



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

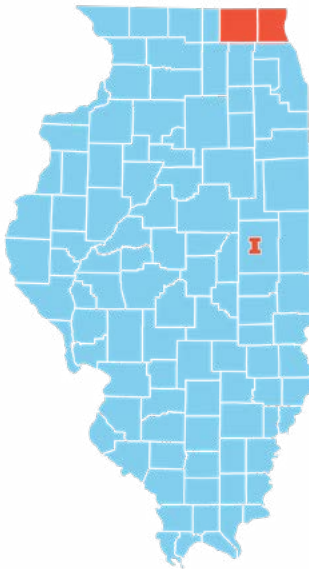


Serving Lake and McHenry Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Michelle Cox
County Director



Building impact through partnership and purpose

Change has a way of reminding us of who we are and why our work matters. At University of Illinois Extension, our mission has always been rooted in service, meeting communities where they are and helping them move forward with knowledge, opportunity, and connection.

This past year has offered a powerful example of the resilience that exists within our organization. When challenges arise, our greatest strength is the collective commitment of those who believe in Extension's work. Staff, volunteers, partners, and community members continue to demonstrate that meaningful progress happens when people come together with a shared purpose. Simply put, we are stronger together.

Moments of transition also create space for reflection and recalibration. They allow us to evaluate how we serve, strengthen what sustains our efforts, and identify new

opportunities to respond to emerging needs across our counties. Rather than standing still, we continue to adapt, grow, and innovate.

Extension's impact is built not on any single program or initiative, but on the collective efforts of individuals who believe in the power of education, collaboration, and community engagement. Because of this shared commitment, we remain a trusted resource and a catalyst for positive change.

As we look ahead, we do so with confidence, knowing that resilience, partnership, and a spirit of service will continue to guide our work and expand our impact throughout the communities we serve.

Respectfully,

Dr. Michelle Cox
County Director

Cover photo: 4-H Insect and Invertebrate program at Illinois Beach State Park.

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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4-H Embryology



Learning comes to life through 4-H Embryology

In classrooms and learning spaces across Lake and McHenry counties, curiosity came to life—one egg at a time. Through the 4-H Incubation and Embryology Program, Illinois Extension reached 94 classrooms and more than 3,400 youth, engaging students from Pre-K through high school in a hands-on STEM learning experience delivered in schools, libraries, 4-H clubs, homeschool groups, and after school settings.

Over a 21-day incubation period, youth experienced science as an active, real world process rather than a textbook lesson. Students prepared incubators, monitored temperature and humidity, recorded daily observations, and practiced responsibility while observing embryonic development and the hatching of chicks. Activities were developmentally appropriate, allowing educators to tailor lessons to meet the needs of learners from early childhood through adolescence, while aligning with Illinois Learning Standards and Next Generation Science Standards.

Building skills through experience

The Embryology program goes beyond teaching biology concepts. Youth built STEM skills such as observation, data collection, and scientific reasoning, while strengthening life skills including responsibility, patience, teamwork, and care for living things.

Older youth expanded their learning through deeper inquiry, hypothesis development, and group problem solving, while younger participants developed foundational skills in curiosity,

language, and social interaction. Across all age groups, students practiced critical thinking, decision making, and interpersonal skills as they worked together to care for the eggs and respond to challenges throughout the incubation process.

Extending 4-H access across communities

A hallmark of the Embryology program in Lake and McHenry counties is its broad community reach and accessibility. By offering programming in early childhood classrooms, elementary and secondary schools, and community-based learning environments, Illinois Extension ensured that youth from Pre-K through high school had equitable access to high quality, research-based Extension education—many experiencing 4-H for the first time.

Educators received training, curriculum resources, and ongoing support from Extension staff, allowing for consistent implementation and positive outcomes across 94 participating classrooms.

Inspiring future scientists and learners

For many of the 3,400 youth served, watching a chick hatch was a first exposure to animal science, agriculture, and applied STEM learning. The excitement of discovery fostered curiosity and confidence, helping youth see themselves as capable learners, scientists, and problem solvers—regardless of age or prior experience. Through programs like Embryology, Lake and McHenry County 4-H continues to deliver meaningful, hands on learning that supports youth development from early childhood through adolescence, while strengthening community partnerships and expanding the reach of Illinois Extension.



Building future innovators through 4-H robotics

As technology, artificial intelligence, and automation continue to shape the workforce, youth need early access to hands-on STEM learning that builds problem-solving, teamwork, and computational thinking skills. In Lake and McHenry counties, many young people, particularly in under-resourced communities, have limited opportunities to connect classroom learning to real-world STEM applications.

