



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

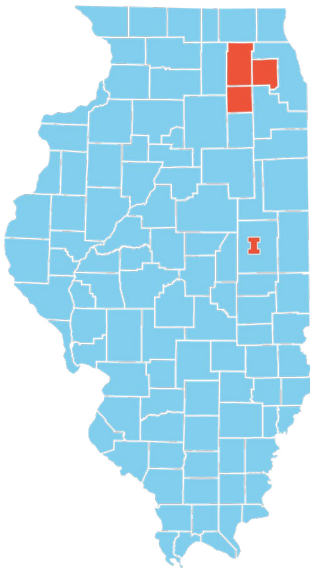


Serving DuPage, Kane, and Kendall Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Deanna K. Roby-Vorgias
County Director



Wishes or weeds? How we address challenges impacts a path forward

Challenges often come down to how we choose to see them. Think of a dandelion—some people view it as a stubborn weed, while others see it as food for pollinators or a wish waiting to be made. The situation doesn't change, but our mindset does. Approaching challenges with optimism doesn't mean pretending problems don't exist; it means looking for the possibilities within them.

When obstacles appear, it's natural to focus on what feels difficult or uncertain. But shifting our perspective can open new paths forward. Instead of seeing a problem as a setback, try viewing it as a chance to learn, adapt, or try something new. Like the dandelion that grows through cracks in the pavement, resilience often emerges from unexpected places.

When you trust that every experience—even the tough ones—has something to offer, this transforms challenges into opportunities.

With the loss of our local SNAP-Ed programs and staff, we may not yet know exactly what the work ahead will look like. But one thing is certain: we are ready for whatever comes next.

The need for nutrition education at every stage of life remains strong, as do our partnerships with organizations and communities that support healthy eating and active living. While these needs will continue, our approaches to meeting them will adapt and grow over time.

We can't control every situation, but we can control how we interpret it. Whether you see a weed or a wish is up to you.

Deanna K. Roby-Vorgias
County Director

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

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

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

2025 Engagement

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

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

Partnerships

Resource Generation

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| 5,129 Program Volunteers | 277 Community Gardens | 2,830 School and Community Partners | \$15,026,392 Value of Volunteer Contributions | \$499,188 Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated | \$960K+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|

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



Cross-collaboration cultivates community at Mercy Housing

This year, the Mercy Community Garden underwent a remarkable transformation, growing from just four small garden beds to 30 raised beds—including two that are wheelchair-accessible. The garden also shifted from individually assigned plots to a fully communal model, maintained and watered by residents themselves. This change not only expanded the garden's capacity but also strengthened community connections, allowing residents to work, learn, and share together in a collaborative space.

Mercy Housing, which serves approximately 870 residents in Batavia, made this revitalization possible through support from Batavia United Way, Nicor, Kane County, and University of Illinois Extension, along with grants from Growing Together Illinois and the Kane County Food Access program. These partnerships provided funding, expertise, and resources to help transform the garden into a fully accessible, educational, and sustainable community space.

During the growing season, a Master Gardener was on-site weekly to guide residents on planting, pest management, harvesting practices, and troubleshooting gardening challenges. By October, the garden produced more than 500 pounds of fresh vegetables, all distributed directly to residents. Some of the harvest was also used in SNAP-Education programs, offering hands-on nutrition education through youth and adult sessions, including CATCH Kids Club, Illinois Junior Chef, MyPlate for My Family, and Healthy Cents. While 273 individuals participated directly in educational sessions, garden signage and produce cards reached nearly 1,000 additional community members, expanding the program's impact.

The garden became a hub for wellness and social connection. Residents of all ages attended two luncheons featuring freshly harvested produce, and many shared that the garden encouraged them to eat more vegetables, try new varieties such as eggplant and cherry tomatoes, and engage with their neighbors. The garden also served as an outdoor classroom, offering weekly hands-on educational experiences for children throughout the summer, reinforcing the importance of healthy food, sustainability, and environmental stewardship.

