



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

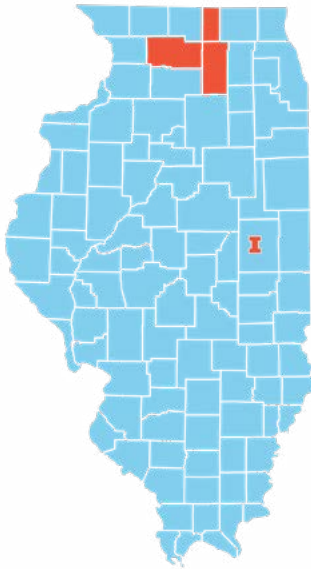


Serving Boone, DeKalb, and Ogle Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Heather Coyle
County Director



A note from the County Director

In the not so distant past, learning something new or putting knowledge into action meant phoning a friend, digging through printed materials, attending presentations, enrolling in training programs, learning on the job, or scheduling time with a professional. Most of these sources were trusted. Today, information is available instantly at our fingertips — but trust is no longer guaranteed.

While the way we access information has changed dramatically, communities and individuals still need reliable guidance to turn knowledge into action. They need help finding credible information, identifying local resources, and connecting with people who can support their goals. Since its creation in 1914 through the Smith Lever Act, the Cooperative Extension Service has served as that trusted local partner.

Extension programs create spaces where people learn, share, and feel connected. Youth build skills and confidence in their ability to lead, and adults gather for workshops, events, and conversations that spark new ideas and strengthen community ties. These moments — big and small — shape the heart of our work.

I am grateful for how our team and partners continue to listen to community voices and respond with practical, innovative programming. Their commitment ensures our programs remain welcoming, accessible, and relevant to the people we serve. Thank you to everyone who contributed.

Heather Coyle
County Director

Cover photo: Camp Russell campers and staff take in the sights and sounds of Russell Woods Forest Preserve during a peaceful hike beneath the trees.

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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Spreading green goodness



Master Gardeners dedicate thousands of hours each year educating the public, building partnerships, supporting community garden spaces, and actively engaging in ongoing volunteer service and education.



61
Master Gardeners



4,036
Total Master Gardener Hours



\$138,397
Value of Volunteer labor



Tai Chi program empowers seniors to move with confidence

Falls, chronic pain, and the fear of falling are common challenges for older adults, often leading to reduced activity and declining well-being. In Ogle County, a group of seniors found renewed strength, confidence, and connection through the Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention program.

Offered at Hub City Senior Center in Rochelle and Rock River Center in Oregon, the program was led by Extension Family Life Educator and Board-Certified Tai Chi for Health Instructor Kara Schweitzer. Over 16 sessions, participants engaged in gentle, flowing movements based on the Sun Style of Tai Chi, an evidence-based approach developed by Dr. Paul Lam to improve balance, flexibility, and mobility while reducing pain and fall risk.



Participants didn't just learn a new form of exercise, they experienced meaningful improvements in both physical and emotional health. One participant shared, "My confidence is better than it has been in several years," while another noted, "I was able to stand the entire class without a chair."

Survey results confirmed the program's impact: 92% of participants improved their balance, 57% increased stamina, and 86% felt more socially connected. Seventy-nine percent reported better focus and mindfulness, 35% reduced their fear of falling, and 29% experienced less pain. Every participant planned to apply what they learned, and 93% intended to continue practicing tai chi on their own.

Beyond the numbers, the program created a sense of community and empowerment. Participants reported feeling more relaxed, centered, and physically capable. "I didn't have a balance problem," one participant said, "but this gave me an awareness of balance, which is helpful as I get older."

Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention didn't just teach movement, it helped older adults reclaim confidence, reduce pain, and embrace a more active lifestyle. The program's success is a testament to the power of evidence-based wellness education and the importance of creating safe, supportive spaces for older adults to thrive in.



Health Quest inspires lifelong wellness

Energetic and curious 5th grade students at Oregon Elementary School embarked on a journey that would shape their understanding of health, wellness, and personal responsibility. Through the 4-H Health Quest Program, led by Illinois Extension staff in Boone, DeKalb, and Ogle counties, students explored the foundations of lifelong healthy living in a hands-on, engaging, and empowering way.

