

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

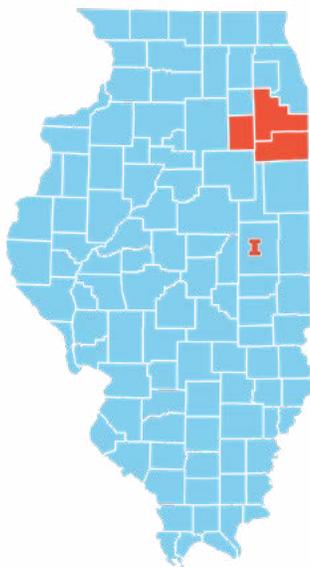


Serving Grundy, Kankakee, and Will Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Marilu Andon
County Director



Local voices are the gateway to lifelong impact

Some call us the University’s ‘best kept secret,’ and it’s true, though not in the way they think. When we’re at our best, we’re so interwoven into communities that we become part of what moves them forward.

For more than 100 years, University of Illinois Extension has been deeply woven into the fabric of our communities; actively engaged in transforming and strengthening every corner of the state with local experts from Illinois’ largest and most trustworthy institution.

When people step back and hear the full scope of Extension’s work, they’re often surprised by how their lives intersect with us.

This report reflects that truth:
Extension is not hidden.

In fact, we are so visible that people have a hard time separating us from our community. We are embedded in daily life, advancing the University’s mission through collaboration, relevance, and results that matter.

Extension shows up where progress happens: alongside local governments, schools, nonprofits, producers, families, and volunteers who trust us to bring research, listening, and practical solutions to the table.

Throughout this report you will find stories of impact where Extension empowered communities. We are able to make this impact because of relationships. It’s our superpower.

We leverage our statewide network to host meetings, workshops, and facilitate engagement with key stakeholders, influencers, and decision-makers. Whether it’s connecting local government to stormwater professionals or connecting local schools with classroom embryology, Illinois Extension is uniquely positioned in the community to broker

reciprocal relationships that leverage critical research, technologies, and education.

In 2025, we saw real examples of this. As you read this report, I hope it inspires you to see the impact that thoughtful action can have.

2025 was also a year of unexpected challenges: In July, the Illinois SNAP-Ed program (known as Eat.Move.Save.) lost federal funding. Locally, this means a loss of four staff members who are exceptional at what they do. We feel for our colleagues and the communities that rely on their expertise and exceptional talent.

While it was not a chapter we wanted to write, it underscores our ability to respond quickly and adapt to significant challenges. We are now moving forward by hiring new program staff to continue addressing critical issues in Health and Community Wellness, ensuring our communities remain supported.

Lifelong learning translates into lifelong impact; we build skills that endure and empower communities to grow stronger. Our new Strategic Plan, which will guide us over the next 10 years, is rooted in our history. If you want to hear more about our strategic plan, see page 23.

Our impact has never depended on being loud for its own sake. We are visible through the many partnerships and communities we empower. It’s an honor that can’t be said for many organizations and one I don’t take lightly.

Thank you for your continued support as we build a future empowered by local voices making a local impact.

Marilu Andon
County Director

Cover photo:

Michael Galloway shows off his rabbits at the Grundy County 4-H Fair. See story on page 13.

Image by Kayla Dunlavey.

Written and produced by:

Anthony Warmack

Proofed and edited by:

Brooke Katcher
Yukta Sinha

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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Financial Report

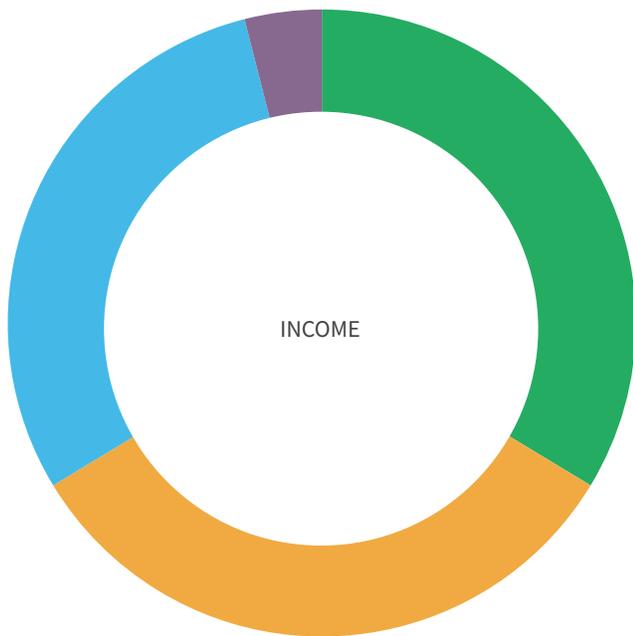
Illinois Extension provides programming to communities in Grundy, Kankakee, and Will counties. Through local, state, and federal funding streams, Extension is able to provide educational programs through a team of knowledgeable educators and program staff. *Federal funds include Illinois Nutrition Education Program grant and Smith-Lever fund monies. Local funds include donations from 4-H foundations, 4-H Federations, United Way of Grundy County, United Way of Will County, and program fees.*