4-H Robotics addresses this need by providing equitable, research-based programming that builds technical skills while strengthening confidence, collaboration, and persistence. The program also supports workforce readiness by introducing youth to careers in engineering, computer science, and advanced manufacturing.

Illinois Extension delivered a comprehensive 4-H Robotics program across Lake and McHenry counties through in-school programs, afterschool programs, and community based 4-H clubs. In FY2025, the program served 164 youth across 15 schools, engaging youth in hands-on robotics design, programming, and problem-solving.

A culminating highlight of the program year was the 4-H Robotics Showcase, held on April 26, 2025, in partnership at the College of Lake County. Using the Illinois 4-H AiBot Challenge, 112 youth from nine schools competed as 19 teams, designing and programming robots to complete AI inspired, real-world tasks. Youth participated in performance, technical, and teamwork judging in a supportive environment that emphasized learning and growth. Hosting the event on a college campus reinforced post secondary awareness and STEM career pathways.

Youth participating in 4-H Robotics demonstrated increased confidence, persistence, and technical skills. Through repeated testing and refinement, youth strengthened robotics design and programming skills while learning to collaborate effectively



4-H Robotics team at work.

under time constraints. Educators and volunteers observed improved communication as youth explained their robots, programming choices, and problem-solving strategies during judging.

Beyond technical learning, the Robotics Showcase helped build confidence and pride, with many youth presenting their work publicly or competing on a college campus for the first time. The program strengthened school and community partnerships and positioned 4-H as a leader in STEM education. These efforts contribute to long-term workforce readiness and the development of skilled, confident young people prepared to support Illinois' future economy.

External Collaborators

- College of Lake County
- Participating Lake and McHenry County School Districts
- Local 4-H Volunteers and Robotics Coaches



4-H Youth

164 Youth from 15 Schools participated in 4-H Robotics program



4-H AiBot Challenge

112 Youth from 9 Schools competed as 19 teams



Learn more about 4-H
extension.illinois.edu/lm

Junior Master Naturalist program growing environmental stewards

Cultivating curiosity through nature-based learning

Children in Lake and McHenry counties face increasing challenges in accessing outdoor learning opportunities. Research shows that youth spend an average of only four to seven minutes in unstructured outdoor play daily, while screen time exceeds seven hours. This imbalance contributes to rising health concerns, including obesity rates that reach up to 36% in some Illinois communities. Socioeconomic barriers compound these issues, with 17.2% of Lake County residents living in poverty. Programs that reconnect youth with nature are essential to improving physical health, mental well-being, and environmental literacy. A systematic review by Fyfe-Johnson and colleagues links green space access to better physical activity, cognitive function, and mental health in children. Additional findings from UNICEF and Alive Magazine emphasize that outdoor play strengthens family bonds, boosts resilience, and supports overall well-being.

The Junior Master Naturalist Program was launched as a 4-H Signature Program to address these needs by providing hands-on, experiential environmental education for youth in grades Pre-K through 6. Developed through collaboration between Lake and McHenry County Master Naturalist programs, the initiative began with planning meetings focused on youth engagement strategies. From these discussions, a vision emerged: empower volunteers to lead nature-based programs that spark curiosity and foster stewardship.

Programs were hosted at diverse community locations, including Woodstock Public Library, Hearthstone Early Learning Center, Avon Township Center, Howe Elementary in Beach Park, Newport Elementary in Wadsworth, and outdoor venues such as Van Patten Woods and Illinois Beach State Park. These sites provided accessible spaces for families to explore topics ranging from reptiles and amphibians to mammals, insects, and composting.

A cornerstone of the program is volunteer leadership. Master Naturalist volunteers, trained through sessions where the educator taught Herpetology and Mammalogy, now confidently deliver lessons. The BUG Bytes series exemplifies this success: designed and led by volunteers, it engages youth in insect ecology through games, crafts, and outdoor exploration. The educator's role has shifted to logistical support, ensuring sustainability and scalability.

By the Numbers: Over the past year, the Junior Master Naturalist Program delivered impactful experiences across multiple sites. Total sessions conducted: 46. Total unique participants: 267, including 235 youth and 32 adults. The program served an age range from Pre-K through 6th grade, ensuring early exposure to environmental concepts.



Jesse Davis, 4-H Educator (Metro).