To further enhance the partnership, the 4-H team provided a variety of interactive programs for youth, including loom knitting, Cooking 101, mindfulness, yoga, Lego building, and dance-based exercise. These programs encouraged creativity, critical thinking, and physical and emotional well-being in a fun and supportive environment, complementing the garden's mission to promote community health and engagement.

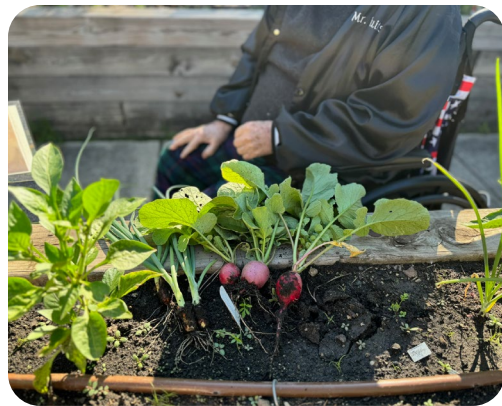
The revitalized Mercy Community Garden demonstrates how collaborative partnerships, hands-on education, and communal spaces can improve food access, strengthen community ties, and support wellness for residents of all ages. By combining gardening, nutrition education, and interactive youth programs, the project creates lasting benefits for both people and the environment, fostering a resilient and connected community in Batavia.

There are different cultures, and not everybody speaks the same language necessarily, but you can tell through people's eyes what their hearts say.
Olivia Melgoza, Program Coordinator



CHILDREN LEARN HEALTHY HABITS AND SKILLS WITH SNAP-ED

This summer, University of Illinois Extension again partnered with multiple local sites—including Tri-Town YMCA, Community House at Anne M. Jeans, and Marian Park Housing, as well as Goodwin in North Aurora, Greenman in Aurora, and the Fox Valley Family YMCA—to offer engaging nutrition-based programs for school-aged youth. SNAP-Ed staff led hands-on cooking lessons, teaching kids how to choose food wisely and prepare balanced snacks and meals, while staying active. The goal was to keep children physically engaged during the summer months while encouraging healthy eating habits. Programs like these are vital because they help children understand the connection between nutrition and activity, laying the foundation for lifelong wellness. Participants not only learned valuable skills in the kitchen but also gained confidence, teamwork experience, and an appreciation for healthy living, which will benefit them long beyond the summer.



SECRET GARDEN BOASTS HEALTHY HARVEST FOR COMMUNITY

The DuPage County Care Center expanded its garden program in 2025 through a Growing Together Illinois grant, increasing fresh food access and community impact. Four new SNAP-Ed produce beds were added to the "Secret Garden," helping the program surpass its goal of donating 200 pounds of produce annually. In total, more than 430 pounds of vegetables were grown and donated to People's Resource Center. The garden supports more than 60 resident gardeners, offering opportunities to grow vegetables, herbs, and flowers while connecting with nature. Beyond food access, the garden serves as a source of pride, purpose, and community engagement for residents, staff, and volunteers. With ongoing support from Illinois Extension and dedicated Master Gardener volunteers, the program continues to grow—nourishing both the community and the people who care for it.



OLDER ADULTS BUILD SOCIAL CONNECTIONS THROUGH COOKING

Older adults in our community are gaining the knowledge and confidence to make healthier choices through hands-on nutrition programs designed just for them. A partnership between Illinois Extension and local senior communities, including Constitution House Senior Apartments and Mercy Housing, is helping promote health, wellness, and connection. Through healthy cooking classes and nutrition information booths, residents learn to prepare affordable, nutritious meals while exploring topics like smart beverage choices, dairy benefits, and injury prevention. These lessons highlight essential nutrients, which support overall health. Residents have embraced the program, with many returning each month. The classes also provide a welcoming, social environment that brings neighbors together, helping older adults build healthier lifestyles and stronger connections.



