing at-risk population, it was a critical connector and supportive partner to so many schools, agencies, and partners. The staff and the work they performed will be missed, but the impact both they and the program made will live on in the lives of those they connected with, their families, and their communities.

However, as the County Director for Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair County, I ended 2025 with immense optimism for what is ahead. Extension does not exist without local funding, and Monroe County remains one of the leading examples across the State of Illinois of what impact a strong relationship can create.

Madison County will continue its ongoing support and leadership, continually seeking new ways to benefit its citizens through our collaboration. Late in 2025, St. Clair County made a tremendous supportive commitment to Extension. This will enable Extension to provide expanded, enhanced services to the communities that need and deserve them most.

As someone who is honored to share the work that Extension does, I am filled with gratitude that county leadership recognizes not only our unique and unrivaled value, but the reality that we work in our communities. These are our communities. The staff of your Extension office serve the people they live next to, raise families with, and share the same life challenges.

It is with tremendous gratitude that I serve your local staff and serve you. The land-grant mission of the University of Illinois is real, and the work we do enhances our communities and positively changes lives. As it is every year, this report is a celebration of the people who made it all happen. Too numerous to list and too tremendous to capture in words, I will simply write, "Thank You."

And, once again, I ask that as you look through this annual report, you recognize that every bullet point, statistic, picture, all of this content, is evidence of lives changed, lives made better.

Sincerely and with gratitude,

William Catalano
Extension County Director for
Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair

Cover photo:
Sunrise over the countryside.
Photo by Grace Madson,
Grant Prairie 4 H Club.

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

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

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

2025 Engagement

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

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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Raeleen Neary inducted into 4-H Hall of Fame

Volunteers make a difference in the lives of local youth. In honor of her service and dedication, Raeleen Neary was inducted into the 2025 4-H Hall of Fame at the Illinois State Fair. Neary has led the Clover Friends 4-H Club for 15 years, served five years as goat superintendent, and actively supported the Monroe County Youth Livestock Auction Committee. She contributes her time to the Extension Council and the Monroe County Extension & 4-H Education Foundation, helping organize the annual Harvest Night Dinner Auction. Neary also volunteers as a State Fair judge. Her dedication strengthens youth programs and ensures 4-H opportunities thrive in Monroe County.



Raeleen Neary honored as a 2025 inductee into the 4-H Hall of Fame.



4-H Teen Teachers inspire local youth

4-H provides experiential learning and leadership opportunities for youth. Eleven 4-H Teen Teachers supported a variety of programs, including Conservation Day, and led five summer sessions of Ag in the Classroom lessons for 117 youth at local learning centers such as the Waterloo Kennel Klub, The Backyard, Children's First Lakeview Center, and SPPCS Splash. They also assisted with Fair Tours at the Monroe County Fair in July. By facilitating lessons, mentoring younger participants, and sharing their knowledge, these teen leaders enhanced learning opportunities, fostered curiosity about agriculture, and encouraged leadership skills among local youth.



A 4-H Teen Teacher leads and supports youth activities at the Monroe County Fair.

Monroe County Conservation Day engages fifth graders

Youth are naturally curious about the living world around them. Illinois Extension partnered with Monroe County Farm Bureau, Monroe County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Monroe County Agriculture in the Classroom to host Conservation Day, engaging 401 fifth-grade students in hands-on outdoor learning at the Waterloo Sportsman's Club. Students explored native bees, bird migration, food waste, geology, recycling, and wildlife, culminating in a raptor show by the World Bird Sanctuary. The event provided experiential learning that deepened students' understanding of conservation, environmental stewardship, and local ecosystems.



Fifth-grade students enjoy a day of learning and fun exploring conservation at the Waterloo Sportsmen's Club during Conservation Day.

Monroe County 4-H members shine at Illinois State Fair

Fair season is a local tradition and the season's highlight for 4-H youth. Twenty-three Monroe County 4-H members showcased general projects at the Illinois State Fair this summer, while six youth exhibited livestock. Participants earned numerous ribbons, including Champion and Reserve Champion awards, highlighting their skills, dedication, and creativity. A special moment came when Cohen Brandt participated in the Parade of Champions with his market lamb, demonstrating the high level of achievement and pride Monroe County youth bring to the State Fair stage.



4-H member Cohen Brandt proudly showcases his market lamb at the Illinois State Fair.



4-H members demonstrate dedication, skill, and confidence at the Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair County 4-H shows and local fairs.





Three Madison County 4-H Teen Teachers proudly display their Serve it Safely food safety certifications.

Empowering youth leaders through 4-H Teen Teachers in Madison County



Illinois Extension 4-H partnered with Madison County Conservation, Agriculture Resources and Environmental Education to empower teens ages 13 to 18 to develop leadership skills while teaching younger youth about agriculture and healthy food practices. Four Madison County Teen Teachers completed eight hours of training and put their skills into action through meaningful community service.

Teen Teachers volunteered their time to lead 16 youth in the Youth Cooking School program, guided 90 youth from the Playground in Highland on educational Madison County Fair tours, and supported CAREE activities at local farmers' markets. In addition, three Madison County Teen Teachers joined peers from across the unit to earn their Serve it Safely food safety certification. Through teaching, mentoring, and service, these teens strengthened their leadership abilities while making a lasting impact on youth and the community.



Madison County CAREE engage youth at the 4-H Livestock Clinic with hands-on activities and agricultural resources.

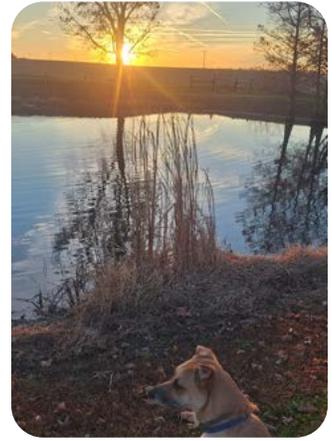
Building skills and confidence at the 4-H Livestock Clinic



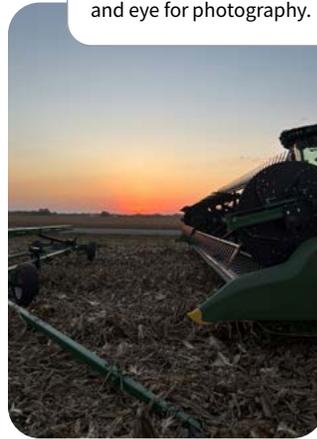
The 4-H Livestock Clinic brought youth together for hands-on, interactive learning that strengthened skills and enthusiasm for livestock projects. Participants rotated through five stations covering beef, goats, swine, nutrition, and livestock record books, gaining valuable knowledge to support their 4-H projects. Madison County CAREE/Ag in the Classroom added to the experience with a booth featuring fun livestock facts and free magazines to spark curiosity beyond the event. With the dedication of 4-H superintendents and the generous support of the Madison County Fair Association, which provided pizza for participants, the clinic created a welcoming environment that fostered learning, connection, and excitement. Together, these efforts built youth confidence and strengthened community ties as families prepare for fair season.