Running from September through November, Health Quest introduced students to key wellness topics including nutrition, physical activity, mental health, and sleep habits. The interactive format encouraged students to learn new information and apply it in meaningful ways, transforming lessons into lasting lifestyle habits.

A standout feature of the program was the opportunity to connect directly with professionals in the healthcare and wellness fields. Guest speakers such as doctors, nurses, fitness trainers, and mental health experts brought real-world insights into the classroom, answering questions and sparking curiosity. After just the first session, students eagerly shared how “cool” it was to talk with doctors and ask questions they’d never had the chance to ask before.

These authentic conversations enriched the learning experience and opened students’ eyes to future career possibilities in health-related fields.

Many students were experiencing 4-H for the first time and were interested in learning more about the 4-H program.

Students left the program with practical tools to make informed choices, a stronger understanding of wellness, and a sense of empowerment that extended far beyond the classroom. The 4-H Health Quest Program didn’t just educate, it inspired. It planted seeds of wellness and curiosity that will continue to grow in these young lives and ripple throughout their families and communities.



Learn more about the 4-H program
extension.illinois.edu/bdo/4-h-clubs

A community approach to nutrition and gardening

Food and nutrition insecurity remain pressing challenges for many families in rural Illinois. In response, the Homegrown Healthy program continues to sow seeds of change, empowering individuals with the skills, confidence, and resources to grow their own food.

Now in its second year, Homegrown Healthy welcomed 21 participants from Ogle, Whiteside, and Lee Counties to a 10-week gardening and nutrition education experience. The program focused on how to grow and maintain a garden, as well as how to prepare and enjoy the harvest. Each week featured hands-on activities, fresh produce, and recipe tastings that turned learning into action.

Participants embraced the opportunity to dig in—literally. Radishes became a surprise favorite, with many excited to plant a second fall crop after taking home seed packets.

Tomatoes also sparked enthusiasm, as classroom practice led to better care and more abundant harvests at home. Several participants shared that they recreated recipes at home for their families, turning tastings into real-life meals. Seasoned gardeners reported plans to make meaningful changes to their gardens next year based on what they learned.

Survey feedback revealed a deep appreciation for the program’s practical value. One participant said, “I really enjoyed new recipes and all the things to start an indoor and outdoor garden.” Another shared, “When I started, I thought it would be for beginners only, but I learned something new at each class.” A third added, “Loved trying and learning about ways to use the produce. It was helpful to hear about what others were growing and problems they were solving.”

Participants’ knowledge of growing, preparing, and storing produce increased from moderate to high. At least four expressed interest in pursuing Master Gardener certification. To support continued learning, each graduate received a hydroponics kit and a Five Ingredients or Less Cookbook, sparking a ripple effect as they share skills and encourage healthier food practices.



Learn more about the Master Gardener program
extension.illinois.edu/bdo/master-gardeners

Inspiring the next generation of agricultural leaders

According to the Illinois Ag in the Classroom's Career Ag Mag, agriculture employs 22 million people across 250 career areas nationwide. It remains the largest industry in the United States, yet only 1% of Americans identify as farmers. The rest work in diverse fields such as agribusiness, engineering, animal science, food technology, and environmental management. In Illinois, agriculture is especially vital, occupying 75% of the land and supporting over 1 million jobs, or 13% of the state's workforce.



To help students understand the breadth of opportunities in agriculture, Illinois Extension's Ag in the Classroom program partnered with the Rochelle Helping Us Build summer school program for middle schoolers. The career-themed week included a special focus on agriculture, engaging 33 students in hands-on activities like an ag career escape box, career bingo, and Play-Doh modeling to explore different roles in the industry.

Two days later, students toured CHS Ethanol in Rochelle, where they saw real-world applications of the careers they had studied. From plant operations and engineering to sales and quality control, students learned that ag careers span a wide range of education levels from vocational training to advanced degrees.

Thanks to CHS Ethanol's generosity, these students left with a deeper appreciation for agriculture's role in their community and the exciting careers that await them.