MICROPANTRIES PROVIDE MASSIVE IMPACT IN ADDISON

Access to food shouldn't depend on time, transportation, or fear—and in DuPage County, micropantries are helping make that a reality. Supported by Illinois Extension, these small, community-based food stations provide 24/7 access to dry and canned goods, allowing individuals to take what they need and give what they can—judgment free. Strategically placed in high-impact areas, including grade schools in Addison School District 4, micropantries are helping address hidden food insecurity. Two new units were installed in Addison schools, expanding access for families who may feel uncomfortable visiting traditional pantries. Community partners, including Kiwanis, help stock and maintain them year-round. With food supplies turning over weekly, the need is clear. These micropantries provide reliable access to food while strengthening community partnerships and compassion.





4-H teens learn real-world skills through national opportunity

Through a growing partnership between 4-H and Casey's, youth across the country are gaining meaningful, hands-on experiences that prepare them to be “Beyond Ready”—equipped with the leadership, career, and life skills needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

In 2025, 4-H members from eight counties, including DuPage County, visited local Casey's stores to take part in an interactive retail careers program. Going beyond a typical field trip, youth engaged with store team members, explored daily operations, and participated in hands-on activities like planogram exercises, customer service, and teamwork—gaining insight into what it takes to run a successful business.

The program was intentionally designed to blend mentorship, career exploration, and skill-building. By connecting young people with professionals in their own communities, the partnership helps bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application. Youth not only gain exposure to potential career pathways, but also build confidence in their ability to navigate future opportunities.

Casey's believes education is key to building strong communities by preparing youth for the future and strengthening connections. This aligns well with 4-H, which empowers young people to build skills, grow, and succeed through meaningful learning experiences. “By supporting youth development through hands-on learning and mentorship, we’re helping young people build the confidence and skills they need to thrive,” says Katie Petru, director of communications and community at Casey's.

For many participants, the experience left a lasting impression. DuPage County 4-H members participated at the Lombard store in September. Vinny Kelley especially enjoyed the planogram activity. “It was fun because it felt like a real job,” he shares. “It showed me how much organization and strategy goes into things you might think are simple, like putting products on a shelf.”



His sister Sophia walked away with a new appreciation for customer service. “I learned that helping people is a big part of having a job,” she says. “The Casey's workers showed us how they take care of customers. They taught me that being respectful and helpful can take you far in life.”

Another 4-H member was inspired by the mindset of continuous learning she observed among employees. “I learned that you’re always learning, even when you already have a job,” explains Kayli Gergen. “The workers said they are always practicing, making mistakes, and growing. That makes me want to keep learning too.”

Beyond the direct impact of this program, Casey's continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to the communities it serves. Through the generosity of its guests, team members, and partners, the company donated \$6.6 million in fiscal year 2025 to support core community needs.

I learned that you're always learning, even when you already have a job. The workers said they are always practicing, making mistakes, and growing. That makes me want to keep learning too.

Kayli Gergen, DuPage 4-H member



YOUTHBUILD PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPS LIFELONG LEARNERS

Together, 4-H and Quad County Urban League help local teens build confidence, life skills, and career readiness through the YouthBuild program. This initiative supports youth earning their high school diploma or GED while preparing for college, careers, and greater independence. Through hands-on lessons with 4-H like Welcome to the Real World, Cooking 101, and Government Day, youth gain practical experience in financial literacy, nutrition, teamwork, and civic engagement, while building confidence and real-world skills. The impact was clear—while 28% of participants were initially unsure they saw themselves as learners, 100% did after the program. “I look at the world and people around me in a more positive way,” says one participant. Case manager Maryah Clark adds, “It’s powerful to watch them step into an environment they are not typically exposed to and show genuine curiosity, professionalism, and interest.”