Madison County CAREE at the 4-H Livestock Clinic.



4-H members participate in a fall photography contest, showcasing their skills, creativity, and eye for photography.





Exploring science and nature with 4-H Outdoor Adventures Club at Scott Air Force Base

Illinois Extension's 4-H Outdoor Adventures Club brought science, nature, and hands-on discovery to life for youth at Scott Air Force Base this summer. Through interactive sessions on plants, wildlife, weather, and insects, youth explored the outdoors while building curiosity and critical thinking skills.

Participants explored plant science by identifying trees and flowers, examining seeds, and planting marigolds to take home. Bird-themed activities included migration tracking, binocular use, and creating crafts to prevent bird collisions.

Youth also tackled animal science, engineering, and environmental challenges by matching tracks to animals, testing boat designs, and investigating water science. Weather sessions explored wind and tornadoes through hands-on experiments.

Entomology lessons introduced bees, ants, and butterflies while highlighting pollination and ecosystems, with insect-based snacks adding a fun twist.

By combining hands-on science with outdoor exploration, the club helped youth learn by doing, strengthening teamwork, problem-solving skills, and appreciation for the natural world.



Hands-on science comes alive as a young participant examines flower anatomy under the microscope, discovering the intricate details of plant life.

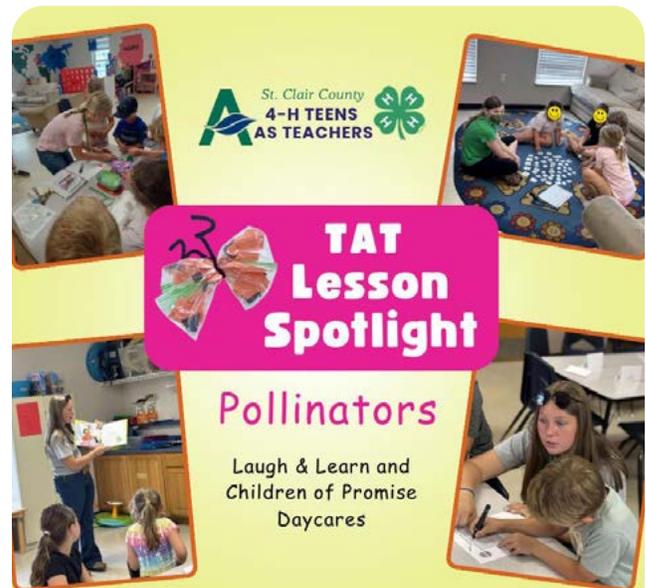


Youth explore the fascinating world of entomology, getting up close with insects and discovering what makes these tiny creatures extraordinary.

4-H Teen Teachers lead the way in agriculture education in St. Clair County

Illinois Extension 4-H partnered with St. Clair County Ag in the Classroom to empower teens ages 13 to 18 to become educators and leaders in agricultural literacy. Six St. Clair County 4-H Teen Teachers completed eight hours of training and put their skills into action by volunteering to lead Ag in the Classroom lessons over an eight-week period.

Through hands-on teaching and mentorship, these teens strengthened their leadership, communication, and teaching skills while helping younger youth build a better understanding of agriculture. The program not only expanded agricultural knowledge among participants but also fostered confidence and civic engagement among teen leaders, creating a lasting impact in classrooms and the community.



St. Clair County 4-H Teen Teachers lead engaging agriculture lessons that help youth explore topics like pollinators through hands-on learning and discovery.

4-H Overall Impact



69
4-H Clubs



982
4-H Club Memberships



798
Unique 4-H Members



9,730
4-H Affiliations (4-H Experiences)

Youth Engagement



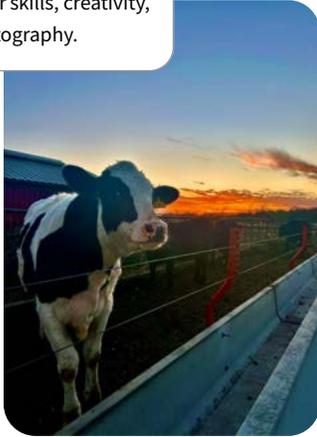
2,509
Fair Exhibits



83
Unique Adult Volunteers



4-H members participate in a fall photography contest, showcasing their skills, creativity, and eye for photography.





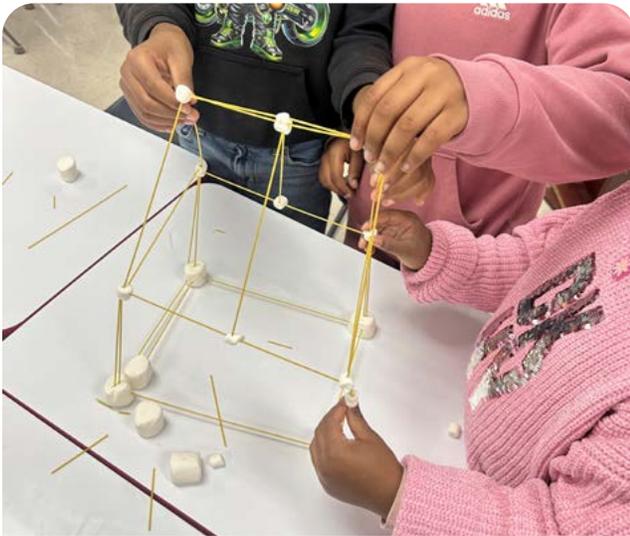
Building resilient youth through social and emotional learning

Youth mental health has become a growing concern across Illinois. In response to the Illinois Children’s Mental Health Plan (2022–2027) and the increasing need for emotional support for young people, Illinois Extension’s 4-H Social and Emotional Learning programs help students develop skills to navigate emotions, relationships, and everyday stress.