Independent report showcases 1-to-10 economic return for communities

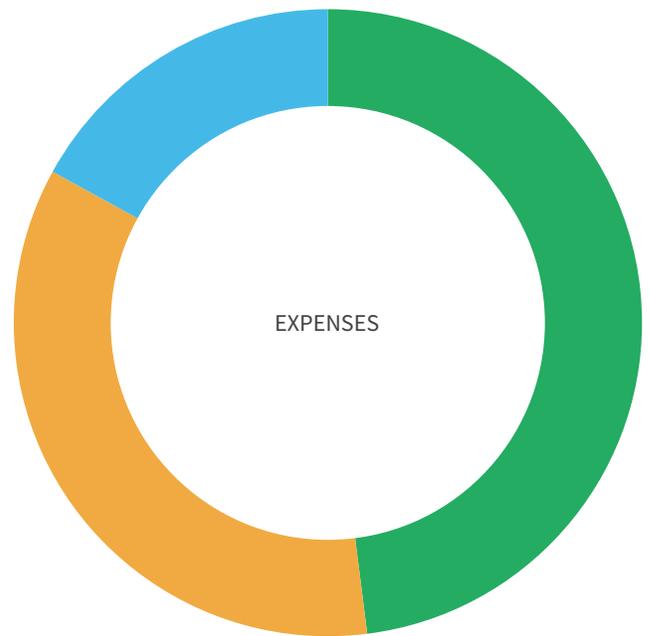
Illinois Extension staff have been embedded in local communities for more than 100 years, translating university research, delivering 28,000 annual educational programs with 800,000 program attendees, and offering training and services that positively impact the lives of adults and youths. A 2020 independent report shows this work results in an impressive 1-to-10 economic return for communities.



Read the full report online
go.illinois.edu/ExtensionImpact



Amount	Source
34%	Federal
33%	State
30%	County
3%	Local



Amount	Source
48%	Programs, Implementation, and Outreach
35%	Office and Operations
17%	SNAP-Ed

Image by
Kayla Dunlavy
Photography

25,447
people reached by direct
Illinois Extension programming
in local communities ¹



\$353,772
Value of volunteer time²



92 community leaders
received Local Government Education resources

4-H Youth Development



13,303
4-H Experiences¹



2,314
Fair projects



Over one-half
of engaged 4-H youth self identify as
BIPOC or Hispanic/Latino

Natural Resources, Environment, Energy, Agriculture



5,701
Program attendance ¹



2,445
Volunteer hours



1,600
Pounds of produce donated

¹ Individuals participating in multiple program areas may be counted more than once.

² Based on independent Sector Value of Volunteer Time.



One Mission. One College. Lifelong Impact.

Whether you know Illinois Extension as 4-H, classroom embryology, Master Gardener trainings, greenhouse school programs, afterschool robotics, Reading Buddies, or another program, Extension works behind the scenes with local experts solving local problems.

Illinois Extension programs have different names because they create impact in many different areas — but they all have one thing in common: They are all implemented by Illinois Extension directly within Grundy, Kankakee, and Will Counties.

Illinois Extension develops educational programs, extends knowledge, and builds partnerships to support people, communities, and their environments.

Housed within the College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, Illinois Extension is part of the nationwide Cooperative Extension network. Through the support of ACES, Extension is able to respond to local needs, and develop programs to make the state and its residents happier, healthier, safer, and more prosperous.

Creating lifelong learning, Illinois Extension advances one mission under one college to empower lifelong impact.

Conozca las etiquetas de información nutricional.

Es importante leer las etiquetas de los alimentos para determinar su valor nutricional y realizar elecciones informadas sobre los alimentos.

Nutrition Facts

8 servings per container
Serving size 2/3 cup (55g)

Amount per serving
Calories 230

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 8g 10%

Saturated Fat 1g 5%

Trans Fat 0g 0%

Cholesterol 0mg 0%

Sodium 160mg 7%

Total Carbohydrate 37g 13%

When life _____ in your Family is
important for you _____,

Illinois Extension is here.

To give you the knowledge and
tips to improve your Family
Nutrition Health.



I knock on the door, and I say: this is what I do. It's free. SNAP-Ed's human touch leaves a 'lifelong impact.'



As the SNAP-Ed program comes to an end due to a loss in federal funds, staff leave behind a legacy of Lifelong Impact.

Making healthy choices is not always easy. For families with financial struggles, the choice of whether or not to eat healthy is often made for them. Over the past 30 years, Illinois Extension has helped address this problem in local communities with the SNAP-Ed program. This program, which offers free nutrition and healthy lifestyle education for people eligible for SNAP benefits, is nearing its final chapter due to a loss in federal funding after years of helping families make healthier choices. As the program comes to a close, the local team continues to do what they've always done: provide lifelong learning to families and communities for as long as possible.

“Our community outreach workers are very talented, and we haven't slowed down since the funding announcement over the summer,” says Morgan Pizur-Kranc, who provides guidance to the community outreach worker staff team in Will and Kankakee counties as the Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed educator. “I don't think people realize how hard this great team works to truly make a difference in the community.”

Lifelong impact starts with people: “This is what I do. This is what I offer. It's free.”

The Illinois Eat.Move.Save. program, the state's name for SNAP-Ed, is made up of more than 200 staff. In Kankakee and Will counties, this team is made up of three community outreach workers and one educator.

“The community outreach workers provide research-based education to community members,” says Pizur-Kranc, “while I focus my efforts on helping organizations and communities create policies and systems that make healthy food access easier, and providing guidance to this talented team of facilitators.”



The program generally targets areas where at least half of residents live below 185% of the poverty level. “We have a map that is available to us that traces where the eligible audiences are, and then we go to work,” says Isabel Dyche, who works in Will County as a community outreach worker.

Some sites qualify automatically, such as food pantries, while others—including K-12 schools or food retailers—must meet additional criteria, all centered on reaching those with the greatest need.