PLANO YOUTH EXCITED TO GAIN STEM EXPERIENCE

Illinois Extension brought 4-H STEM programming to Plano Community Library District in 2025. Through this collaboration, 10 engaging programs were offered at no cost to the library, each drawing 15 to 20 youth participants. Projects included straw rockets, DNA bracelets, animal adaptations, penny spinners, paper bridges, and more. These sessions fostered curiosity, lifelong learning, and skill development, and also helped reach new audiences and strengthen connections with local families. “4-H supports our efforts to get kids excited about coming to the library and excited about learning,” says Deanna Howard, director, Plano Community Library District. “We were fortunate that this partnership allowed us to bring high-quality STEM programming to students ages 6 to 12.” This 4-H Pathways experience was made possible in part by a Microsoft Community Empowerment Grant awarded from the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley.



BUILDING BRICK CLUB SETS STAGE FOR STATEWIDE PROGRAM

Kids love LEGO®-style building bricks—so 4-H turned that excitement into a hands-on club in Kane County. Youth explored the engineering design process through creative challenges, building and testing their ideas each session. Members also strengthened public speaking skills by presenting their projects, while developing spatial awareness, fine motor skills, and problem-solving abilities. The local club played a key role in shaping a new statewide project. Staff used the pilot to test activities and establish best practices, resulting in a 22-page leader guide to help other counties launch their own Building Brick Clubs. The impact has grown quickly: 10 clubs now serve more than 100 youth statewide. “Additionally, 646 youth are enrolled in the individual project, making it the 14th most popular out of 200,” says Amy Henschen of Illinois 4-H. “It’s also reaching new audiences, with 19 percent of participants new to 4-H.”



4-H TEEN FEDERATION RAISES FUNDS FOR LOCAL NON-PROFIT

Members of the 4-H Teen Federation are making a meaningful impact through leadership and service. Each year, the group hosts its signature Bowl-4-Charity event, raising funds for local organizations while building teamwork and organizational skills. In 2025, the event raised more than \$2,400 for We Are Called to Care, which supports youth in foster care. 4-H Teen Federation provides older 4-H members with opportunities to expand their leadership beyond the club level by planning and coordinating countywide events. Bowl-4-Charity is one of their largest efforts, combining fun, community engagement, and philanthropy. Past beneficiaries include Hesed House, the Kendall County Community Food Pantry, and Habitat for Humanity. Through these efforts, 4-H teens are developing lifelong leadership skills while making a lasting difference in their communities.



Extension partners hosted cover crops field day with drone demonstration

A Drone Demonstration Field Day was held in August 2025 to showcase innovative approaches to establishing cover crops in Northern Illinois. Due to the overlap of harvest and cover crop planting windows, farmers in this region often face challenges getting cover crops seeded in a timely manner. Drone technology offers a fast and efficient solution, allowing operators to seed fields even while crops are still standing and harvest is underway.

Cover crops are an important conservation practice that improve soil health by reducing erosion, increasing water infiltration, and suppressing weeds. This event highlighted how drone seeding can help farmers more easily adopt these practices despite tight seasonal constraints.

The event was supported by partners including American Farmland Trust, Kane-DuPage Soil and Water Conservation District, and Extension. Attendees included row crop growers, new farmers, seed companies, and agricultural service providers. Attendance was strong, with broad interest from a wide range of stakeholders. A panel discussion offered valuable real-world perspectives and practical insights into implementing drone technology in agricultural operations.

Extension continues to be a long-term partner in supporting agriculture, bringing deep expertise and enthusiasm to advancing conservation practices in the region.

Workshops and demonstrations like this help local farmers investigate the feasibility of different cropping and management systems, and evaluate the results, without having to invest the time and money required to do the same through trial and error.

Steve Arnold, Farm Bureau Manager

As noted by Kat Gerds, administrative coordinator for the Kane-DuPage Soil and Water Conservation District:

“Northeastern Illinois experiences unique challenges – tight growing seasons with limited access to fields due to unpredictable weather in the seasonal ‘shoulders,’ as well as tight airspace regulations. Together, this can make implementing cover crops difficult. Utilizing a drone to apply the seeds is a terrific solution that allows our farmers to take advantage of this proven conservation practice.”

This event emphasized the importance of conservation practices for maintaining long-term cropland productivity and improving crop health. It also introduced farmers to alternative methods of cover crop seeding and helped expand service availability in the region, including support from a drone operator based in Peoria—addressing a previous gap in local access to agricultural drone services.