Learn more about the Ag in the Classroom program extension.illinois.edu/bdo/agriculture

Nature comes alive for 500 youth

Each spring and fall, the Natural Resource Education Center at Russell Woods Forest Preserve in Genoa transforms into a vibrant outdoor classroom, welcoming more than 500 grade school students from across DeKalb County. Under the guidance of Extension Educator Peggy Anesi and Extension Program Coordinator Marian Termini, students experience hands-on lessons like "Migration Headache," "Little Sprout," and "Web of Life"—all designed to deepen their understanding of nature and their connection to it. A hike through the forest is always a highlight, especially for those visiting a forest for the first time.

"While many of our local elementary schools plan a yearly trip, the students are always new," says Termini. "For some of the younger ones, it is their first time in a forest. They are often a little nervous and may even ask if bears live here."

NREC is known for its ever-changing environment—whether it's Stinky the musk turtle making another escape or a bulletin board freshly decorated with seasonal themes like monarchs in summer or turkeys in fall.

This year, the center welcomed new audiences, including English Language Learners from the Sycamore Community School District. The program was tailored to meet the needs of students from kindergarten through fifth grade, many of whom were experiencing nature study for the first time. "We absolutely loved our field trip to Russell Woods," says ELL teacher Claribel Robles. "Many of our students could not stop talking about the tortoise. The activities were structured in a way that allowed our students to engage with new concepts and enjoy time in nature."

Preschoolers from Two Rivers Head Start Agency in Sycamore also had their first Russell Woods experience. Though their visit was shorter, the impact was lasting. "The kids had so much fun and have been talking about it nonstop for the past few days," says teacher Alabaster Dapkus.

Through engaging lessons, thoughtful accommodations, and a welcoming environment, Russell Woods continues to be a place where curiosity grows and nature becomes a lifelong teacher.



581

Youth attended Field Studies at NREC



1,313

Visitors at NREC



Learn more about the Master Naturalist program extension.illinois.edu/bdo/master-naturalists



Inspiring growth at Camp Russell Woods

For many years, Illinois Extension has partnered with the DeKalb County Forest Preserve to provide Camp Russell Woods summer day camp opportunities for youth. This year 4-H was added to the experience.

From late June through July, youth participated in age-specific camps designed to spark a connection with nature:

- Ages 7–9: Birds of Prey Camp and Endangered Species Camp
- Ages 9–11: Forest Adventures Camp

Enrollment was limited to 20 campers per week, ensuring a personalized experience for each camper. Youth had opportunities to build relationships, explore new interests, and develop essential life skills. Campers showed growth in confidence, friendships, and understanding of the natural world.

One memorable moment came during a lesson on mushrooms. At first, many campers weren't excited about studying fungi, but staff helped turn it into an exploration of the world of mycorrhizae, how fungi and plant roots work together. By the end, campers were sharing what they learned and amazed by how fungi help forests grow.

Parents also noticed the impact, reaching out to learn more about local 4-H programs. Their enthusiasm highlighted how Camp Russell connects families to broader opportunities through Illinois Extension and 4-H. Here are a few examples:

- One quiet camper admitted she doesn't have many friends at school. Camp gave her the chance to shine by helping younger campers and modeling leadership.
- Another youth began the summer reserved but gradually opened up, joining group activities and making friends. His grandmother was thrilled to hear he was thriving.
- Will, a shy boy with no siblings, arrived not knowing anyone.

By the end of Will's first day, his grandmother remarked, "Well, he's smiling, so that's a good sign." Will returned for two more weeks, and on the final day proudly guided his mom through the nature center, showing how camp had become a place of joy and belonging.

Together, these stories show that Camp Russell is more than a summer program.

Camp	Youth Registered
Birds of Prey	15
Endangered Species	14
Forest Adventures	17



Campers show off their creativity with handmade panda masks during the Endangered Species Camp.

Ripple Report

Ripple effects from Extension programs show how small actions grow into lasting community change. The following highlights illustrate how learning, leadership, and local action continue to strengthen watershed awareness and stewardship across the region.

Paddle and Learn

- Indirect student reach: 557
- All ten (100%) respondents reported increased knowledge in watershed topic.
- All participants indicated high confidence levels (4-5) and they would share their knowledge of watersheds with friends and family.
- All respondents reported (50% rated 4 and 50% rated 5) that they would integrate watershed components into their student curricula.
- Seven respondents reported they would support community watershed efforts, extending the program's influence beyond.