Extension delivered SEL programming at Paul Laurence Dunbar Elementary and Katie Harper Wright Elementary in East St. Louis, along with Frohardt, Grigsby, Maryville, Mitchell, Prather, and Wilson elementary schools in Granite City. Through age-appropriate lessons, educators created supportive spaces where youth practiced emotional regulation, mindfulness, communication, and conflict resolution.

Extension reached hundreds of youth in Madison and St. Clair counties through two core programs: Mindful Me for kindergarten through second grade and Your Feelings Matter for third through fifth grade. During this period, 706 youth participated in Mindful Me and 96 participated in Your Feelings Matter. Participation continues to grow, with 637 youth currently enrolled in Mindful Me and 175 in Your Feelings Matter.

By equipping youth with social and emotional tools early in life, Extension helps prevent long-term challenges tied to unmanaged stress and poor emotional regulation. Evaluation results show strong impact: 94% of Mindful Me participants reported learning how to talk about their feelings, and 95% learned ways to calm down and focus. Youth practiced mindfulness strategies that strengthen self-regulation, relationships, and school environments.



Students collaborate to build a structure with spaghetti and marshmallows — a social-emotional learning lesson with 3rd and 4th graders to demonstrate the importance of teamwork and understand each other’s temperaments as a group.

Bringing science to life through embryology and incubation

Fifth-grade students at Lincoln Middle School in East St. Louis transformed classroom learning into a real-world science experience through a hands-on embryology and incubation program. By observing the complete life cycle of a chicken, students actively engaged in learning that connected biology, agriculture, and food systems in a meaningful way.

Throughout the incubation process, students took on the role of scientists. They monitored and recorded daily data, including temperature, humidity, and egg rotation, developing observation and data-collection skills while learning the importance of precision and consistency. Their commitment paid off when the eggs began to hatch, a moment that sparked excitement, curiosity, and pride across the classroom.

After the chicks emerged, students continued their learning by caring for them over the course of a week. They observed growth patterns, ensured daily care, and gained a deeper understanding of animal needs and responsibilities. For many students, the experience was eye-opening. It was their first realization that the meat found in grocery stores comes from a living animal, helping them better understand where food originates and how agriculture fits into everyday life.

Students reflected on the impact of the program, sharing comments such as, “It helped me know how the chicken is born and hatched and the steps it takes from incubation to hatch,” and, “This program helped me by showing me how chicks grow.”

By combining hands-on learning with real-world application, the embryology program strengthened students’ understanding of life cycles, animal care, and food systems. Most importantly, it made science tangible and memorable, inspiring curiosity and responsibility while reinforcing classroom concepts in a powerful, lasting way.



Two students observe newly hatched chicks during a hands-on classroom learning experience.





Students celebrate their teamwork and creativity during the Illinois Food Challenge.



Illinois Food Challenge inspires youth to cook, create, and lead

Illinois Extension brought hands-on learning to life by hosting the Illinois Food Challenge at Gordon Bush Alternative Center in East St. Louis. Through an interdisciplinary partnership between 4-H and Illinois Nutrition Education Programs, and with support from the Illinois Beef Association, the team created a dynamic, real-world learning experience that empowered students to apply cooking, teamwork, and nutrition skills in an exciting, competitive setting.

Leading up to the event, students built foundational skills through cooking classes taught by Chastidy Wilson, EFNEP community outreach worker. Under her guidance, students practiced safe food handling, learned kitchen safety protocols, and gained confidence in meal preparation. These lessons prepared them for the challenge, where they put their knowledge to work.

During the challenge, students worked in teams and received a set of mystery ingredients. Within a limited time, they collaborated to plan, prepare, and present a well-balanced meal that included all five food groups- proteins, vegetables, grains, fruits, and dairy. Throughout the challenge, students problem-solved, communicated effectively, and demonstrated creativity under pressure.

Teams presented their finished dishes to a panel of three judges, explaining their recipes, identifying nutritional components, and answering questions about food safety and preparation techniques. Students rose to the challenge, clearly articulating their decisions and showcasing strong critical-thinking skills.

Student feedback highlighted the program's impact. Participants described the experience as fun, challenging, and rewarding, with many expressing pride in their final dishes. One student shared, "I loved this. Can we please do this again?" while another said, "This was so fun. It was hard, and we all got creative to create our meal."



Members of the winning team pose with their prizes and certificates after the Illinois Food Challenge.

By combining nutrition education with experiential learning, the program strengthened students' practical life skills, built confidence, and inspired enthusiasm for healthy cooking.

Illinois Food Challenge: Program Results

- After participating, 100% of students reported a good or excellent understanding of *MyPlate* and *Food Groups*, with two-thirds rating their knowledge as excellent.
- Following the challenge, 100% of students reported a good or excellent level of understanding food nutrients and their functions, with 67% indicating excellent knowledge.
- After completing the food challenge, all students reported a good or excellent understanding of the importance of food safety, with 67% rating their understanding as excellent.
- Kitchen safety knowledge also increased. 100% of students reported good or excellent understanding afterward, including 75% who rated their knowledge as excellent.



A team prepares a smoothie as part of the Illinois Food Challenge, applying nutrition and food safety skills.



More than 50 area farmers and advisors gather at the SIU Belleville Research Center to discuss current cover crop research trials and management practices.

Commercial Ag Educator Nathan Johanning joins the Illinois Soybean Association and Southern Illinois University Carbondale to share insights during Cover Crop Field Day.



Advancing cover crop research through collaboration and field-based learning

Illinois Extension partnered with the Illinois Soybean Association and Southern Illinois University Carbondale to host the Illinois Cover Crop Field Day in August, at the SIU Belleville Research Center. The event brought together 50 local farmers and agricultural advisors for hands-on learning and discussion around current Extension-led cover crop research trials, including those supported by a grant from the Illinois Soybean Association.

By showcasing research directly in the field, the program strengthened understanding of cover crop performance and management in southern Illinois conditions. Strong participation and engagement highlighted the value of applied research and collaboration, inspiring plans for future winter and spring programs that will further explore regional cover crop data and research findings.