GIVING GARDEN HOSTS FIELD TRIP FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

The Bloomingdale Giving Garden offered a hands-on, four-hour field trip for 32 students, ages 6 to 14, from the Homeschool Co-op of Oakbrook. Students rotated through interactive stations on Native Plants and Pollinators, Vegetable Gardening, Soils, and Cut Flowers. Designed as a free educational experience, the field trip gave students a chance to apply what they'd learned about vegetable gardening in the classroom. Participants toured a large community garden plot, experimented with soil and plant care, and learned directly from area Master Gardeners. This inaugural field trip at the Bloomingdale Community Plots provided youth with environmental education beyond the classroom. The program fostered strong, resilient youth and families while encouraging stewardship of natural resources in home and public spaces, helping the next generation grow both plants and knowledge.



MEET THE FARMER SERIES CONNECTS COMMUNITY

The new "Meet Your Farmer" series connected community members with local growers, offering a closer look at local food systems. Organized by Extension Educator Alexis Barnes, the summer series featured on-farm events welcoming other growers, gardeners, and anyone interested in where their food comes from. At Barbic Farms, a family-owned organic market garden in Wayne, visitors explored field preparation techniques, including planting, irrigation, and soil management. In Newark at The Farmacy Farmstand, grower Pearl Carpenter shared her production methods and business journey, while attendees learned about flower and vegetable production. While at Glory Gardens in Batavia, grower Michelle Deraedt highlighted her non-profit's mission. At each stop, Barnes provided guidance on managing pests and diseases, and the program encouraged knowledge-sharing across the local food community.



EXTENSION VOLUNTEER NURTURES NATURE APPRECIATION

Master Naturalist Holly Yee has devoted herself to connecting people with nature through volunteer work with Friends of the Fox, Elgin Izaak Walton League, and Nachusa Grasslands. Since 2022, she has contributed 369 volunteer and continuing education hours, inspiring youth and adults to become stewards of the environment. Her favorite projects include dragonfly monitoring at Nachusa Grasslands, creek cleanups and tree plantings with local schools, and water monitoring and summer camps with Friends of the Fox River. These projects provide vital research data, restore habitats, and encourage hands-on learning for the next generation. "After 30 years teaching in the classroom, I'm thrilled to return to my roots, sharing my love for the outdoors and helping others connect with the natural world," she says. Yee, and other Master Naturalists, are leaving a lasting impact on both people and the environment.



GARDENERS GROW GREENHOUSE EFFORTS

The Kendall County Master Gardeners recently installed a new greenhouse, expanding their ability to grow and share plants with the community. Volunteers worked rain or shine to complete the project, replacing a smaller structure that had been damaged in a storm. Funding for the new greenhouse came from proceeds of previous plant sales, demonstrating the group's commitment to reinvesting in their mission. The upgraded space will allow Master Gardeners to grow a greater quantity and wider variety of vegetable and native plants for their annual community plant sale, which provides affordable plants to local residents. In addition, the group donates plants to local food pantries and community organizations, helping increase access to fresh food and green spaces. Special thanks to 4 Seasons Landscaping Plus for a generous gravel donation, supporting this important community effort.





First-ever Rooted Conference clearly filled a need for plant-based education

The inaugural Rooted Conference brought together gardeners, growers, and plant enthusiasts from across northern Illinois for a full day of learning and connection. Planned by the agriculture, horticulture, and environment team, the 2025 event was designed to meet the needs of a diverse audience—from beginner gardeners to experienced environmentalists.

Recognizing that growing styles often differ or overlap, Rooted featured a wide range of science-based topics, such as growing garlic, herbicide drift, nature journaling, spotted lanternfly, and plant genetics, with opportunities for questions and discussion. The day began with a keynote from Kathryn Deery of Chicago’s Lurie Garden, followed by three breakout sessions with nine expert speakers.