Water Stewardship for Leaders

- Boone County created and hired a part-time Watershed Specialist position.
- Boone County salt trucks were calibrated to reduce excess road salting.
- Increased support and understanding for the 3-D watershed modeling initiative.
- Helped bridge the gap between education and knowledge of the need for water protection and quality of the water supply.



Master Watershed Stewards pilot program wraps up

Master Watershed Stewards program, a watershed education initiative for the general public, offered participants the chance to understand how watersheds function and how they directly influence local water quality and quantity. The pilot program was developed in conjunction with Purdue Extension.

The program, now fondly called Watershed Stewards on the Illinois side, gives people the opportunity to learn how they can assist local watershed actions in their communities and support local leaders and municipality decisions around stormwater. The program does not require them to volunteer in local watershed groups, but it does enlighten them on all the different agencies and organizations working for clean plentiful water.

The group of 10 students included local leaders, current extension volunteers, educators, and more. They learned water is the number one economic driver and one of the most ignored natural resources. There is no more water being created, what we have is all there is, and it is traveling through the water cycle constantly, even as you read this note.

They learned water is the number one economic driver and one of the most ignored natural resources.



43
Master Naturalists



3,252
Total Master Naturalist Hours



\$111,496
Value of Volunteer labor



Illinois Extension partnered with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine in Springfield to expand access for caregivers to the 2025 Brain Aging Conference.

Expanding caregiver education

Illinois Extension partnered with the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine in Springfield to expand access for caregivers to the 2025 Brain Aging Conference. The collaboration began when Community and Economic Development Educator Mike Delany, through his work on Local Government Education webinars, connected with SIU Medicine's Executive Director of Telehealth Services Laura Hepp Kessel. Kessel explained that SIU Medicine wanted to offer remote viewing sites across Illinois to reach caregivers of dementia patients, many of whom face financial and logistical barriers to traveling to Springfield.

Delany recognized the opportunity and brought the idea to County Directors Karla Belzer and Heather Coyle. Both agreed to host events, with Belzer managing the Whiteside County site and Delany coordinating DeKalb County. To strengthen outreach, Delany enlisted Family and Consumer Science Educator Kara Schweitzer, whose programming for senior populations aligned with conference goals.

SIU Medicine anticipated modest attendance, hoping for three or four participants per site. Thanks to Extension's efforts, Whiteside welcomed five attendees, while DeKalb hosted nine. Participants included caregivers, senior-daycare owners, and administrators from in-home service agencies. All remained engaged for the full 5.5 hours of programming and praised the event's quality, noting the "wide variety of topics" and describing the conference as "very enjoyable."

The collaboration exceeded expectations and highlighted Extension's role in bridging geographic and resource gaps. By facilitating access to specialized education, Extension ensured caregivers and professionals in smaller communities could benefit from a partner's high-quality programming.





4-H



35

Boone County 4-H Clubs



21

DeKalb County 4-H Clubs



24

Ogle County 4-H Clubs



1,003

Members



171

Adult Volunteers

Shows



3,789

Fair Exhibits



754

Exhibitors



27,686

Experiences

Isaac Williams of the Summerhill Huskies 4-H Club shows his horse, Serendipity, during the Ogle County 4-H Horse Show.



Johnna Jennings' lifelong commitment to 4-H

For one dedicated 4-H professional, the journey began at the age of eight in rural Northwest Ohio. 4-H Educator Johnna Jennings was raised by parents who served as 4-H club leaders. She was an active 4-H member and attended 4-H camp.

Jennings demonstrated leadership beyond the club level by working as a counselor at 4-H camp, serving on the junior fair board, and participating in junior leadership through the Illinois Federation. The county fair became a central part of her life, not only as a venue for showcasing projects and building friendships, but also as the place where she met her future husband in the pig barn. Many of her most cherished childhood memories are rooted in the people and programs of 4-H. Her early experiences laid the foundation for a lifelong passion of youth development.

After college, Jennings naturally gravitated toward the Cooperative Extension Service, beginning her professional career with Ohio State Extension in 1988. In 1993 she joined Illinois Extension as the 4-H Youth Development Educator in DeKalb County. In 2011, following a statewide reorganization, her role expanded to include Boone and Ogle Counties. During her career, Jennings helped shape and deliver innovative programming tailored to the evolving needs of youth.