AAB/NREE Program Impact



93
educational sessions delivered



3,565
total program attendance



2,342
unique participants reached



631
expert consultations provided

Southwestern Illinois Agronomy Summit empowers local farmers

Illinois Extension hosted the first annual Southwestern Illinois Agronomy Summit at the Monroe County Annex, bringing farmers together for a day of practical, research-based learning. The summit delivered timely crop production insights on soil fertility, weed control, cover crops, and disease management, with a strong focus on real-world application.

The program concluded with a farmer panel that highlighted the value of conservation practices and shared firsthand experiences with implementing them on local farms. Through peer-to-peer discussion and Extension expertise, participants gained actionable strategies they could immediately apply to improve productivity and sustainability in their operations. Farmers left the summit better equipped with applied field knowledge and practical tools to strengthen their farming practices.



Commercial Agriculture Educator Nathan Johanning discusses crop production and conservation practices at the Southwestern Agronomy Summit in Waterloo.



GOLDEN GARDEN DAY CELEBRATES ILLINOIS MASTER GARDENER ANNIVERSARY

Illinois Extension hosted Golden Garden Day at the JJK FAN site in East St. Louis to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Illinois Master Gardener program. The event brought together approximately 40 Master Gardeners and partners from across the state for a day of learning, service, and reflection. The workshop focused on increasing food access and promoting sustainable landscaping in East St. Louis. Participants took part in hands-on activities that included planting trees, touring the Jones Park greenhouse, visiting a collard green variety trial, and engaging in discussions about local stormwater management challenges. To commemorate the day and anniversary, five trees were planted by The Davey Tree Expert Company with the help of the Dean of ACES, Germán Bollero. Through these experiences, attendees explored how horticulture practices have evolved over five decades and how urban farming continues to expand as a tool for community resilience.



Master Gardeners and partners from across Illinois gather to celebrate 50 years of the Illinois Master Gardener program.



Kris Juelfs, Extension educator, pauses the wellness walk at Baebler Farm so participants can connect with nature using their five senses.

WELLNESS WALKS INSPIRE MINDFULNESS AND NATURE CONNECTION

Illinois Extension brought participants closer to nature and well-being through a Wellness Walk at Baebler Educational Farm in Waterloo. Thirteen participants joined Kris Juelfs, nutrition and wellness educator, and Sarah Ruth, horticulture and natural resources program coordinator, for a guided stroll through the farm’s pollinator habitat, ponds, and forested areas. Along the way, participants practiced meditation, mindful breathing, and sensory exploration while learning about native plants and habitat creation. The event strengthened participants’ connections to the outdoors and highlighted the positive impact of nature on mental and physical wellness.



EXTENSION COMMUNITY GARDEN CULTIVATES GROWTH AND CONNECTION

The Extension Community Garden at the Monroe County Annex in Waterloo demonstrates the power of partnerships to foster learning, wellness, and community engagement. Nearly 150 pounds of produce were harvested and donated through garden programs. Fourteen young participants in the Gardenbuds program, ages 5–7, explored hands-on lessons with Extension staff and Master Gardeners, while six clients from Human Support Services developed life skills through gardening and food preparation activities. Seasonal workshops and a Garden Showcase with the Monroe County Farmers Market expanded outreach—connecting education, wellness, and community members across Monroe County.



Participants from Human Support Services weed and harvest in the Extension Community Garden.



Master Gardener Bill Klopfenstein monitors the biochar research beds at Willoughby Farm.

MASTER GARDENERS BOOST SOIL HEALTH THROUGH BIOCHAR RESEARCH AT WILLOUGHBY FARM

Master Gardeners at Willoughby Farm in Collinsville are actively improving soil health by researching the effects of biochar on raised bed vegetable gardens. Since 2024, volunteers have been testing how adding this porous, nutrient-retaining material impacts the growth of potatoes and onions. Research shows that biochar, created by heating organic waste such as wood chips, crop residue, or manure in a low-oxygen environment, can enhance soil fertility, hold water like a sponge, and provide habitat for beneficial microorganisms. The project began after Collinsville’s Cool Cities Committee suggested exploring biochar, and Willoughby Farm staff and volunteers turned the idea into a hands-on research project. Farm Superintendent Carol Frerker, with a background in chemistry and environmental science, saw the opportunity to “learn more by doing our own research.” Master Gardeners prepare the soil, plant seeds and sets, monitor soil pH, and carefully control watering for each test bed. Once harvested, they weigh the crops to evaluate how biochar affects yield, providing practical insights for gardeners and the wider community.



Artemis, I Moon Tree takes root at SIUE

On Earth Day April 22, Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers planted a historic Artemis I Moon Tree at The Gardens at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, connecting space exploration with community education and environmental stewardship. SIUE was selected as one of 1,000 government, public, and educational sites nationwide to receive a Moon Tree seedling, recognizing the site's commitment to learning, conservation, and public engagement.

The Artemis I Moon Tree Seed experiment builds on NASA's original Apollo 14 Moon Tree project from 1971 and reflects a continued partnership between NASA and the USDA Forest Service. During the 2022 Artemis I unmanned mission, approximately 1,200 tree seeds representing five species traveled more than 1.4 million miles aboard the Orion spacecraft, orbiting the Moon before safely returning to Earth. After the mission, USDA Forest Service centers in California and Mississippi germinated the seeds and grew them into viable seedlings.

SIUE received a Sweet Gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) Moon Tree, which volunteers thoughtfully planted along the main walkway near the existing Sweet Gum grove. Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers led every step of the process, from site selection to planting and ongoing care. The Moon Tree now serves as a living symbol of scientific discovery, collaboration, and education--inspiring visitors to explore the connections between agriculture, conservation, and space science.



Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists celebrate the planting of the Artemis 1 Moon Tree at The Gardens at SIUE, marking a living connection to NASA's Artemis mission.



Ann Glosecki recognized at the 50th Master Gardener Conference

At the 50th Master Gardener Conference, the annual Master Gardener Awards honored volunteers and projects that demonstrate leadership, innovation, and meaningful

community engagement. A state Master Gardener advisory committee reviewed nominations in the Outstanding, Teamwork, and Sustained Excellence categories, recognizing individuals whose service strengthens Extension programs and improves community well-being.