Community response has been overwhelming. Registration for sessions reached capacity within the first hour of opening, and waitlists formed for every program. Families consistently requested expanded topics and more opportunities to interact with live animals. This demand underscores the program's relevance and the value families place on nature-based learning. Looking ahead, the Junior Master Naturalist Program aims to broaden its reach by adding new sites, increasing volunteer-led sessions, and introducing advanced topics such as climate change and water quality monitoring. Plans include deeper collaboration with local schools and agencies to integrate environmental education into after-school and summer programming. By continuing to invest in volunteer training and resource development, the program will sustain its mission of cultivating environmental stewards for generations to come.

Beyond numbers, the program's true impact lies in the stories shared by participants. Parents report that children eagerly recount what they learned, from identifying local frogs to understanding the role of pollinators. Educators observe increased confidence and curiosity among youth, many of whom had never visited a forest preserve before these sessions. These experiences not only teach science but also nurture a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the natural world. As environmental challenges grow, fostering this connection is more critical than ever.



Lake County Nature Network and Nature Funfest

Leading the Way to a Nature-Focused Lake County

The Lake County Nature Network has been a cornerstone of nature engagement in Lake County for decades. Originally formed as an offshoot of the national “Leave No Child Inside” initiative, LCNN focused on connecting marginalized and underserved communities to nature in the North Chicago suburbs. Its original mission was: “The Lake County Nature Network is a collaborative effort to better connect Lake County’s Latino and African American communities to nature-based learning, science, recreation and stewardship activities within Lake County.”



Today, LCNN continues this mission with a broader, inclusive approach: “Lake County Nature Network is a collaboration of organizations committed to nurturing healthy communities and positive family experiences by connecting Lake County families with local nature and outdoor recreation.” This mission continues its original roots with a primary focus on the county’s underserved and marginalized populations. LCNN now includes more than 65 members representing more than 30 organizations with nature-focused initiatives.

In 2025, LCNN relocated its annual festival—renamed Nature Funfest—from the Greenbelt Cultural Center to the Round Lake Park District and Prairie Grass Nature Museum. The event welcomed 150 visitors, featured 15 booths and activities, and involved more than 50 LCNN members along with their organizations. Families enjoyed nature crafts, hikes, birding, ponding, live animals, and environmental education experiences. This collaborative event showcased LCNN’s commitment to community engagement and nature access.

Research underscores the benefits of nature-connected communities: improved physical and mental health, reduced stress, stronger family bonds, and enhanced environmental stewardship. Research highlights that regular exposure to nature improves cognitive development, emotional resilience, and family well-being. Studies from the Children & Nature Network and the American Academy of Pediatrics show that time in natural settings reduces stress, boosts attention, and strengthens family bonds, while fostering environmental stewardship and healthier lifestyles.

150 Visitors

Attended the Funfest

50 LCNN Members

Involved members and their organizations

Programs like LCNN’s Nature Funfest help reverse this trend, promoting equity and access to green spaces for all families.

Looking ahead, LCNN plans to expand Nature Funfest in August 2026 with increased marketing and outreach to ensure even greater participation. LCNN also hopes to get involved in other county-wide efforts through tabling opportunities, large scale programming and other collaborative efforts. By fostering collaboration among local organizations, LCNN continues to lead efforts toward a healthier, more nature-connected Lake County.



Stitching skills and confidence: 4-H Quilting SPIN Club

Youth in Lake County showed strong interest in hands-on creative projects but had limited opportunities to learn sewing and quilting. Many participants had no prior experience with sewing machines or fabric, yet wanted to build practical skills that support creativity, patience, and problem-solving.

In 2025, University of Illinois Extension launched the 4-H Quilting Special Interest (SPIN) Club in Lake County. Through six, two-hour sessions, youth worked alongside mentors from the Northern Illinois Quilters Guild to learn quilting techniques step by step. Mentors provided clear instruction, explained the reasoning behind techniques, and supported youth as they built skills and confidence.

By program completion, youth created large, quilted table runners and developed key skills, including sewing machine use, accurate measuring and cutting, basic quilting stitches, pattern reading, and finishing techniques such as pressing and binding. Participants also strengthened attention to detail, patience, and confidence.





New Wave 4-H club strengthens community through food advocacy

Food insecurity continues to affect families across McHenry County, with little food pantries often experiencing periods when shelves are quickly emptied, and resources are stretched thin. These pantries provide an important point of access for families who may not qualify for traditional assistance or who are seeking dignified, judgment free support. Community organizations report that maintaining a consistent supply of food is an ongoing challenge. Illinois 4-H empowers young people to identify local needs and take meaningful action. For members of the New Wave 4H Club, addressing food insecurity became an opportunity to combine service, advocacy, and leadership while strengthening ties between youth and their broader community.