As Jennings prepared for retirement, she reflected on a career filled with joy, purpose, and meaningful relationships. Her work has touched countless lives, and her legacy is evident in the generations of youth who have grown through the 4-H program. She credits 4-H with giving her a fulfilling career and a lifetime of unforgettable memories. Her parting message is one of optimism: "Our future will be in good hands as long as we have 4-H members who continue to work toward making the best better."



Johnna Jennings, longtime 4-H Youth Development Educator for Illinois Extension in Boone, DeKalb, and Ogle counties, retired in April after 32 years of dedicated service. Her leadership, passion, and commitment shaped countless young people and left a lasting impact on the 4-H community.



New 4-H educator to expand youth outreach



Illinois Extension welcomed Abigail Nelson in June 2024 as the new 4-H youth development educator. Nelson provides leadership and programming in 4-H youth development, with a focus on schools and new audiences.

While designing developmentally appropriate entry points into the 4-H program and reducing barriers to participation in 4-H experiences, Nelson is strengthening partnerships with local school districts and community organizations to ensure more youth have access to high-quality, research-based learning experiences. By bringing 4-H programming into classrooms and out-of-school settings, this initiative expands opportunities for young people who may not participate in community-based 4-H clubs.

Nelson is passionate about leadership development, emotional intelligence education, and helping youth build the confidence and life skills needed to thrive personally, academically, and professionally. A strategic focus on engaging with partners and youth through schools and new audiences plays a key role in advancing access to youth development experiences that foster teamwork, problem-solving, career exploration, and civic engagement.

"As a former 4-Her, I am so excited to step into this role and contribute to these communities in meaningful ways," Nelson shares. "My focus will be on empowering youth to develop skills and leadership qualities that benefit them personally and enrich their community."

A Boone County 4-H alumna, Nelson lives in Rockford. She earned degrees from Rock Valley College, Southern Illinois University, and Rasmussen University. She is based in the Boone County Extension Office in Belvidere and can be reached at agnelson@illinois.edu.



4-H ORNITHOLOGY EDUCATION TAKES FLIGHT

Enthusiastic youth gathered at the Natural Resources Education Center in Russell Woods Forest Preserve for the “Wing It!” Ornithology Program. Through birdwatching, species identification, and habitat exploration, participants gained hands-on experience and a deeper appreciation for Northern Illinois’ native birds. 4-H Program Coordinator Katie Williamson created a welcoming space for learning, while Youth Development Educator Abigail Nelson noted, “From the moment the program began, the participants were clearly captivated.” By the end, students had developed genuine curiosity and excitement about ornithology. Due to strong feedback, plans are underway to offer the program again.



YOUTH GAIN SHOW RING SKILLS AT THE SHOWMANSHIP CLINIC

In the spring, 4-H Program Coordinator Tally Lalor hosted a multi-species showmanship clinic at the Boone County Fairgrounds, welcoming 72 youth exhibitors and their families from across Northern Illinois. The event focused on hands-on learning techniques with sheep, swine, and cattle. Experienced professionals led sessions on daily care, nutrition, grooming, and ring presence. With live animals on-site, youth practiced techniques and asked questions in a show ring setting. Generous sponsors provided raffle prizes and giveaways, including halters, show sticks, and grooming supplies. Participants left with new skills, confidence, and tools to succeed in the barn and show ring.