It sounds complicated at first. However, as the team began talking, it became clear that the foundation of the entire program is built on growing local relationships. According to Dyche, once you know the areas you want to impact, you simply have to ask:

I knock on the door, I bring a folder, and I say: ‘This is what I do. This is what I offer. It's free.’

Learning in a supportive environment: “She had saved \$100 in a single month by changing her habits.”

On paper, the lessons are about food and healthy living, but in practice the program provides an outlet for learning in a safe environment that is unique.

Quinn Kilburg, SNAP-Ed community outreach worker serving Kankakee County, tells about a program done at the local YMCA child care center. In one activity, he watched as preschoolers wrinkled their noses, then reached back for seconds during a “Tiny Trees Taste Test,” sampling broccoli and cauliflower with hummus or a savory yogurt dip.

“It's a great way to introduce kids to new foods in a really low-pressure way,” Kilburg says. “They get to decide what they like. That autonomy matters.”

Teachers notice the ripple effects almost immediately. Some say children are more willing to try fruits and vegetables at snack time, while others report that the youth are more apt to share what they've learned with parents and others.

One small breakthrough still stands out. A young boy, known for refusing anything beyond bread or crackers, surprised his teachers during a taste test. He loved dried mango; he liked hummus, and he asked for more.

“He really loved the flavor,” says Kilburg. “They were struggling so much to try to find things to feed him. But now the teachers, and hopefully the parents, have something to build on for a healthy future.”

The same pattern of impact is observed in adults.

At the Joliet Township Infant and Child Care Center, Isabel Dyche teaches teen parents, some still in high school, who are navigating adulthood earlier than expected. The conversations are candid and, at times, uncomfortable.

“They feel like they know everything,” Dyche says, laughing. “But behind that is a longing to learn more about the things they don’t fully understand.”

Dyche shows them how to read recipes, plan meals, and experiment with unfamiliar flavors. When the group asked for quesadillas, she brought blue corn flour, something most had never seen.

“I said okay, let’s try something new. They didn’t know there were different colors of corn, but they tried it and liked it,” Dyche says.

The lessons go beyond cooking. Dyche talks openly about sugary beverages, energy drinks during pregnancy, how to budget, and how quickly small purchases add up. One student later wrote her a note saying she had saved \$100 in a single month by changing her habits.

“She put it into practice, and she saved,” Dyche says. “That made me very happy.”

“It’s a ripple effect. They tell their families. Their families tell others.”

As the program, which impacts over 1 million residents annually with nearly 2,000 statewide partnerships, continues the process of being sunset due to a loss of federal funding, the life-changing impacts of the work will not be erased. You can read more about the impacts of Eat.Move.Save. on Illinois residents in a recent news report.



5,151
Participant interactions

384
Nutrition education classes

Through every program the team facilitates, the focus is on information about choices and how those choices affect the body and the wallet. For many participants, that information becomes an “aha” moment.

“You see it click,” Kilburg says. “They realize they can change one habit, and that change actually matters.”

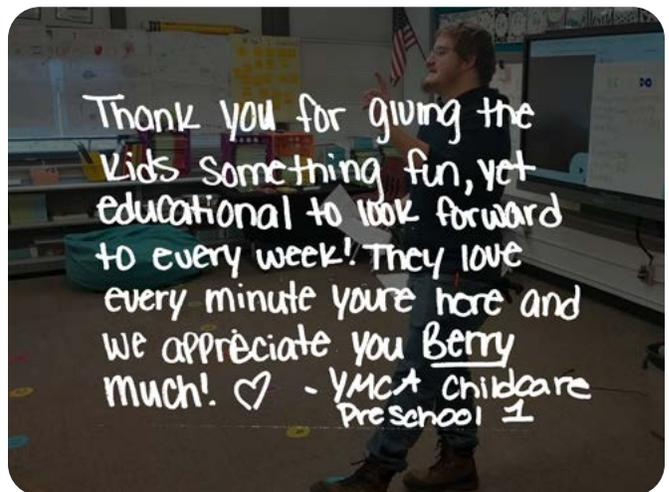
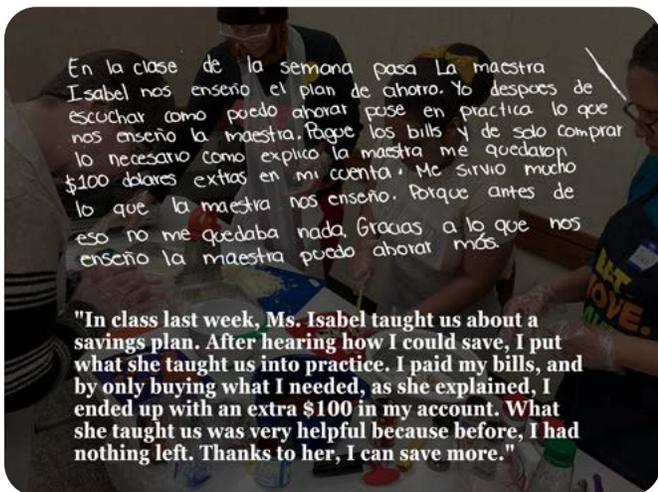
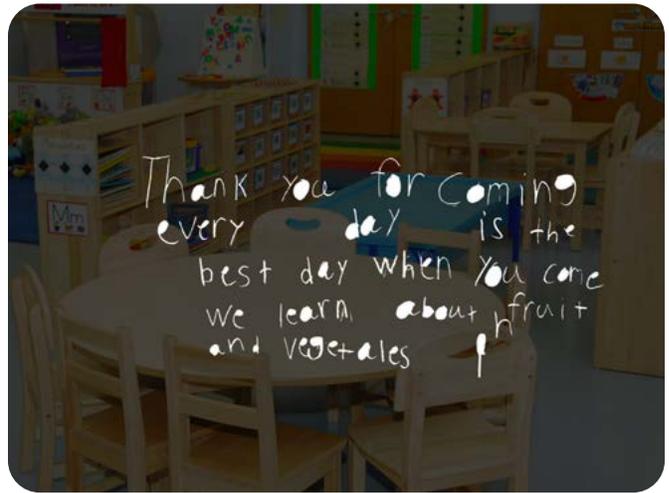
What has made the program work, staff say, is the trust built over time. Classes are delivered where people already are: schools, food pantries, child care centers, churches, housing programs, etc. Often, staff return again and again, becoming familiar faces.