Monroe County Master Gardener Ann Glosecki of Columbia received the Outstanding Award for her exceptional volunteer leadership. Glosecki played a key role in youth and adult education initiatives, supported programming at the Monroe County Fair, and led efforts to redesign the Extension Community Garden at the Annex Building. Her work also enhanced Extension educational programs that use the garden as a hands-on learning space.



Ann Glosecki of Columbia is honored with the State Outstanding Master Gardener Award.

Through her creativity, problem-solving skills, and willingness to explore new gardening techniques, she helped expand the garden's impact and accessibility. Glosecki's contributions reflect the Master Gardener program's shared commitment to improving lives through education and gardening.

Ann is an enthusiastic Master Gardener who is always eager to share her love of gardening and learning with others. She is a dedicated volunteer who is always happy to lend a hand to support the program.

Sarah Ruth, University of Illinois Extension, Horticulture Program Coordinator

2025 Master Gardeners Statistics



78
volunteers



4,604
volunteer hours



\$160,173
national volunteer value



13,145
pounds of produce donated

2025 Master Naturalists Statistics



43
volunteers



3,926
volunteer hours



\$136,585
national volunteer value



Cooking up creativity! Youth prepare a healthy donut recipe, learning hands-on skills for nutritious and delicious eating.



Youth Cooking School equips children with essential cooking skills

According to America’s Health Rankings, 32.4% of children ages 10-17 are overweight or obese in Illinois, which ranks 27 among US states. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the prevalence of childhood obesity has more than tripled since the 1970s. A child who is obese is more likely to become obese as an adult, highlighting the importance of providing nutrition education and awareness to youth.

Youth Cooking School, developed by Nutrition and Wellness Educator Kris Juelfs, teaches food safety, nutrition, and basic cooking skills to children ages 8–13 in Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair counties. This past summer, 127 participants received 12 hours of hands-on education over four days across seven sessions at four locations.

Extension partnered with several organizations to ensure program success, including Monroe County Home and Community Education Group, Monroe County Pork Producers, Monroe County Farm Bureau, Monroe County Annex, St. Paul Lutheran Church in Columbia, Hecker Community Center, and Madison County Farm Bureau.

Students completed a survey at the end of the program, which revealed notable gains in knowledge and skills. Before attending Youth Cooking School, only 25% of youth reported high knowledge of food safety; after the program, 100% rated their knowledge as average or high. Understanding of healthy food choices increased from 22% before the program to 69% afterward. Confidence in following a recipe rose from 50% to

78% of participants. These results demonstrate that Youth Cooking School effectively improves nutrition knowledge and cooking skills. Participants highlighted practical skills and lessons they gained, including safe food handling (“clean, separate, cook, chill”), proper cooking temperatures for meats, knife safety techniques, and the importance of curling fingers while cutting. Many also discovered that healthy food can taste good, reinforcing the program’s goal of making nutrition education engaging and applicable. These reflections, combined with measurable gains in food safety knowledge, recipe-following confidence, and understanding of healthy choices, show that Youth Cooking School equips children with the tools and confidence needed to make healthier decisions in the kitchen and beyond.

Wellness Wednesday: Empowering adults to build healthier lifestyles



Obesity is a serious, common, and costly chronic disease and is a risk factor for other serious chronic health diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. According to CDC data (2021-2023), the adult obesity rate is around 40-42%, making it a significant public health issue. Rates tend to increase as people age. Access to credible, science-based nutrition education plays a critical role in helping individuals make informed health decisions.

Illinois Extension addressed this need by leading Wellness Wednesday, a series of engaging programs designed to support adults interested in improving their health and well-being. Through these sessions, Juelfs provided reliable nutrition information and practical strategies participants could immediately apply to their daily lives.

Juelfs delivered seven Wellness Wednesday programs, reaching 59 participants across Monroe County, with a live online option available to increase access for those unable to attend in person. Each 60-minute session combined interactive presentations with recipe demonstrations and food samples, reinforcing learning through hands-on experiences.

Program topics reflected participant interests and current health needs and included *Building Healthy Habits and Exploring Diet Trends*, *Show Your Heart Love*, *Food and Medication Interactions*, and the *Wellness Nature Walk at Baebler Educational Farm*. These sessions helped participants better understand nutrition choices, physical activity, and lifestyle behaviors that support long-term health.

Participant feedback highlighted the program’s impact and value. One attendee shared, “Love all of your services, such a great opportunity. Keep up the great work!” Another added, “Your programs are excellent.” Through Wellness Wednesday, Illinois Extension strengthened community capacity to make healthier choices and supported adults in taking meaningful steps toward improved health and quality of life.



Teens build confidence, career readiness, and life skills at U of I Extension workshop in Waterloo

Thirty-four local teens strengthened their confidence and took steps toward independence during the Building Life Skills Workshop hosted by Illinois Extension in Waterloo. The full-day, hands-on event equipped youth with practical tools to prepare for life after high school.

Through interactive sessions, teens gained real-world skills in financial literacy, food safety, stress management, and emergency preparedness. Community partners and Extension educators led engaging activities that encouraged participation and problem-solving in a supportive environment.

The Waterloo Police Department addressed the risks of drug and alcohol use and the dangers of drinking and driving, while Monroe County EMS demonstrated CPR, first aid essentials, and everyday safety tips. Extension educators taught healthy eating on a budget, basic food preparation, food safety, and stress management strategies. Representatives from the First National Bank of Waterloo introduced budgeting, scholarships, financial planning, and saving strategies. The Waterloo Optimist Club provided breakfast to help teens start the day energized.

Throughout the day, teens worked in teams, building leadership, communication, and teamwork skills. The workshop empowered participants with practical skills and confidence for college, the workforce, or other future pathways.



Hands-on learning in action! Teens practice CPR techniques during the Building Life Skills Workshop, gaining essential skills to respond in emergencies.

My son was really excited to share the financial information he learned during the workshop. I was surprised these topics aren't incorporated into the high school curriculum, so it was very useful and practical for him.
Parent of participant

Illinois Extension team members collaborate statewide to tackle food waste and empower produce use



Illinois Extension educators statewide teamed up to tackle food waste by creating a dynamic video series that teaches families how to select, store, and prepare fresh produce. This collaboration between Nutrition and Wellness and SNAP-Ed educators developed research-based content that empowers households to maximize nutritious foods and reduce spoilage.