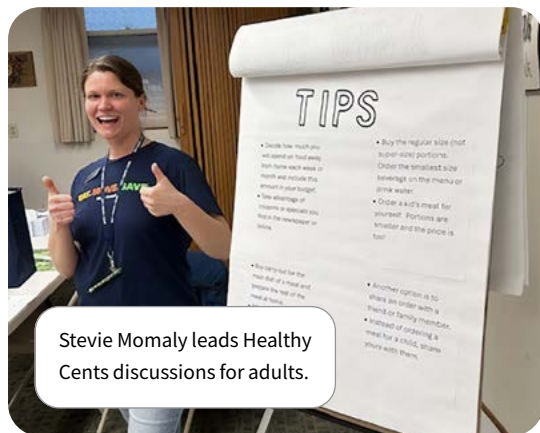


4-H: LEADING WITH HEART, HEAD, HANDS, AND HEALTH IN THE COMMUNITY

Boone County 4-H members participated in two meaningful service projects: Military Mail and the Fall Food Shower. This year, youth created and sent 1,145 cards to soldiers overseas, with 14 members decorating 25 or more. The Fall Food Shower brought clubs together to donate pantry staples and toiletries. In total, they contributed 826 food items and \$100. Across DeKalb and Ogle counties, 4-H members also took part in several service projects. Youth planted oak trees through the Oak Tree Savannah Program, made cards for Opportunity House, and prepared a meal for Hope Haven. Ogle County members placed third in the Illinois 4-H Can Food Drive and organized cereal and food drives for local pantries. These efforts highlight the generosity and leadership of 4-H youth.



Boone County 4-H members participate in the Fall Food Shower service project.



Stevie Momaly leads Healthy Cents discussions for adults.

INSPIRING HEALTHY HABITS ACROSS GENERATIONS

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education Community Worker Stevie Momaly completed a vibrant OrganWise Guys series with five kindergarten classes. Students learned healthy habits through fun phrases like, “If there is a party, the Kidney Brothers are bringing water!” She believes most will adopt at least one habit, whether it's drinking more water, eating fruits and vegetables, or staying active. Momaly also led Healthy Cents discussions for adults, empowering families to make informed choices about nutrition and wellness. Her favorite topic, container gardening, inspires participants to grow food in small spaces and brings excitement about growing their own fresh produce. Through Eat. Move. Save. booths, she continues to build trust and promote wellness. The booths offer quick nutrition tips, healthy recipes, and friendly conversations that encourage lasting lifestyle changes.





Farm Strolls bring communities together

Illinois Extension hosted Farm Strolls in Boone and Ogle counties, giving the public a chance to explore local farms and connect with producers. For one day, farmers opened their doors to share their harvests, stories, and traditions. Past hosts included apple orchards, meat producers, homesteads, alpaca fiber mills, dairy farms, goat farms, and an apiary.

The self-guided tours attracted more than 400 participants, with 10 farms in each county welcoming visitors. The strolls highlighted the diversity of agriculture while strengthening ties between farmers and their communities. By fostering curiosity and appreciation for local food systems, Illinois Extension helped build lasting connections that supported producers and inspired future generations.



A hands-on lesson in financial literacy

Financial education for youth is becoming increasingly complex. As traditional tools like paper checks fade, new technologies from chip-enabled credit cards to peer-to-peer payment apps continue to reshape how we manage money. In this fast-evolving landscape, where spending often feels disconnected from any visible reduction in a bank balance, it's easier than ever for young people to lose track of their finances.

To help teens build financial confidence and understand modern tools and foundational money management, Illinois Extension's team partnered with area high schools to deliver "Welcome to the Real World," a two-hour financial literacy simulation.

Illinois Extension collaborated with Belvidere North High School in Boone County to host the simulation. The school's consumer education faculty requested two sessions, each with about 90 students, on the same day. Extension staff worked closely with teachers and administrators to plan and deliver the event.

The simulation begins with students selecting a career without knowing its salary, encouraging choices based on interest rather than income. Once revealed, students calculate deductions like FICA, income taxes, and student loan payments to determine their net income. With budgets in hand, they enter the "real world," visiting stations to make decisions about housing, transportation, groceries, clothing, and entertainment.

As they move from the real estate office to the car dealership to the grocery store, students quickly discover how expensive life can be and how fast money disappears. At the end of the simulation, they regroup to reflect on their experience. Many expressed surprise at the cost of everyday living and noted they ran out of money faster than expected. Faculty were equally impressed, inviting Extension to return next year with at least one simulation per semester.



Learn more about the Community and Economic Development programs
extension.illinois.edu/bdo/community-and-government



High school students participate in the two-hour "Welcome to the Real World" financial literacy simulation.

Ready 4 Work launches teens toward success

Over the past three years, Illinois Extension has empowered high school students through the 4-H Ready 4 Work program, a hands-on initiative designed to build essential career and life skills. Led by Extension Educator Mike Delany and 4-H Program Coordinator Kathy Dombek, the program has become a trusted resource for schools preparing students for life after graduation.

