

Cook County Extension Council Meeting
December 18, 2025
University of Illinois Extension
8751 S. Greenwood Ave., Suites 112-122
Chicago, IL 60619
Minutes

Meeting Attendees: Eric Meredith, Dedra Ries, Mary Harkenrider, Geri Redd, and Richard Juarez

New Members: James Flagg

Staff Attendees: Willene Buffett, Leonard Parker, Molly Hofer, Aida Peralta, Rainah Folk, and Abbey Matre

Welcome and Introductions

Vice Chair, Eric Meredith, called the meeting to order at 10:07 AM.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Minutes from September 18 were reviewed and approved.

County Director Updates

New Unit Educators. *Director Buffett, Abbey Matre, and Rainah Folk.* The unit recently filled two vacant positions in the Natural Resources, Energy and Environment (NREE) and Community and Economic Development (CED) program areas.

Forest Preserves 5-year agreement. *Director Buffett.* Across the state, each Extension unit must have a connection to their respective county board to receive funding through governmental apportioned funding or referendum. In Cook County, the relationship that exists is through a five-year intergovernmental partnership agreement with the Forest Preserves District. Each year, a scope of work is provided to the board of commissioners outlining the work that has been done as it relates to Extension programming and the environment. The five-year agreement has ended as of 2025, thus a meeting was held with the newly appointed Forest Preserves director, Adam Bianchi, to explain the relevance of Extension programming, renew the five-year agreement, and ask for a \$25,000 increase in funding. Each of these items have been approved by the board as of December 2025.

- Mary Harkenrider asked for clarification regarding the increase in funding.
 - Director Buffett: the \$25,000 will be allocated over the course of the contract.
- James Flagg asked for clarification on how the additional funds will be used within Extension.
 - Director Buffett: the funding is earmarked for Cook County Initiative (CCI) programming .
- Richard Juarez asked if the intergovernmental agreement renewal will be reported in writing.
 - Director Buffett: Yes.

Family and Consumer Science education positions. *Director Buffett and Molly Hofer.* Due to federal funding cuts, the SNAP-Education program was eliminated. The dean from the College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES), Dr. Dean Boléro, alongside the Extension Director, Dr. Matthew Vann, expressed a commitment to advancing nutrition security, as part of the Extension and College of ACES mission, through a merger of the Family and Consumer Science and Integrated Health Disparities teams. The new team—Health and Community Wellness—will have three specialized areas of expertise: Health and Family; Food and Nutrition; and Food and Health Systems.

- Dedra Ries asked for clarification regarding the distinction between Community Health and Health and Community Wellness teams and potential overlap.
 - Director Buffett: The regional associate director, Dr. Durriyyah Kemp, emphasized the line item in the statewide budget that is allocated for the Community Health team. Dr. Kemp, Director Buffett, and program leaders will have conversation to discuss the possibility of program overlap.
 - Molly Hofer: There has already been overlap between Family Life programs and Community Health programs. Because the funding sources are different and the expertise of educators vary, the programs developed over time have been complimentary and address the statewide priorities and new initiatives.
- Eric Meredith asked for clarification about the funding allocated for SNAP-Ed programming and if the UIC CPHP staff are targeted to fill the new educator positions.



- Director Buffett: Funding for educational component for SNAP-Ed is no longer available; positions are external and open to those with relevant credentials to apply.
- Mary Harkenrider asked for clarification on CCI funding allocations and financial education programming.
 - Director Buffett: Funding provided by the board is earmarked for CCI programming through the unit's Community Health, Local Food Systems and Small Farms, STEM, NREE teams.
 - Molly Hofer: Statewide, there is only one financial educator. The HCW team is continuing to grow, there is uncertainty in what will come of consumer economics education within Extension with these changes.

Old Business

New Council member recruitment. We are continuing our efforts to identify potential new members.

Evaluations. Annually, council members are given an opportunity to provide feedback on their experience serving on the council and the effectiveness of the meetings. The evaluations help us to enhance the council's effectiveness and, as a result, our unit's effectiveness. The forms have been sent to council members to complete.

New Business

2026 Meeting Schedule. For the 2026 calendar year, the council has decided to keep the same schedule. Meetings will take place quarterly on the third Thursday of the month, beginning March 2026 at 10:00 AM.

Council member reappointment. *Director Buffett.* Comments on council member reappointment status and required documentation will be communicated by Director Buffet via Email with the Council Chair, Richard Juarez.

Civil Rights Updates. *Rainah Folk.* Annually, each Extension unit is required to complete a civil rights compliance report. The report is composed of volunteer hours, extension council composition, outreach efforts, and accommodation request. The information provided in this report is aligned with the statewide NIFA review, 3-year unit review process and 3-year unit plan of work. The report was completed and submitted to campus in September.

- Mary Harkenrider expressed concerns about volunteer tracking systems; would like to reassess systems to determine a better way to track volunteer hours.
 - Geri Redd will raise issue at the Extension State Advisory Council (ESAC) meeting in February.

Plan of Work. *Rainah Folk.* The Unit Plan of Work (POW) is compiled to provide an overview of the state priority issues that unit plans to target locally. POWs include goals and progress toward reaching underrepresented audiences to continually enhance diversity and equitable access to Extension resources. As of October 1, the unit will be operating under a new 3-year POW, aligned with the 10-year strategic plan.

Updates From Meetings with Program Teams. *Director Buffett.* Each council member should attend at least 2 meetings with an Extension program team within the unit to understand their operations and what is going on throughout the county.

Extension County Board. *Director Buffett.* Extension Law indicates that every Extension unit must have a County Board separate from the Extension Council. In PY25, the Extension County Board of the Extension Council was audited; Counties without an active county board will need to configure a board comprised of at least 1 County Commissioner (or representative) and 4 (2 male, 2 female) Extension Council Officers.

- Richard Juarez and Eric Meredith expressed interest in having discussion with Director Buffett, Assistant Director Parker, and CED Educator Rainah Folk regarding recruiting commissioners.

Announcements

N/A

The next meeting date is March 19, 2026.

The meeting adjourned at 11:23 AM.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Rainah Folk.