The team produced 13 engaging videos featuring common and seasonal produce, each offering practical tips to extend shelf life and prevent waste. These resources are shared widely, in food pantries, Family Community Resource Centers, Department of Human Services offices, and are also available online through the Illinois Extension website and YouTube.

The impact is measurable: the YouTube playlist has reached 20,947 views, and the Extension webpage adds another 1,106 views, totaling more than 22,000 engagements. Families who watch the videos learn to prevent food waste, stretch their food budgets, and prepare healthy meals at home.

By combining expertise across disciplines, the team delivered cost-effective, practical education that improves nutrition, reduces waste, and builds confidence in cooking. Their collaborative approach ensures that all community members, from pantry visitors to home gardeners, have access to tools that make healthy eating easier and more sustainable.

In recognition of their innovative and collaborative work, the team received the Interdisciplinary State Team Excellence Award, highlighting the statewide impact of their efforts to empower families and reduce food waste.

Nutrition and Wellness Program Impact: 2025



nearly 1,200
Participants



more than 2,100
Educational Touches

85%
reported improved knowledge of the subject taught

95%
intend to share program information with others

95%
plan to use information learned in daily life

93%
felt the program met their needs

Evaluation Outcomes
(Family and Consumer Sciences Standard Survey)



Teamwork in action as students learn, cook, and create a teriyaki meatball recipe.



Youth Cooking School empowers young chefs to bring healthy meals home

Two brothers attending the EFNEP Youth Cooking School summer cooking camp at the Belleville Public Library turned a day of learning into a meaningful family experience. After preparing white chicken chili at camp, the brothers requested the recipe so they could recreate the meal at home that same evening. They also asked for the whole wheat pancake recipe they had made earlier in the day, eager to continue practicing their new skills. With a trip to the grocery store, the brothers prepared a home-cooked dinner for their family, demonstrating how Youth Cooking School lessons extend beyond the classroom.

Teens from SIUE TRIO Upward Bound in East St. Louis also participated in EFNEP Youth Cooking School, where Extension staff led hands-on nutrition and cooking sessions that built confidence in the kitchen. Participants strengthened food safety skills by practicing proper handwashing and using the Germ Glo machine. Through a “Superfoods for Superheroes” theme, teens explored MyPlate food groups, learned how nutritious foods fuel healthy bodies, and practiced essential culinary skills such as safe knife use, meat preparation, and accurate measuring. Working together, they prepared teriyaki meatballs and fruit-topped stuffed crepes.



From chopping to cooking, SIUE TRIO Upward students get hands-on experience dicing fruits for their recipe.

By the end of the program, many participants shared excitement about recreating the recipes at home, demonstrating increased confidence and a willingness to apply healthy cooking skills in their daily lives.

Summer cooking school builds confidence and curiosity through RISE-UP mentoring

For the past three years, Illinois Extension has partnered with the RISE-UP Mentoring Program to strengthen life skills for teens in East St. Louis through summer cooking school. Sponsored by Lansdowne-Up, RISE-UP equips youth with hands-on experience in labor and construction trades while providing mentoring, professional guidance, and essential life skills.

In the 2025 program, participant Darius M. discovered new confidence in the kitchen. Although he enjoyed eating, he had limited cooking experience and focused his interests on other hobbies. Through summer cooking school, Darius learned the basics of nutritious eating and practiced preparing unfamiliar recipes, including sun-dried tomato wraps with spinach and basil and breakfast crepes.

At first, Darius doubted he would enjoy the dishes. Instead, he surprised himself, and his instructor, by naming the tomato wraps his favorite recipe of the nine prepared that summer. “I have never seen half the ingredients in this recipe, let alone eaten them. This is fantastic!” he shared. By the end of the program, Darius recognized that unfamiliar foods did not have to be a barrier and expressed a new willingness to try different ingredients and meals.

This experience reflects the mission of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. By combining familiar foods with new flavors and techniques, summer cooking school creates engaging culinary experiences that build skills, expand perspectives, and empower youth to make healthier choices, both in and out of the kitchen.

31

male teens participated

9

lessons delivered over 15 total hours

55%

improved ability to choose foods aligned with federal dietary recommendations

45%

increased use of safe food handling practices

39%

improved physical activity behaviors

35%

improved skills in preparing simple, nutritious, affordable foods

Rise-UP Impact



Youth celebrate completing the Meal Kit Project program as they pose outdoors, showcasing confidence, friendship, and pride in their accomplishments.

Future of the Meal Kit Project: Supporting healthy communities through nutrition education and resources

The Meal Kit Project, initiated by a dedicated local student and School Office Manager, Felicia Clay, and led by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program through Community Outreach Worker Shaneise Tally, aims to empower low-income families with practical cooking skills, nutrition knowledge, and essential resources to improve their health and food security. Originally launched as part of the Feeding Futures Initiative through Pilot Light and Illinois Extension, the program demonstrated how teachers can incorporate food as a context for teaching across disciplines. The inaugural cohort included six families (22 individuals) from St. Clair County, achieving a 100% graduation rate. Participants demonstrated meaningful improvements in diet quality, with all increasing their fruit and vegetable intake, and many adopting healthier food resource management and physical activity habits. Following the program, families received crock pots, air fryers, seasonings, utensils, and pantry items--donations from local pantries and support from the Feeding Futures Initiative, enabling them to apply their new skills at home. The program was inspired by a student's advocacy and collaboration with local chef Georgy Clemons, who demonstrated cost-effective meal preparation techniques. As the first cohort concludes, plans are underway to expand the program to two East St. Louis locations during the 2025-2026 school year.

By the end of the program, families made measurable improvements across nutrition, food resource management, and physical activity. Continued support will ensure more families gain access to nutrition education and practical cooking resources that promote long-term health and food security.



A participant proudly holds a completion certificate for the Meal Kit Project, celebrating her commitment to building healthy habits.

100% participants showed improvement in one or more diet quality indicators including eating fruits, vegetables, drinking less regular soda and high sugar drinks, and cooking dinner at home.

83% participants showed improvement in one or more food resource management practices including cooking dinner at home, comparing food prices, and planning meals before shopping.

67% participants showed improvement in one or more physical activity behaviors including exercising for at least 30 minutes or making small changes to be more active.

80% eat vegetables more often each day.

75% cook dinner at home more times a week.

60% plan meals before shopping more often.