“That’s when the real learning happens,” says Morgan Pizur-Kranc. “When people feel comfortable enough to ask questions and share what’s really going on in their lives.”

The effects don’t stop with one participant. A lesson learned by a parent reaches a child. A lesson taught to a child reaches a parent. It’s all about lifelong learning, which leads to lifelong impact.

“It’s a ripple effect,” Dyche says. “They tell their families. Their families tell others.”

As SNAP-Ed approaches its end, that ripple continues outward, impacting families right up to the day the program ends. Even though the funding was disrupted, the relationships remain.





A home run for hunger relief: a creative partnership tackles food insecurity

Food access is a major stressor for individuals and communities throughout Illinois. One way of contributing to a solution that more organizations are turning to is the 'micro pantry.'

Micro pantries, similar to Little Free Libraries, allow for anonymous pickup of food items for those in need. But keeping these pantries stocked is a dilemma that many weren't expecting and don't know how to solve. Illinois Extension stepped in to help.

"Hearing the Will County Health Department talk about how they stock and restock their micro pantry within one day got me thinking," says Extension Educator Morgan Pizur-Kranc, "these micro pantries are another great way to provide food to people that really reduce a significant amount of barriers."

This prompted an idea: What if Illinois Extension could increase donations by connecting organizations and building partnerships?

So Pizur-Kranc reached out to the local baseball team, the Joliet Slammers: "I've always had this idea in my mind to work with the Joliet Slammers because they're well-known, respected, and engaged with the community, not only in Joliet, but in surrounding communities as well."

The concept was simple. At a few games in July into August, the public was invited to bring donations of healthy canned goods and in exchange for the generosity, the slammers offered free game tickets.



Sometimes everything you need is right in front of you. You just need to be that connector between partners doing great work in the community.

In all, this partnership collected nearly 140 items that went to stock six micro pantries in the county. The results were so promising that a more robust partnership is planned for 2026.

Illinois Extension is specifically designed to build collaborative partnerships, like this one, with stakeholders that inform and leverage the University and its partners to support stakeholders as they move toward a future free from food insecurity.

"Sometimes everything you need is right in front of you. You just need to be that connector between partners doing great work in the community," says Pizur-Kranc. "You don't need to recreate the wheel, something might just need to be tweaked a little to be more effective."



For a list of Will County micro pantries, visit willcountyhealth.org/maps



A 4-H Member with autism shares how rabbit shows changed his life

'I am autistic and rabbit shows helped me:' Showing livestock to be 'Beyond Ready' for life

The 4-H program, Illinois' largest youth development organization administered by Illinois Extension, prepares youth to be Beyond Ready for life by allowing young people to explore their interests, make mistakes, and learn in a safe and supportive environment. For Michael Galloway, a member of the Homes Cool Kids 4-H Club, showing rabbits helped him find his voice.

Now in sixth grade, Galloway, the son of Meagen and Mike Galloway of Morris, wants to inspire others by sharing his experiences.

I am autistic, and rabbit shows helped me learn to talk to people.

"I am autistic:" Showing rabbits to overcome challenges

When first asked to share his experience, Galloway said "yes" because it might help "others who may have anxiety or autism gain the courage to try something new even if it is scary."

"I would not speak or look at people in the face, I would look at the ground and whisper in my mom's or dad's ear to have them say what I wanted to say," says Galloway. "I am autistic, so a lot of things are really uncomfortable for me, like some sounds, lights, or smells, and talking to people was one of those hard things."

Galloway's story started, as he tells it, four years ago. His mom started showing Californian rabbits — this sparked his interest, and he wanted to help:

"She told me she would register me for the youth show, but that she would not speak with the judge for me. I had to do that. I really wanted to show rabbits, so my mom gave me a few that were just mine and taught me how to pose them, and I started to show."

This interest in rabbits helped spark Galloway to face the challenges he was experiencing head-on: "At first it was really hard, and I whispered a lot. But I really enjoyed caring for my rabbits, and the more I learned, the more excited I got about talking to people about them...I was excited to talk to the judge about my rabbit. Now, talking is not so hard."

All images in this story by: Kayla Dunlavey Photography



"I really like the friends I made:" 4-H connects youth with peers, helping them find their spark

In February, Galloway joined 4-H to explore more opportunities to make friends and learn more about agriculture and rabbits. What he found was a community of supportive peers who encourage and build each other up as they explore their own individual interests.

"I really like the friends I made [in 4-H]," says Galloway. "For example, I met a teenager at the 4-H fair who, when I was scared to stand up for the auction, told me she would make silly faces at me while I was up there to make me laugh and not be scared."