In June 2025, the New Wave 4-H Club was awarded an Illinois 4-H Food Advocacy Grant, supporting a youth-led initiative focused on stocking a local Little Food Pantry in McHenry County. Seven youth leaders planned and carried out the project, taking responsibility for purchasing, organizing, and distributing food throughout the summer months.

Using grant funds, the club distributed more than 3,000 individual food items, including complete meals, lunches, and snacks. These items were supplemented with fresh bread, buns, and desserts donated by a local bakery and community members, increasing both the quantity and variety of food available.

Youth participants also engaged in advocacy and outreach. Club members took part in a local radio interview to raise awareness about food insecurity, share information about 4-H, and promote upcoming county 4-H events. Additional outreach included collaboration with a local church partner, distribution of flyers, social media engagement, and sharing the project through the 4-H newsletter.

As a result of the project, the Little Food Pantry remained consistently stocked for nearly three months, providing ongoing

access to food for families in need. Combined outreach and advocacy efforts reached more than 100 individuals, including 4-H families, radio listeners, church members, and community stakeholders. A community partner from First United Methodist Church shared the following reflection on the project's impact:

Our little food pantry is very busy and often empty. It is a challenge to fill it and keep up with the need.

The grant funding provided important support during a critical time. Participating youth gained firsthand insight into the realities of food insecurity and the importance of sustainable community support efforts. They observed how quickly pantry items were used and reflected on how their planning and advocacy helped families access food while maintaining dignity. Through this experience, youth strengthened leadership, communication, and civic engagement skills while recognizing the power of collective action. This project addressed an immediate community need while also fostering empathy, leadership, and long-term community connections—demonstrating how Illinois 4-H prepares young people to make a meaningful difference close to home.

Want to make a difference? Consider partnering with your local library or supporting an existing pantry. Together, we can turn libraries into even greater hubs of hope and help.

Little Library Pantries: small spaces, big community impact

Libraries have always been trusted spaces for learning, resources, and connection. Now, they're extending that mission in a powerful way—by adding Little Library Pantries. The small shelves or cabinets stocked with nonperishable food and household essentials provide immediate support while promoting dignity and care for neighbors in need.

Across Lake and McHenry counties, several partner libraries—including Woodstock, Harvard Diggins, Zion-Benton, and Round Lake Area—have successfully launched indoor pantries. Each pantry reflects the unique needs of its community, yet they share a common goal: making food and basic supplies easily accessible in a welcoming, approachable environment.

The impact is real. At a recent community hub event at Zion-Benton Library, a resident expressed heartfelt gratitude after learning about the pantry from a SNAP-Education staff member. With just a few items, they were able to build a meal—turning a moment of need into a moment of relief. SNAP-Ed also supports these efforts by providing healthy messaging and simple recipe cards, encouraging families to make the most of pantry staples.

Little Library Pantries prove that small spaces can create significant change. They strengthen community bonds, reduce barriers to food access, and remind us that care and compassion often start with simple acts.





Teaching food security: growing school gardens in your community

In Lake and McHenry counties, many schools have taken the first steps toward creating school gardens—but sustaining and growing these programs can feel overwhelming. If you’ve ever wanted to start a school or community garden but weren’t sure where to begin, you’re not alone.

The need for school gardens is greater than ever. With recent changes in SNAP benefits, many low-income youth face increased food insecurity. A neighborhood school garden can help bridge that gap—especially during summer months—while offering hands-on learning in an environmentally friendly way. Gardens don’t just grow food; they develop skills, confidence, and community connections.

In the past, SNAP-Education Community Outreach Workers provided cooking schools to bring resources directly to families. However, that program officially ended on September 30, 2025, leaving educators searching for new ways to support students who lack consistent access to affordable, nutritious food. That’s where the School and Community Gardens Online Course comes in.

What is it? This self-paced, research-based online class equips educators, volunteers, and community leaders with the tools to teach youth how to garden. Whether you’re starting from scratch or strengthening an existing program, this course walks you through every step—from planning and planting to sustaining your garden for years to come.

Ready to make a difference? Start your journey today by enrolling in the School and Community Gardens Online Course. Together, we can grow healthier communities—one garden at a time.