Program statistics



Danforth students sit with Community Outreach Worker Shaneise to reflect on the recipes they prepared, and lessons learned through the *Around the Table* curriculum.



Changing minds about beans through Jackie Joyner-Kersey Summer Camp

Youth who learn to enjoy a variety of healthy foods are more likely to make nutritious choices later in life. Through partnership between the Illinois Extension EFNEP program and JJK FAN, youth at JJK Summer Camp explored the benefits of beans as a nutritious source of protein and healthy fats. During a cooking session, students prepared white chicken chili; many tried it for the first time, along with beans. To their surprise, those who initially refused were soon asking for seconds! The activity encouraged openness to new foods and highlighted how hands-on experiences can change attitudes toward healthy eating.



Around the Table curriculum inspires curiosity, confidence, and healthy eating habits

Through the *Around the Table* curriculum, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program engaged Danforth interns in a hands-on session that encouraged them to explore new foods and flavors. Interns expanded their palates by sampling a variety of fruits, many for the first time, and prepared healthy recipes from scratch, including sweet potato pancakes.

As they cooked and tasted, participants took part in meaningful conversations about healthy eating habits, fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and the personal significance of food. Teens shared who taught them to cook and reflected on their most memorable food experiences, highlighting how food connects individuals, families, and cultures.

The session also introduced the concept of balanced diets and examined the social, health, aesthetic, and sacred roles food plays in everyday life. By emphasizing openness to trying new foods and exploring diverse flavors, the program helped



Students work together to prepare sweet potato pancakes, trying the recipe for the first time.

interns build positive attitudes toward healthy eating. Interns demonstrated increased curiosity, confidence, and willingness to step outside their comfort zones with skills that extend beyond the kitchen and contribute to personal growth. This hands-on experience supported the program's broader goal of fostering healthy habits, cultural awareness, and a lifelong appreciation for nutritious foods.

96
program families served

79
new families enrolled

334
individuals reached
through program families

46%
program graduation rate

Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program
Adult Impact Overview

33
groups served, reaching
707 youth

293
lessons delivered over 381
total hours

Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program
Youth Impact Overview



ABCs of School Nutrition Regional Learning Institute in action.



School nutrition professionals gain hands-on training at ABCs Regional Learning Institute

Many students eat two-thirds of their meals at school, so it's important they receive healthy, nutritious food. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program partnered with Nutrition and Wellness Educator Kris Juells to deliver a professional development institute for school nutrition staff across Madison and St. Clair counties. The ABCs of School Nutrition Regional Learning Institute was held at the Madison County Extension Office in Edwardsville, where 50 school food service staff members participated.

Attendees gained practical knowledge in key areas including creating healthier lunchroom environments, ensuring food safety, promoting staff appreciation and retention, and integrating cultural foods and taste tests into school meal programs. Each participant earned five continuing education credits, fulfilling annual professional development requirements.

The institute also encouraged collaboration among staff from different schools. Participants shared strategies for implementing taste tests, with one attendee highlighting lessons learned from conducting taste tests at a larger high school. The peer exchange reinforced the value of shared learning and strengthened connections across the regional school nutrition community.



Healthy eating made fun! Maryville Elementary students sampled homemade hummus with fresh veggies and pretzels during SNAP-Ed's interactive taste test.

Granite City students discover new foods through SNAP-Ed taste tests

Food habits formed in childhood often carry into adulthood, which is why it is important to introduce youth to a variety of healthy food options. SNAP-Ed conducted interactive taste tests at Prather Elementary and Maryville Elementary in Granite City, engaging students who were also receiving direct education from community outreach workers.

At Prather Elementary, kindergarten students sampled yogurt parfaits topped with Cheerios and a choice of strawberries or blueberries. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive: 118 students reported liking the parfait, three did not enjoy it, and four were unsure.

At Maryville Elementary, students in first and second grade tried homemade hummus served with carrots, bell peppers, and pretzels. A post-event survey captured student reactions: 146 students liked the hummus, 66 said it was okay, and 72 did not enjoy it. Student comments ranged from enthusiastic praise, "It was so good I want more!" and "You made today the best lunch ever!" to constructive feedback and personal taste preferences, highlighting the variety of responses young children have to new foods.

The taste tests not only encouraged students to try new flavors but also provided valuable insight into their preferences, supporting SNAP-Ed's efforts to promote healthy eating habits in schools.



Reducing food waste at Jackie Joyner-Kersey Academy

Schools often face the challenge of providing nutritious, reimbursable meals while minimizing food waste and stretching limited food service resources. At Jackie Joyner-Kersey Academy, the lack of site-specific data on post-meal waste made it difficult to determine which foods students consumed and which were discarded.

To address this, SNAP-Ed partnered with school nutrition staff to conduct a food waste audit during a high-volume July lunch service. SNAP-Ed provided on-site technical assistance, supported data collection, and observed cafeteria operations to assess meal service under the Offer vs. Serve model, use of the share table, and post-meal food waste by category.

The lunch service ran efficiently with four cafeteria staff, allowing students to move smoothly through the line and receive full reimbursable meals. The cafeteria was clean, organized, and welcoming, supporting positive meal participation. A key focus of the audit was the share table, an evidence-based strategy promoted by SNAP-Ed to reduce waste and improve food access. Unopened items were made available to students, sandwiches were quickly reused, and approximately 50 unopened milk cartons were recovered, showing the impact of this low-cost approach.

The audit produced actionable data that is now guiding improvements. Mashed potatoes (28 lbs 10.6 oz) and fruit (25 lbs 7.4 oz) generated the highest waste, indicating opportunities for portion adjustments and menu refinement. Waste from entrées (9 lbs 1 oz) and white milk (9 lbs 4.6 oz) remained low, while chocolate milk (16 lbs 6.8 oz) emerged as an area for targeted nutrition education.

As a result, school nutrition staff are using the findings to inform menu planning, reduce waste, and strengthen food recovery practices. Leftover fruit is now repurposed for next-day breakfast service. Through SNAP-Ed support, the school gained practical data and reinforced strategies that promote sustainable meal operations and improved access to nutritious foods.



SNAP-Ed in action: helping students waste less and eat more.