"You just meet a lot of nice kids who don't bully you in 4-H," he says.

Within his first few months in 4-H, in addition to meeting new friends and trying new things, Galloway grew in his knowledge of rabbits. He learned about withdrawal periods, keeping good notes about each rabbit, how to breed rabbits for color variations, and more.



With more than 80 supported projects, 4-H empowers young people to explore their interests. For Galloway, that was rabbits. For others, it might be robotics or video games. In the future, Galloway wants to explore other projects, such as goats, sheep, nature, and woodworking. “I am excited to explore and learn new things,” he says.

“My mom won’t let me just give up:” 4-H is a family affair
Mentorship among peers is an important part of the 4-H program, but so are positive youth and adult partnerships that allow for mentorship and growth. Judges who are experts in their fields speak with youth about their projects, and volunteer 4-H leaders dedicate their time to help youth explore their interests.

For supportive parents, this also means positive interactions with their children, as 4-H encourages families to be part of their child’s learning experience.

“My mom won’t let me just give up if things get hard; she pushes me every day to do my best. She tells me it’s okay to have a rough day, but a rough day doesn’t mean giving up. My parents always do whatever it takes for me to be able to do things I enjoy. For example, I wanted to do shooting sports in 4-H, but there was not a coordinator trained. My dad went last weekend and took the first training course to become a leader, making it possible for us to do shooting sports now.”

“You are going to get through this:” Advice and the future
Things aren’t easy for Galloway, but his supportive network and newfound interests allow him to face challenges head-on: “A lot of things are hard for me; sometimes even being in the barns at the fair can be too loud or too many smells. But my parents help me when I need breaks to go somewhere calmer. My mom has a bag of fidgets and snacks for me when I need a distraction; that helps too. I think anyone can do anything if they have someone who loves them, helps them, and pushes them.”





When asked what advice he has for others with autism or anxiety, Galloway had this to say:

It's OK, you're going to get through this. I had some really bad days and even was in the hospital, but I have a lot of people who love me who help me through it. Find something you enjoy doing and use that to help when you feel anxious — like for me, I go to the barn and spend time with my animals. Even if you don't feel like it, you have someone who loves you and wants to help you. Kids in 4-H will always help each other.



HOW IT STARTED



HOW IT'S GOING

4-H built his confidence to be 'Beyond Ready'

When Perry Harlow talks about 4-H, he doesn't start with projects or awards. He starts with courage.

"4-H didn't just teach me skills," says Perry Harlow, a 4-H alumnus who now works as Young Leader program coordinator for Illinois Farm Bureau, "it forged the courage to stand alone for what I believe in, a strength that has become my compass in every professional challenge I face. The confidence to be the lone voice of integrity in a room full of doubt is the greatest career asset 4-H ever gave me, and it's the one that defines my leadership every single day."

Harlow began his 4-H journey at age eight. What followed was an 11-year experience that helped shape not only his skills, but his sense of purpose. Over the years, he explored a wide range of projects, including public speaking, leadership, cooking, photography, sheep, cattle, and rabbits—each one offering a new opportunity to grow.

As Harlow progressed through the program, his interests evolved into leadership and civic engagement.

Through county and regional leadership opportunities, he learned how to communicate clearly, lead with confidence, and navigate complex conversations. Just as importantly, he learned how to do so in a safe and supportive environment, one that allowed him to test ideas, take risks, and thrive.

Harlow made a career of civic engagement, working on Capitol Hill for various governmental advocacy groups, where he spoke to decision-makers about issues that matter. Eventually, he returned home to serve as the Illinois Young Leader program coordinator for Illinois Farm Bureau.

"This is what 'Beyond Ready' means," says Emilia Elabed, 4-H youth development educator, "for Perry, 4-H empowered him to be 'Beyond Ready' for his future career, giving him the confidence to speak out on issues that matter, and building skills that now allows him to be a role model for young people today."

Harlow credits 4-H with much of his success. He is featured in a recent video highlighting the impact of the 4-H program on young people across the state.

To me, 'Beyond Ready' means helping youth build the skills and confidence they need not just for the next step in life, but for whatever opportunities or challenges come their way.

"To me, 'Beyond Ready' means helping youth build the skills and confidence they need not just for the next step in life, but for whatever opportunities or challenges come their way. It's about making sure they can think critically, adapt, and lead in their own way. It's about being empowered to take on the future with resilience and a sense of purpose," says Elabed.

At its core, Illinois Extension's approach to youth development is rooted in strengthening the communities young people call home, creating pathways for leadership, civic engagement, and lifelong learning that impact families, organizations, and local institutions. By investing early and intentionally, Extension helps ensure that youth are prepared for what comes next.

Harlow's journey reflects Illinois Extension's commitment to supporting strong, resilient youth and communities by equipping young people with the confidence, civic engagement, and leadership skills they need to thrive beyond their 4-H experience. It's work that strengthens families and communities across the state.



Watch the 'Beyond Ready' video online:
go.illinois.edu/Beyond-Ready



Bringing STEAM programming to Kankakee County youth

Science, Technology, Engineering, Art/Agriculture, and Math education continues to be one of the most in-demand requests for youth programming in Kankakee County. Over the past year, Extension has delivered a wide range of activities directly in several Kankakee county schools and groups, from drone mapping to ice-cream-in-a-bag experiments and other programs in between. These programs give young people the autonomy to test ideas and discover their own solutions.