Why it matters

- **Food Security:** Gardens provide fresh produce for families who need it most.
- **Education:** Students learn science, nutrition, and environmental stewardship in a hands-on way.
- **Community Impact:** Gardens foster collaboration and create spaces where families can connect and thrive.



Education related to food production at home

Master Gardeners delivered targeted outreach and education centered around helping local residents successfully grow their own food at home, a critical step in creating food resilience at the local level. From seed-starting workshops to one-on-one consultations, Master Gardeners ensured that individuals were more confident and better equipped to produce their own fresh produce, regardless of yard size or home type.

An addition to the 2025 Seed Expo was a series of presentations and workshops conducted by Master Gardener volunteers, College of Lake County staff, and community partners. The theme of these presentations was food production at home, with the goal of providing Seed Expo attendees with relevant knowledge that they could apply when sowing seeds that they acquired that day at the event.

In our target communities of Waukegan and North Chicago, Master Gardeners conducted a series of classes and plant clinics focused on food production in the home landscape. Six classes were held over the course of the year at the Waukegan and North Chicago Public Libraries, as well as four plant clinics at the Waukegan Public Library that tied into their newly launched seed library. These plant clinics allowed individuals to have one-on-one conversations with Master Gardeners about particular seeds that they were picking up from the library and tips on how to successfully grow them, or any other plant-related questions they might have had. In North Chicago, the Master Gardener volunteers in charge of the Mosaic Healing Garden held weekly programs for neighborhood youth during the months of June and July. These programs were held at the garden, with the goal of introducing participants to the basics of gardening, where food comes from and how it grows, as well as different vegetables that they might not previously have been familiar with.



2,000 Attendees

The Great Seed Expo attracted more than 2,000 attendees in 2025.

30,000 Seed packets

An estimated 30,000 seed packets were distributed.

15,000 lbs

More than 15,000 lbs of local food was donated to local food pantries.





Master Gardeners address food access

Lake County Master Gardener volunteers continue to focus considerable effort into addressing food access issues facing local communities. Food insecurity is a pressing issue in some of our Lake County communities, with many residents lacking access to fresh, nutritious produce. Financial hardship, lack of nearby grocery stores, or a combination of both, are contributing factors that exacerbate this issue. In 2025, a particular emphasis was put on establishing new partnerships and conducting outreach in two Lake County communities, Waukegan and North Chicago. In Waukegan, 35% of residents are SNAP-eligible, and in North Chicago, that percentage rises to 45%. While these two communities were not the only ones impacted by Master Gardener-related food access projects, the progress made in these areas highlights the intentionality of the work being done by Lake County Extension volunteers.

Master Gardener volunteer projects related to food access or addressing food insecurity fell into three broad categories in 2025:

Access to high quality seed

Ever-increasing food prices mean that the ability to successfully grow ones' own food at home has never been more important. Lake County Master Gardeners have been working to get high-quality seed into the hands of local residents for a number of years through a network of seed libraries and events. In addition to the well-established seed libraries that Master Gardener volunteers maintain at the Lake County Extension office and Zion-Benton Public Library (which combined, distributed 10,000 packets of seeds in each of the last two years), Extension staff and Master Gardeners helped launch a new seed library at the Waukegan Public Library, and advised staff at the North Chicago Public Library on the establishment of one there.

Highlighting Extension's work to get more seeds into the hands of community members, the 2025 Lake County Extension Master Gardener Seed Expo capitalized on the success of previous events by creating new strategic partnerships and greatly expanding our ability to engage more local residents in the event. A new partnership with the College of Lake County and

a change of location to the college's Grayslake campus not only created a more centralized and accessible location, but it dramatically increased our event capacity. The 2025 event drew almost 2,000 attendees, a 40% increase from the previous year. More than 40 community groups and vendors were present to distribute seed, provide educational materials, and promote local products and services. Between Lake County Master Gardeners, local garden clubs, non-profit organizations, and community members, it's estimated that 50,000 seed packets were distributed and exchanged over the course of the event. Of surveyed attendees, 62% were attending the event for the first time, which speaks to our efforts to engage a larger audience and get seeds in the hands of more community members. Eighty percent of attendees were local residents, representing almost every community in the county, with folks from McHenry and Cook counties represented, as well as individuals from Wisconsin.