Using the 4-H Work Ready curriculum, teachers selected topics like career planning, budgeting, teamwork, and interview skills to fit their students' needs. One of the program's strongest partnerships is with DeKalb High School, where Extension staff visit the Adult Living class each semester to present multiple lessons. Students consistently describe the sessions as engaging and relevant. One student shared, "The activity where we built a tower using a 'hands-free' leader taught me a lot about my own leadership style. I always left your visits feeling more informed and ready for post-high school life."

The program has reached hundreds of students, complementing school curricula and helping youth build confidence and workplace readiness. Ready 4 Work is more than a classroom experience, it's a launchpad for lifelong success.

I always left your visits feeling more informed and ready for post-high school life.
DeKalb High School student





Tech savvy and thriving

Twenty-two youth from Ogle and DeKalb counties led the way in launching a new 4-H Technology SPIN (Special Interest) Club. Members explored robotics by learning about the types of robots that are used globally and how these robots are used in the real world. The team of young creators then built their own LEGO Mindstorms robots. These machines were engineered to follow a black line, hit a red ball, and navigate a maze.

To bring their robots to life, members had to master adding sensors and coding a program to download into the machines. They then crossed their fingers hoping it would work. One tough lesson learned: not everything works the way you think it should. "It should work... in theory," became the unofficial club motto, said 4-H Program Coordinator Jodi Baumgartner.

In addition to robotics, members explored programming, coding, 3D printing, Esports, and GPS technology. Teen leaders David Wehler, Immanuel Arellano, and Elizabeth Kennedy taught lessons and challenged members to complete activities independently.

From writing code for a simple game to designing objects for the 3D printer, members stayed engaged, experimenting and using technology to spark interest in future careers.

Passport to discovery



Each year, Boone County 4-H clubs come together to host an educational fun night at the Community Building in Belvidere. This year's theme brought global flair to the celebration. Fourteen of the county's 18 clubs participated in a cultural showcase, each selecting a country to represent through interactive booths filled with crafts, educational displays, and traditional snacks and drinks.

Countries represented included Australia, Germany, Italy, Jamaica, Peru, New Zealand, Netherlands, France, Ireland, Kenya, Mexico, Scotland, Sweden, and Switzerland. Families and 4-H'ers explored the booths, learning about global traditions while enjoying a variety of international treats. QR codes placed at each table allowed attendees to vote for their favorite food, presentation, educational display, and overall best booth.

The competition was close, with every club putting tremendous effort into their displays. Juntos 4-H Club swept three categories including Best Overall Booth, Best Presentation, and Best Food for their vibrant representation of Mexico. Boone Farms 4-H Club earned Best Educational Display for their engaging booth on Jamaica.

Creative sparks fly



The DeKalb County Farm Bureau came alive with color, texture, and imagination as 34 youth from Boone, DeKalb, and Ogle counties gathered for the first-ever 4-H Creative Arts Day. Held on a school holiday, the event offered a dynamic mix of hands-on workshops designed to engage young minds in artistic exploration.

Participants, ages 8 to 15, took part in seven unique sessions, including needle felting, glass fusing, candle-making, cake decorating, and open-ended visual arts. Many youth attended multiple workshops, diving into new techniques and discovering fresh ways to express themselves. Each session emphasized artistic technique, creativity, and safety, helping youth build confidence and develop new skills.

The event introduced participants to new artistic media and techniques while fostering creativity, self-expression, and a lifelong appreciation for the arts. It also strengthened connections between professional artists, educators, and the 4-H program, creating an inspiring and supportive atmosphere that families praised for its variety and quality.

Creative Arts Day proved to be more than just a fun experience; it was a meaningful investment in youth development and a celebration of the power of creativity.

Let's Walk program boosts health and senior connections



In the spring, the Integrated Health Disparities "Let's Walk!" program brought movement, motivation, and meaningful connection to 17 seniors in Ogle County. At the Rock River Center in Oregon, participants met biweekly over eight weeks for walking tips, warm-ups, and an hour-long walk tailored to their comfort level. Whether walking a few steps or several laps, seniors were encouraged to gradually increase their pace and distance.