"In the beginning of the program, students were stumped when given the problems they had to solve," says Maezie Nettleton, former 4-H STEAM coordinator who led programs in the summer. "With some practice, students felt more confident solving the problems. Students were so excited to get to be engineers and see themselves as scientists."

These STEAM-focused programs, along with other Kankakee County specific programming in communities like Bourbonnais, Pembroke Township, and others, are vital in helping youth see themselves in STEAM careers: "Programs like Mad Scientist, which teaches horticulture, Classroom Embryology, which teaches life sciences, and our Bass Fishing club, which teaches STEM-related practices, are impactful in helping youth identify their interests and explore a future career."

Delivering these educational programs increases competencies and helps youth thrive and be beyond ready for life in the future, whatever future career they choose.



Mad Scientist curriculum brings STEM curiosity to the classroom

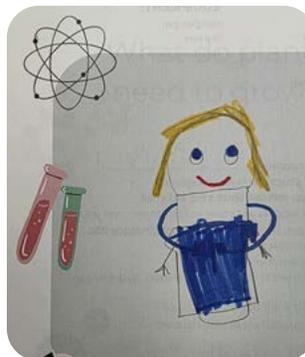
For a program that started with a one-week turnaround and a simple request for "something STEM-related," Mad Scientist has quickly grown into one of the most sought-after youth programs in the region.

The horticulture-focused curriculum brings six-sessions and features hands-on exploration of plants, soil, ecosystems, and scientific thinking to classrooms and partner organizations. Along the way, the program has sparked curiosity that extends well beyond the classroom.

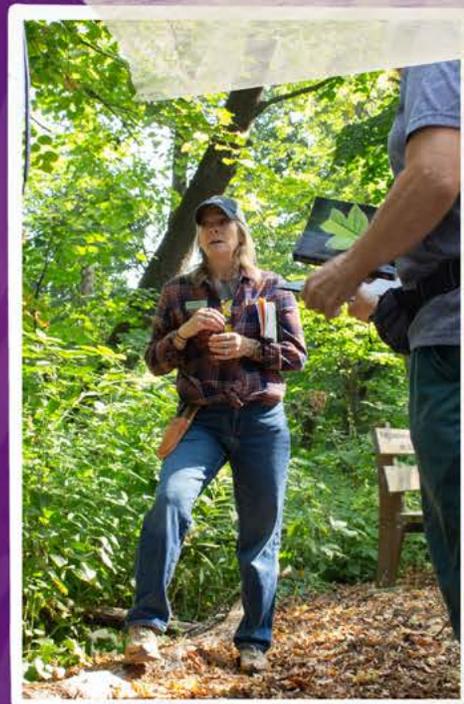
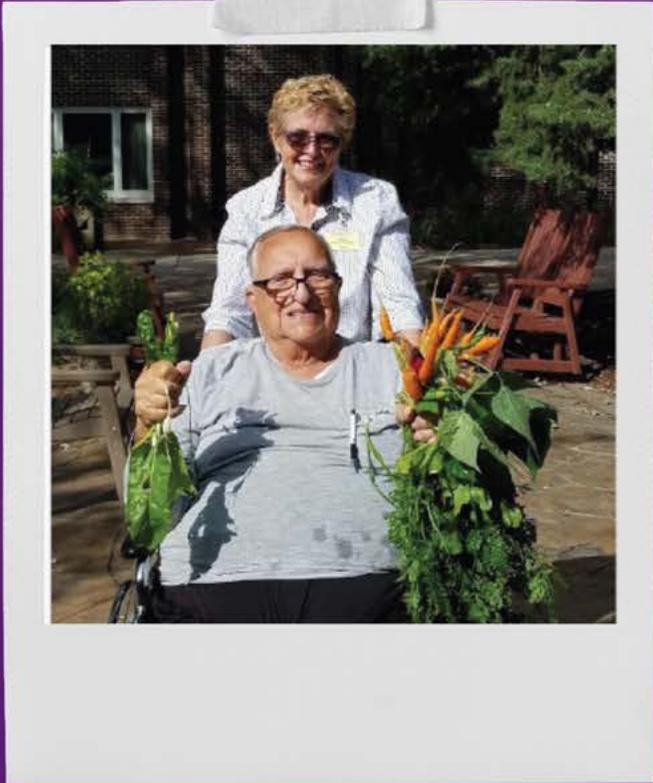
It has made a huge impact. This is my favorite program to teach and the one that I'm most proud of. I've seen a lot of positive outcomes in schools and in the youth that it impacts.

Brittney Muschetto-DePatis, 4-H Educator

Programs like Mad Scientist reflect Illinois Extension's broader commitment to building strong, resilient communities by meeting local needs with responsive, research-based education. Extension helps young people develop skills that support lifelong learning and community well-being, strengthening participants, and the families, schools, and communities around them.



50 YEARS



Celebrating 50 years of impact with Illinois Master Gardeners

The Illinois Master Gardener program, which started in Will County in 1975, looks back on 50 years of friendships, impact, and topsoil.



Fifty years ago, a vision for a program that would become a premiere resource for gardeners in Illinois was born. The Master Gardener program has impacted many people. The 50-year celebration, which was celebrated in 2025, felt very personal for Will County, which was the epicenter for the program in Illinois.

In 1975, Extension Specialist Floyd Giles piloted a program that started in Washington State in the local community. This 'train the trainer'-style program, which focused on mentorship and research-based answers, became the Master Gardener program.