Access to locally grown food

The CARE Garden, a 0.5 acre food pantry garden in Libertyville, has been a Lake County Master Gardeners flagship project since 2011. Supported each year by 70-80 volunteers, it is coordinated by a team of Master Gardeners, to manage the garden and harvest produce. The garden tests innovative growing practices while supplying fresh produce to local food pantries. Over the past four years, volunteers have harvested more than 11,000 pounds annually, with a record 15,300 pounds produced in 2025. All produce is donated to The Chapel CARE Center and the First Presbyterian Mobile Food Pantry, together serving hundreds of families each week and month.

In 2025, this impact expanded with the launch of three new Master Gardener-led gardens in Waukegan and North Chicago. These include garden beds at Staben House, a community garden at the African American Museum, and the Mosaic Healing Garden, which transformed a vacant lot into a thriving community resource providing fresh food and education. Mosaic Healing Garden took a vacant lot in the heart of the community and turned it into a productive garden serving local residents.

Chapel CARE Center

500-600 families
served every week





Master Gardeners align with Extension’s strategic goals: maintaining a safe and accessible food supply

In McHenry County, there are almost 20,000 individuals or just over 6% with income at or below the poverty level and eligible for SNAP benefits. At the same time, just over 30% are considered obese and just over 8% are diabetic. One of Extension’s Strategic Goals is to maintain a safe and accessible (healthy) food supply.

McHenry County Master Gardeners answer this call in partnership with McHenry County College’s Center for Agrarian Learning and McHenry County Plantings group. This year, the second “Great Seed Event” was sponsored by Ball Seed, the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County, Platt Hill Nursery, and Natural Communities, LLC. There were 750 people in attendance and thousands of vegetables, herbs, perennial and native seed packages distributed. There were demonstrations on seed starting, indoor light setups, composting and hydroponics. Speakers gave talks on seed saving, pollinators, and growing grains.

Master Gardeners also work directly with food pantries and local organizations to grow and provide fresh fruits and vegetables. Master Gardeners partnering with the Cary Park District grew 1,827 lbs. of produce and provided 68 five-gallon buckets of fresh cut flowers for their local food pantry. Nunda Township gardeners provided 3,921 lbs. of produce for Family Health Partnership. The VFW Peace Gardeners grew 2,205 lbs. of fruits and vegetables for the McHenry Food Pantry.

Master Gardeners were also able to work with multiple schools, teaching about plants and growing things. They worked with The Woodstock High School Green Club, Richmond Burton Community High School Garden Club, Hearthstone Preschool and Brown Bear Preschool. A new gardening project this year is with Pioneer Center for Human Services, which works with developmentally disabled youth and adults.

Community forums strengthen partnerships and local impact

Communities in Lake and McHenry counties rely on collaboration among nonprofits, schools, health agencies, and service providers to address local needs. Yet many organizations work independently, making it challenging to coordinate services, avoid duplication, and pursue shared goals. Partners look to trusted conveners who can connect groups, spark dialogue, and support unified action. University of Illinois Extension is positioned to serve this role by creating spaces for collaboration and shared learning.

In 2024, University of Illinois Extension – Lake & McHenry Counties convened three community forums designed to elevate priorities, strengthen partnerships, and explore opportunities for collective impact.

The Lake County Community Forum, hosted at the Eleanor Murkey Community Center on the College of Lake County’s Lakeshore Campus, focused on maximizing impact through streamlined organizational and business services. It brought together 38 participants from 25 organizations across sectors.

In McHenry County, Extension partnered with the Center for Agrarian Learning at McHenry County College to gather 28 participants representing 19 organizations for conversations centered on agriculture, education, and community development. A third gathering, the McHenry County Health Forum, convened seven participants from five organizations to discuss shared health priorities and partnership opportunities.

Across the forums, Extension served as facilitator and connector, creating space for relationship-building, open dialogue, and collective problem-solving. These gatherings highlighted partners’ commitment to working efficiently and aligning efforts to better serve local residents in need.

In total, the forums engaged 73 participants from 49 organizations, strengthening cross-county networks and reinforcing Extension’s role as a trusted community partner. Participants gained valuable awareness of Extension’s resources and identified opportunities for improved coordination and collaboration. The insights generated will inform program planning and partnership development, further supporting responsive, community-driven solutions that benefit organizations and the broader communities they serve.





Master Naturalists

Lake County welcomes first class of Master Naturalists

In 2025, the Master Naturalist program officially launched in Lake County, with 24 participants completing classroom training in the fall. An additional four certified Master Naturalists transferred from other counties, bringing the total to 28. Despite being in its early stages, the program has already formed strong partnerships, and trainees are actively contributing to local conservation efforts.