The conference, held at Elgin Community College, welcomed 175 attendees and sold out two weeks in advance, with a waitlist of 35—demonstrating strong demand for accessible, research-based horticulture education in the region. Through sponsorship support, eight student scholarships were awarded, with additional discounted rates offered to other applicants, helping expand access and build connections with local colleges.

Feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. One attendee shared, “The best gardening conference I’ve ever attended! Strangers and friends at Rooted shared the same feelings!” Others praised the knowledgeable speakers and engaging topics, with one noting, “Continue with science-based presenters. The topics were very interesting, and the presenters were amazing!” Many expressed enthusiasm for future events, calling Rooted a “terrific first-time effort” and encouraging organizers to make it an annual tradition.



Post-event evaluations reflected this enthusiasm, with an average rating of 9.4 out of 10 and 83 percent of respondents rating the conference a 9 or 10. In addition, 96 percent of attendees indicated they felt the information presented was “just right,” not too basic or too technical. Participants also reported feeling inspired to continue learning, with 70 percent saying they were very likely to seek out more information on topics introduced during the event.

Building on this success, Rooted returned in February 2026 at College of DuPage, making the conference accessible to additional students and the broader community. Rooted has quickly established itself as a valuable educational experience—bringing people together, sparking curiosity, and growing a stronger, more connected gardening community.

You knocked this out of the park! This was a terrific first-time effort. Give yourself a big pat on the back. Please make this an annual event!

Rooted Conference Attendee



9.4/10

Event feedback rating

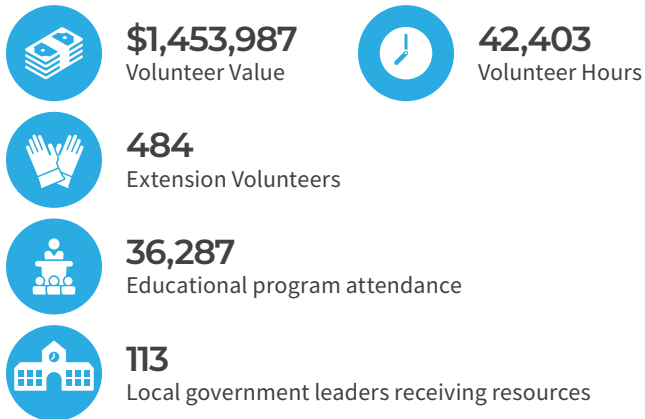


96%

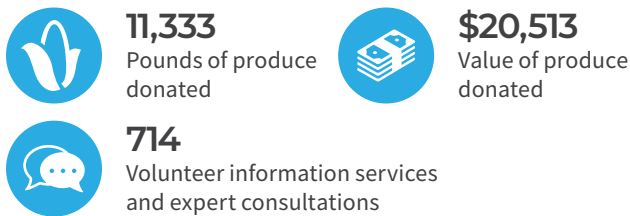
Positive attendee evaluation of content

2025 Impact Snapshot

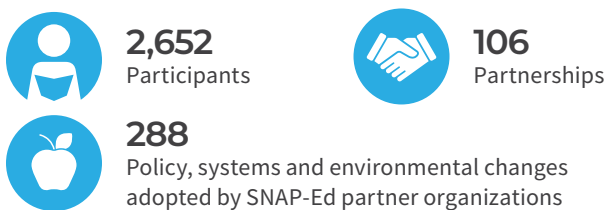
DuPage, Kane, and Kendall Counties



Agriculture, Horticulture & Environment



SNAP-Education



Youth Development



Financial Report



| Amount | Source |
|--------|-------------------------|
| 57.1% | SNAP-Ed Program Funding |
| 18.02% | State Match |
| 16.84% | County Board Support |
| 6.69% | Local Funding |
| 1.35% | Federal Funding |



| Amount | Source |
|--------|--|
| 52.95% | SNAP-Ed Salaries and Expenses |
| 27.77% | Extension Staff Salaries |
| 15.76% | Office and Operation Expenses |
| 3.52% | Travel, Accommodations, and Other Expenses |



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