Since that first pilot session in Will County, volunteers from all walks of life have stepped forward to become Master Gardeners and serve their community. Half a century later, their dedication has helped to answer countless questions, cultivate gardening projects throughout the community, and inspired a statewide culture of connection through nature.

"Even today in 2025, fifty years later, people really appreciate that we can actually *be* in somebody's backyard through the Internet and yet, answer their questions by a real human," says Nancy Kuhajda, Illinois Extension horticulture educator who provides leadership to the Master Gardener program locally. "We still give one-on-one answers that are specific to people who call. You get a voice — it's not just a website."

Bringing community and knowledge to the world of gardening and horticulture

The Master Gardener program, as it exists now, is structured to provide research-based training to volunteers who are interested in gardening and who are ready to take the next step in sharing that passion with others.

"Gardening can be a very solitary activity," says Kuhajda. "When you gather with other people with interests similar to yours, not only does your educational knowledge increase, but your social circle does as well."

Interested volunteers are just one piece of the puzzle. Once potential Master Gardeners are identified, they must go through a rigorous training process on topics, including vegetable



gardening, insects, trees and small fruits, basic botany, integrated pest management, turfgrass care, plant diseases, tree and shrub care, soils and fertilizer, and flower gardening. The training, which typically involves at least 10 weeks of material, can be taken in person, online, or a hybrid of the two.

The rigor of the training is the point: "The training teaches horticulture subjects so volunteers can help answer people's questions and support their gardening," says Kuhajda.

"I must have called 10 other places for help... Finally I found you:" Answering gardening questions

As Illinois communities face new environmental realities, Master Gardeners continue to adapt. Their research-based support helps residents navigate gardening in an approachable and informed way. Master Gardeners continue to be one of the most valued parts of the program and, according to Kuhajda, residents still want something technology can't replace:

"With so much of the world going to auto-response or voicemail, this is one thread has continued to run through the Master Gardener program and makes our program: we are still there for people."

In 2025 alone, more than 1,600 questions were answered from residents in the community about gardening, horticulture, and the environment. The response from clients is always encouraging and shows the impact of this free service.

I must have called at least 10 other places for garden help and had to leave a message and no one ever got back to me. Finally I found you, I can't believe how much you have helped me and given me several options of what I can do.
Will County Resident

Community gardens are a superpower

While the Master Gardener program has transformed over the years, some of its most impactful moments can be found in the community garden partnerships that have flourished under volunteer care.

"We have had a number of long-standing community gardens over the years," says Holly Froning, Master Gardener coordinator serving Kankakee County. "Our volunteers are still actively involved in some of them, and the rest they've turned over to the host organization to nurture longterm."

These community gardens are another way Master Gardeners can shine as they use the knowledge they have gained from training to support the community. "Taking the information from the training and being able to use it in your community—that's the point," says Froning.

Looking to the future

People say that the one constant in life is change and for the Master Gardener program, that's a plus.

"Because we are research-based, we evaluate and adapt our program each time it's offered," says Nancy Kuhajda. "As life changes and as the world changes, so will our program. Our goal will always be to find new ways of educating people so they can use that information to better their lives every day."



For the Master Gardener team in Grundy, Kankakee, and Will counties, the sky is the limit on what the future might look like:

"Fifty years ago, we didn't think we would be able to get information to people as fast as we do with the Internet," says Froning. "I'm sure there'll be something in 50 years that we haven't even thought about and you can bet we will be on the forefront of that as well."

"Yes," agrees Kuhajda, "We will probably virtually appear in someone's orchard as a hologram" she adds with a laugh.



Learn more about becoming a Master Gardener:
extension.illinois.edu/mg

Building partnerships is a superpower

Illinois Extension is bridging the gap to empower communities, share resources, and solve problems.

Across the state, Illinois Extension's greatest impact happens in collaboration. When trusted local relationships bring together knowledge, research, and shared purpose, communities are empowered to create impact. By working alongside community organizations, Illinois Extension extends its reach and multiplies the impact of every program it delivers.

For Extension Educators, this rapport with the community is vital and highlights an important strength.

"I feel like a lot of times I'm playing that liaison or mediator role," says Extension Educator Morgan Pizur-Kranc who frequently works to build partnerships with local food pantries. "For example, a pantry has the capacity to keep itself running but not necessarily expand. That's when they need me to do the legwork outside of the pantry to help their system."

As a local organization connected to Illinois' largest educational institution, Extension's reputation for knowledge is important. This reputation building highlights why Extension is strategically positioned to best build and nurture partnerships. "I think



the legitimacy of information that comes from a university is important," says Nancy Kuhajda, horticulture educator. "We build programs based on what the community needs, as opposed to just taking what we have to the community."

There are many stories of impact related to communities and organizations who Extension has empowered. Illinois Extension's impact is intertwined with partnerships.

These collaborations strengthen communities and ground Extension work in community empowerment, giving local voices and organizations a stage to do what they do best.



Staff from the Kendall-Grundy Farm Bureau partnered with Illinois Extension on farmer appreciation bags.



Symposiums: Extension influences change with horticulture

Extension's horticulture outreach continues to influence meaningful change by providing expertise to other organizations and professionals. Extension Educator Nancy Kuhajda's work reflects this philosophy of translating years of hands-on experience into practical guidance for professionals serving diverse audiences. Kuhajda often presents at symposiums to share her knowledge with others. A recent session was about creating gardening programs for seniors in congregate housing. She addressed a common hurdle: "Everybody wants to do it, but they run out of steam right after the planting. After the presentation, people said, 'in 10 minutes I learned 15 things I should have been doing this whole time,'" Nancy says. Through concrete examples and tested techniques, her presentation helped practitioners rethink how horticulture can thrive in senior settings.