Partnership with local Wild Ones chapter expands programming reach

2025 saw the establishment of a partnership with the local Lake-to-Prairie Wild Ones chapter and Lake County Extension. Hosted at the Extension office, Extension staff and volunteers will work with the local Wild Ones board to develop and deliver a monthly speaker series focused on the natural world and native plants. The mission of Wild Ones is to promote native landscapes through education, advocacy, and collaborative action. This partnership will allow both organizations to work collaboratively and offer innovative, educational opportunities to area residents in virtual and in-person formats. The content and focus areas of the presentations, coupled with the Wild Ones' mission, align well with the public education goals of the Master Naturalist program and will allow Lake County to very quickly scale up our work in this area.



Native seed collection for healthier ecosystems

With approximately 0.01% of Illinois' original prairie remaining, a concerted effort by many groups, organizations, and individual homeowners to restore these plant communities is essential. Lake County Master Naturalist trainees wasted no time jumping into the volunteer portion, or Internship, phase of their training by assisting with native seed collecting efforts in the fall. Master Naturalist volunteers collected seed with four groups around Lake County (Lake County Forest Preserve District, Lake Forest Open Lands, Citizens for Conservation, and Project Wingspan), helping to ensure that a diverse mix of native plant species are available for reintroduction to sites that are highly degraded or being restored back to a more natural state. In addition to assisting local organizations, Master Naturalists collected native seed from their own yards, which will be used to build up Extension's Native Seed Library inventory and for distribution at the 2026 Seed Expo. In the fall alone, Master Naturalist volunteers packaged and labeled 2,000 individual seed packets containing locally-sourced native seed.



Extension Master Naturalists step up for conservation

The McHenry County Conservation District began with the mission to preserve open space, and to provide environmental education programs and resources for recreational opportunities to the public. Today, the Conservation District protects 25,754 acres throughout McHenry County. Another local conservation organization, The Land Conservancy of McHenry County, was formed to work with local landowners to develop and protect conservation easements, and as of 2025, TLC has preserved 3,200 acres for life and counting. They cannot do what they do alone. This is where McHenry County Master Naturalist volunteers step up, providing 1,800 hours of volunteer time so far this year, by sharing natural resource information and assisting with environmental conservation and restoration activities.



Reflecting on SNAP-Education: a legacy of impact

In September 2025, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) sunset nationwide, marking the end of more than three decades of federally funded nutrition education. Each state navigated its own timeline for winding down services. Here in Illinois, we were fortunate to continue programming through most of January 2026, as long as staffing allowed. Naturally, as the program closed, dedicated staff began exploring their next opportunities—but not before leaving a lasting legacy.

A Rich History of Service

SNAP-Ed's roots in Illinois date back to the early 1990s under the name Family Nutrition Program. By 2001, Lake and McHenry counties each had one staff member working closely with food pantries, schools, and parents. Their mission was simple yet vital: help families stretch food dollars, plan healthy meals, and cook nutritious dishes. At that time, the Food Guide Pyramid served as the foundation for lessons and resources.

Partnerships were key. FNP collaborated with local health departments' Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs to deliver required nutrition education for families receiving food coupons. Staff also worked with agencies supporting Food Stamp-eligible households, teaching practical skills for preparing healthy meals on a limited budget. Schools benefited as well—through wellness policy development, garden harvests, taste tests, and more.

From FNP to SNAP-Ed

In 2008, the federal Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, with changes taking effect in Illinois around 2008–2009. Extension programs adopted the name Illinois Nutrition Education Program (INEP), commonly known as SNAP-Ed, as time went on.

As nutrition guidance evolved, the Food Pyramid shifted toward age-appropriate servings and physical activity. In 2011, MyPlate replaced the pyramid, emphasizing fruits and vegetables taking up more than half the plate, with some grains and proteins rounding it out, and low-fat milk as the drink of choice.



Juneteenth day booth in Waukegan.

SNAP-Ed staff embraced these changes, using evidence-based curricula to help families align with updated dietary guidelines and incorporate physical activity.

Local impact: Lake and McHenry counties

During 24 years of service in Lake and McHenry counties, SNAP-Ed staff

brought countless resources to make the healthy choice the easy choice. Recent highlights include:

Harvard School District: Implemented share tables to reduce food waste and support students.

Fun, Engaging Curricula: Programs like OrganWise Guys, It's Fun to Be Healthy, Teen Cuisine, Illinois Jr. Chef, and Healthy Cents, to name a few, introduced nutrition concepts in creative and interactive ways.