The program's impact was felt quickly. Participants reported more energy, less stiffness, and better sleep. One woman shared that her sciatica pain had eased thanks to regular walking. Beyond physical benefits, the program fostered new friendships. Several participants exchanged contact information to meet for walks outside the program or to attend other community events together.

"Let's Walk!" proved that simple, consistent movement can lead to lasting change. By combining physical activity with social engagement, the program helped seniors feel stronger, more connected, and more confident in their ability to care for their health one step at a time.



Extension Advisory Council Members

Thank you to the volunteers who serve on our Extension Advisory Council. The Advisory Council consists of four subcommittees: 4-H and Youth, Community and Economic Development, Health and Local Foods, and Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy. Each subcommittee supports Illinois Extension's services as the County Cooperative Law requires. The council works cooperatively with Illinois Extension staff in planning, promoting, developing, implementing, and evaluating Extension programs, which are designed to meet the needs, interests, and resources of the local communities being served.

4-H AND YOUTH COMMITTEE

Case Charlesworth Boone County*	Lillian Hetland DeKalb County*	Jennifer Mora Boone County
Ellie Davis DeKalb County*	Tina Holtz DeKalb County	Heather Nelson Boone County
Dori Delacruz DeKalb County	Mallory King Ogle County*	Jane Zeien Boone County
Chelsea Eden Ogle County	Madeline Kolthoff Boone County*	Raiden Zimmerman Ogle County*
Noe Escamilla DeKalb County	Araceli Lopez King DeKalb County	*Denotes a youth member.

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Gina Caronna DeKalb County	Luis Gonzalez Boone County	Liz Vos Ogle County
Dan Dietrich Ogle County	Sherrie Taylor Ogle County	Heather Wick Boone County

HEALTH AND LOCAL FOODS COMMITTEE

Candie Fore Ogle County	Abigail Hesslau DeKalb County	Mark Schuth Boone County
Sarah Hackbarth Ogle County	Stephanie Meyers Boone County	

NATURAL RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT, AND ENERGY COMMITTEE

Jodi Gudewicz DeKalb County	Jeff Woodyatt DeKalb County	Anita Zurbrugg DeKalb County
Kayse Rushford Ogle County	Barb Wych Boone County	

Local Extension Program Locations

Locations	Enrolled	Attended
Community and recreation centers	596	1,245
Community organizations	642	765
Early care and education facilities	266	357
Emergency shelters / temporary housing sites	47	47
Extension offices	2,845	3,510
Faith-based centers / places of worship	173	257
Family resource centers	148	148
Food assistance sites	4	4
Gardens	146	219
Healthcare clinics and hospitals	3	3
Group living arrangements	28	343
Individual homes or public housing sites	48	117
Libraries	270	378
Parks and open spaces	1,823	2,316
Public housing sites	62	182
Schools (colleges and universities)	110	110
Schools (K-12)	21,352	29,453
State / county fairgrounds	4,108	4,108
Youth organizations	80	465

Total Extension Program Location Engagement	32,751 Enrolled	44,027 Attended
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Amount	Source
43%	Local Funding & Grants
23%	Fees & Cost Recovery
30%	Federal Funding & Grants
3%	State of Illinois
1%	University of Illinois*

*In addition to the 1%, University of Illinois also pays 30% of educator salaries, pays employee benefits, provides computer equipment and IT services, provides a portion of professional development funds for staff, and hires specialists.



Amount	Source
71%	Personnel
17%	Program Materials & Mileage
12%	Leases & Operations

STAFF

Heather Coyle
County Director

Peggy Anesi
Natural Resources,
Environment, and Energy
Educator

Mike Delany
Community and Economic
Development Educator

Abigail Nelson
4-H Youth Development
Educator

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4-H Program Coordinator

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Office Support Assistant

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Ag in the Classroom Program
Coordinator

Kathy Dombek
4-H Program Coordinator

Sherry Flint
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

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Marian Termini
Ag and Natural Resources
Program Coordinator

Katie Williamson
4-H Program Coordinator

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Natural Resource Education Center

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11750 State Route 72
Genoa, IL 60135
(815) 784-2000
Hours by appointment

ONLINE



extension.illinois.edu/bdo



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Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

University of Illinois, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Local Extension Councils Cooperating.
University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

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