Reading Buddies: Improving literacy rates through strategic intervention

Improving literacy starts with meeting youth where they are, which is the driving force behind Extension Educator Emilia Elabed's Reading Buddies program. After a discussion with the Joliet Boys and Girls Club, the program provides small-group intervention for youth in a wide range of grade levels focused on building confidence. "It's just supposed to be a low-stress environment where we can work on these skills," says Elabed, emphasizing that many youth struggle simply because they don't feel confident in their skills. She built the curriculum herself and lessons are aligned to Illinois learning standards and adapting activities to each learner. The impact was immediate: "Most of the surveys said they did feel more confident in reading and that they would continue to read," she says. Reading Buddies offers a strategic step toward stronger literacy outcomes.



Navigating food systems: supporting organizations

Navigating a complex food system is hard for many organizations, and when someone has a question, simply searching on the Internet for answers doesn't provide the necessary nuance. When organizations need help locally, they contact Extension Educator Morgan Pizur-Kranc, who supports them as they seek answers to important questions. Many come to Extension unsure where to begin, especially when facing issues like food sourcing, funding, or volunteer shortages.

"Questions about the systems, like we need a new source of food, we need a new source of funds, we need a new source of volunteers, are pretty common" she says.

By breaking down those challenges and guiding groups toward workable solutions, Morgan helps organizations move toward meaningful system-level changes.

"When you don't know who to ask, start with Extension"

When residents and organizations hit a roadblock and aren't sure where to turn, Illinois Extension often becomes their first reliable stop. Whether it's a homeowner puzzled by a garden issue or a community group navigating volunteerism policies, staff regularly field questions across a multitude of topics. As Horticulture Educator Nancy Kuhajda explains, many people only discover Extension after other sources fail them: "They just went somewhere else first and it didn't work out for whatever reason and once they do connect with us, they become our biggest advocate because they tell people about the service," she says.

By offering trusted information and a real human to talk to, Extension helps people find solutions and builds lasting relationships in the process.

Partnerships are Illinois Extension's superpower

As Illinois communities continue to evolve, so does the landscape of information. Artificial intelligence is now a daily part of people's lives. These technologies also introduce new challenges. That's where Extension's role becomes even more important. "AI is going to pull something just to satisfy whatever query it is faced with," says Muschetto-DePatis. "This information is not fact-checked and can often seem correct, even if it's not. Extension provides an alternative source that people can turn to for trusted information with research standing behind it."

As a core pillar of Illinois Extension's long-term strategic plan, partnerships are intentionally created to be equitable, sustainable, and responsive to community needs. These collaborations strengthen communities, unlock new opportunities, and ensure that Extension's work remains grounded in trust, innovation, and real-world impact.





Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

Illinois Extension is driving statewide impact through its comprehensive 10-year strategic plan, focused on the key priorities of environment, food and agriculture, health, community, economy, technology and discovery, partnerships, and workforce excellence. Launched in the fall of 2024, Extension is marking progress by releasing a year-one report that outlines key accomplishments in fulfilling its mission of extending knowledge, building partnerships, and supporting people, communities, and the environment as part of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission.

Our first year shows strong alignment and renewed energy across the organization. Illinois Extension is committed to innovation, equity, and meeting the evolving needs of communities in every county.

Associate Dean and Director of Illinois Extension,
Matthew Vann

Vision

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

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

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

Mission

Our mission is our broad and enduring purpose:

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



Learn more about Illinois Extension's strategic plan:
extension.illinois.edu/strategic-planning

STAFF

County Director

Marilu Andon
Director

Communications and Marketing

Anthony Warmack
Program Coordinator

4-H Recruitment and Engagement

Brooke Katcher
Program Coordinator

4-H Youth Development

Emilia Elabed
Educator

Brittney Muschetto-DePatis
Educator

Barbara Dubravec
Program Coordinator

Agriculture and Natural Resources

Nancy Kuhajda
Educator

Holly Froning
Program Coordinator

Illinois Nutrition Education Program (INEP)

Morgan Pizur-Kranc
Educator

Isabel Dyche
Community Worker

Harold "Quinn" Kilburg
Community Worker

Janet Moody
Community Worker (retired
1/2026)

Office Support

Olivia Koerner
Specialist

Mariana Maldonado
Specialist

Nicole Alvarado
Assistant

Colleen Hoffman
Assistant

EXTENSION COUNCIL

The Extension Council is authorized by the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, in accordance with state law, to be actively involved in the operation of Illinois Extension. Extension Councils cooperate with Extension staff in planning, promoting, developing, implementing, evaluating, and financing an Extension program designed to meet the needs, interests, and resources of the local communities served.

Grundy County

Nathanael Greene
Jenna Siegel

Kankakee County

Dale Bowman
Joel Gramirez
Johari Kweli
Denise Turner
Kim Yohnka

Will County

Rev. Herb Brooks
Jackson Hogan
Lin Scharnhorst
Sally Skoff
Alex Tyle-Annen

OFFICE INFORMATION

Grundy County Extension

4004 N Division St.
Morris, IL 60450
(815) 942-2725

Kankakee County Extension

1650 Commerce Dr.
Bourbonnais, IL 60914
(815) 933-8337

Will County Extension

100 Manhattan Rd.
Joliet, IL 60433
(815) 727-9296

ONLINE



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youtube.com/@uiegkw



Illinois Extension

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College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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