McHenry Head Start: Supported wellness policy development through staff focus groups and provided approved Gateway Training for early childhood educators.

School Gardens: Assisted with working with teachers to incorporate into their lessons and then taste-testing activities to connect students with fresh produce.

In-depth study in Zion: Helped bring various resources to the community, such as a community Hub and awareness of different social determinants of health issues.

Book walks, Community Hubs at local libraries, Nutrition Environment Food Pantry Toolkit to work with pantries, to name a few.

A legacy that lives on

While SNAP-Ed has officially ended, its impact remains woven into the fabric of our communities. For more than three decades—and especially the last 24 years in Lake and McHenry counties—staff worked tirelessly to empower families, strengthen partnerships, and promote healthier lifestyles. Their efforts have shaped policies, improved access to nutrition education, and inspired generations to make informed choices.

As we close this chapter, we celebrate the dedication of those who made SNAP-Ed a success and look forward to continuing the mission of health and wellness in new and innovative ways.



Abbott Middle School: Human Pyramid.



Master Naturalists
at Volo bog.

PARTNERSHIPS/COLLABORATORS

Abiding Love Food Pantry	Family First Center of Lake County	Lake County Nature Network	Our Lady of Humility Food Pantry
Advocate Health Care	First Baptist Church	Lambs Farm	PADS of Lake and McHenry Counties
Ahmadiyya Muslim Community	First Calvary Food Pantry	Learn & Charter School	Pioneer Center for Human Services
African American Museum	FISH of McHenry Food Pantry	Liberty Prairie Foundation	Richmond-Burton HS
AJ Katzenmaier Academy	Forestal Elementary	Lightfoot School	Rosalind Franklin University
Alexander Elementary	Foss Park District	Little Fort Elementary School	Round Lake Area Park District
Assisi Mercy Homes	Fox Lake Community Garden	Mano a Mano	School District 6
Antioch Public Library	Fremont Township Community	McHenry County 4-H Youth Foundation	Shepard of the Hills Lutheran Church
Avon Cares Food Pantry	Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves	McHenry County Club Town Int.	St. Ann's Episcopal Church
Avon Township	FSCS El Centro	McHenry County College	Staben house
Beach Park District 3	Good Sheperd Hospital	McHenry County Conservation District	Sun City Del Webb
Beach Park Middle School	Great Lake Youth Center - Navy	McHenry County Fair Association	SWALCO
Boys and Girls Club of Lake County	Habitat for Humanity - Lake County	McHenry County Farm Bureau	The Chapel Church
Brown Bear Day Care and Learning Ctr	Harvard Community Food Pantry	McHenry County Health Department	The Land Conservancy
Carmen Buckner School	Harvard Diggins Library	McHenry County Historical Society	UMMA Food Pantry
Cary Park District	Harvard Park District	McHenry County Water Resource Specialist	VFW Post 4600
Catholic Charities Lake County	Hearthstone Early Learning Center	Memorial United Methodist Church	Warren Newport Public Library
City of Hope Cancer Treatment Center - Zion	Hermon Park Helping Hands Garden	Moraine Township Food Pantry	Waukegan Housing Authority
College of Lake County	Home, Community, and Education, HCE	Mosaic House	Waukegan Library
Community Action Agency (CAA) (Head Start)	IL Dept Natural Resources	Mt. Moriah Food Pantry	Waukegan Township
Community Health Partnership	Jesus Name Apostolic Church	Nativity Lutheran Church Food Pantry	Whitecrane Wellness Center
Community Outreach Waukegan	Lake County Association for Home and Community Education	New Hope Church	Woodstock Farmers Market
Cool Learning Experience	Lake County Community Trust Foundation	NIRCO	Woodstock Food Pantry
Crosby Elementary School	Lake County Fair Association	Naval Great Lakes Youth Center	Woodstock North HS
CUSD50 - Harvard	Lake County Farm Bureau	North Chicago Public Library	Woodstock Public Library
Deerfield Area Historical Society	Lake County Forest Preserve District	Northern Illinois Food Bank	Youth Build North Chicago
District 116	Lake County Health Department	Nunda Township	Youth Conservation Corps.
Ela Area Public Library		One Hope United	Zion-Benton Public Library
Environmental Defenders of McHenry		Options & Advocacy	Zion-Benton Township HS Dist #126
Extension Master Gardener			Zion Park District
			Zion Township

Thank you to all of our partners and collaborators that make our work impactful!

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