SNAP-Ed partners with Nourish Illinois to expand healthy food access



The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program joined forces with Feeding Illinois, the Illinois Department of Public Health, and the Illinois Public Health Institute, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to launch the Nourish Illinois: Food Bank Community of Practice. This statewide initiative provides technical assistance, networking, and resources to help Illinois food banks increase access to healthy, nourishing, and culturally responsive foods.

This involved partnerships with the St. Louis Area Foodbank and Operation Food Search, which support partner agencies throughout the region. The SNAP-Ed team assisted with FB-HANA assessments, identified opportunities, and guided applications for Nourish Illinois, a prerequisite for the Charitable Food Assistance Program. These efforts helped build capacity for equitable, culturally relevant nutrition initiatives.

However, due to funding cuts and the SNAP-Ed program closure, local technical assistance and application support will no longer be available, though the Nourish Illinois initiative continues statewide. Food banks may still work directly with Feeding Illinois, Illinois Public Health Institute, or Illinois Department of Public Health, but will no longer receive partnership, assessment, and coordination from SNAP-Ed.

This change underscores the important role SNAP-Ed has played in connecting partners and advancing food equity in St. Clair County and surrounding communities.



Nourish Illinois: Food Bank Community of Practice—strengthening regional food access.

414

Nutrition education classes offered

1,221

Participants reached through nutrition education

91

Policy, systems, or environmental changes adopted by SNAP-Ed partner organizations

SNAP-Ed Program Impact – 2025



SNAP-Ed leaves a lasting legacy of health and empowerment in our communities

As SNAP-Ed comes to an end, Illinois Extension is pausing to reflect on the tremendous impact the program has made in local communities. For years, SNAP-Ed has empowered families with the knowledge and skills needed to make healthier food choices, stretch their grocery dollars, and build lasting habits for well-being. From classrooms to community centers, the program has reached countless individuals by strengthening families, supporting children’s growth, and fostering healthier communities. While this chapter is ending, the difference SNAP-Ed has made will continue to be felt for years to come.

Celebrating achievements:

Illinois Extension staff making a difference

At the annual Illinois Extension conference, achievements were celebrated, knowledge was shared, and ideas were sparked to continue making a positive impact in communities across the state. Elizabeth Levey, 4-H metro educator, and Grace Margherio, 4-H youth development educator, were recognized with the Inclusive Excellence in Field-Based Program Staff Award. Kris Juelfs, nutrition and wellness educator, was honored with the Interdisciplinary State Team Excellence Award.

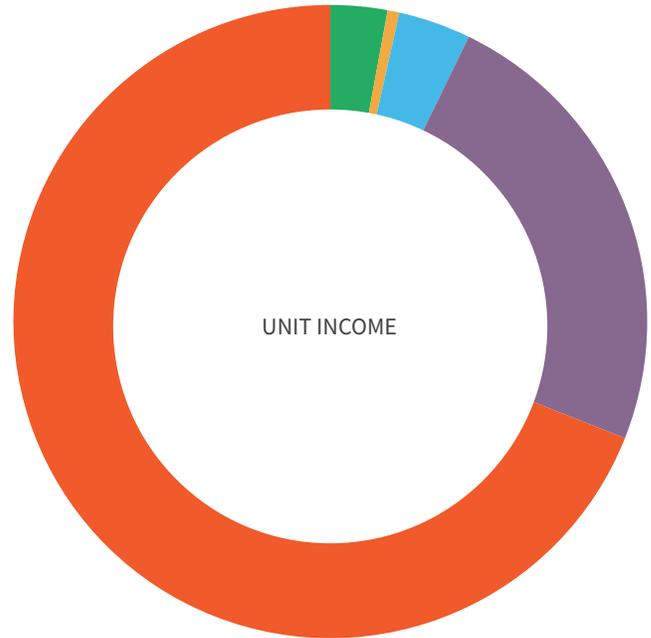
These awards reflect the dedication, leadership, and hard work of Extension staff in advancing programs that strengthen communities, support youth, and promote inclusive, interdisciplinary approaches to education.

Transforming communities through education and innovation

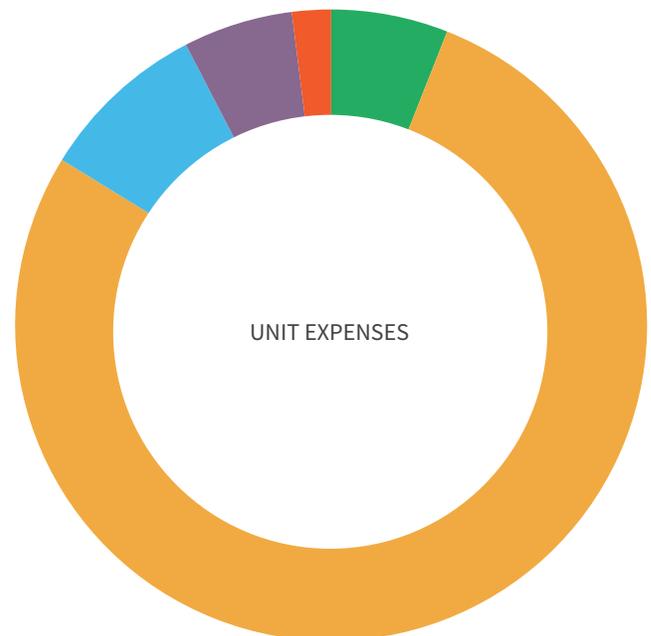
Illinois Extension leverages local, county, state, and federal funding to deliver impactful educational programming that strengthens communities across the state. With a mission to empower individuals and organizations to improve their lives and communities, Illinois Extension builds learning partnerships that put knowledge to work. Every dollar invested in Illinois Extension translates into meaningful solutions that drive progress, foster resilience, and create a brighter future for all.



Illinois Extension staff gather at the annual conference to connect, collaborate, and celebrate their commitment to strengthening communities across the state.



Percent	Source
2.9%	Illinois Department of Agriculture
0.6%	Local Partner Donations
3.7%	Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair Foundations
23.8%	Madison, Monroe, and St. Clair County Boards
69.0%	Federal Funds



Amount	Source
5.99%	Program Expenses
77.78%	Salaries
8.63%	Utilities/Rent
5.61%	Travel
1.99%	4-H Shows, Fairs, and Awards



As the Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed program comes to an end, we look back with gratitude on the staff, partnerships, and lasting impact made across our communities.



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Hours: This office is only
for Military 4-H Youth
Programming

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