



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

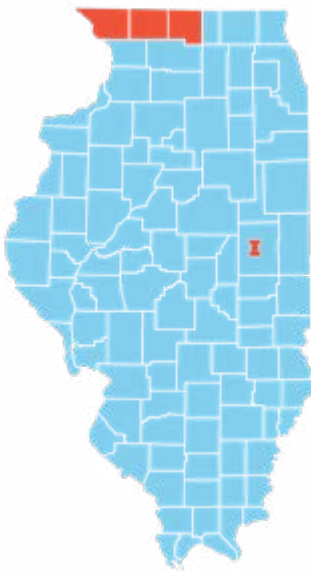


Serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Margaret Larson
County Director



Honoring history, embracing the present, and looking forward to the future

As I have spent some time reflecting on the work of Illinois Extension and 4-H serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties in 2025, I am proud of the role we play in our local communities, with our partnering organizations and with our longstanding supporters and participants in our programs. As a staff, we are deliberate in our work to honor the longstanding history of University of Illinois Extension and 4-H in communities, and fortunate to have multiple generations of families involved in all aspects of our programming and using resources provided. The organization’s history has given us a great path forward and a solid foundation, and we continue to support and excel in longstanding efforts and programming.

But today, I celebrate where we are now and who we are now. In the offices of Jo Daviess, Stephenson and Winnebago County Extension, we are staffed by fantastic, dynamic and forward-thinking professionals, who are engaged at the local level on a daily basis.

I never fail to be surprised learning about a new opportunity to engage with youth, adults and/or families in our area and am in awe of the energy and creativity staff show up with every day.

Last fall, our organization welcomed a new leader, Dr. Matthew Vann, who is director of Illinois Extension and associate dean of the College of ACES. We hosted a quick visit from Dr. Vann in December and staff shared highlights of our local work, partnerships, and presence in our communities. As I sat quietly and listened, I spent the day once again impressed by those in the room and the work that they do.

We are well into 2026, and as I monitor our continuing efforts, my mind wanders to our history, embraces our present, and looks forward to our future. Thank you for being part of our work and our family.

With warm regards,
Margaret Larson
County Director

Cover photo:
Program Coordinator Nikki
Keltner teaches youth at
Dive In! with Illinois EPA.

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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Nutrition and Wellness



ABCs of School Nutrition empowers local school nutrition professionals

School nutrition professionals from across the region participated in the ABCs of School Nutrition Summer Learning Institutes in August to meet USDA Professional Standards requirements. These standards ensure school nutrition staff have the knowledge, training, and tools needed to prepare safe, nutritious, and appealing school meals.

The Institutes, held at the NIU Rockford Conference Center and Highland Community College, had a total of 99 participants representing 41 schools across 18 school districts, all of whom attended one of the full-day trainings. University of Illinois Extension staff Leah Erke, ABCs of School Nutrition Extension outreach associate, and Diane Reinhold, nutrition and wellness educator, delivered sessions on effective hiring and retention practices for school cafeterias, HACCP and food safety plans, food allergy updates, and incorporating cultural flavors into school meals. Guest presenters from General Mills addressed navigating USDA limits on added sugar, while the Freeport School District's nutrition director shared practical insights on cycle menu planning.

Participant feedback highlighted the impact of the professional development, particularly in the area of workforce development and team culture. When asked what the most important thing(s) they learned from the Effective Recruitment and Retention session, participants shared:

The idea that even if I am not the food service manager, we have the ability to change things on our level.

School Nutrition Professional

Communication and teamwork make your life and career so much more rewarding.

School Nutrition Professional



Visit the program area page
go.illinois.edu/JSWNutritionWellness

ABCs of school nutrition

Nutrition and Wellness Educator Diane Reinhold delivers necessary continuing education hours to 99 school nutrition professionals, representing 41 schools across 18 districts.

Building community understanding of poverty through simulation

University of Illinois Extension educators Mike Delany, Community and Economic Development, and Diane Reinhold, Nutrition and Wellness, facilitated the Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation this year, hosted by Networking for Families and DeKalb Township. One hundred community members participated as volunteers or simulation participants. This immersive experience increased understanding of the complex barriers individuals face when trying to overcome poverty, sparked meaningful dialogue, and encouraged participants to identify community-driven strategies to address root causes and better support low-income individuals and families.

Encouraging healthy choices for lifelong wellbeing

Through evidence-based classes, workshops, and collaboration with community partners, Illinois Extension nutrition and wellness programming supports healthier choices related to nutrition, stress management, and physical activity.

Reinhold delivers in-person programs and webinars on topics such as healthy aging, arthritis, emotional eating, weight management, and inflammation. In partnership with the Stephenson County Senior Center and Rockford University's Center for Learning and Retirement, additional classes focus on practical meal preparation and food safety, including air frying, freezer meals, slow cookers, and other strategies for preparing easy, nutritious meals. Together, these efforts empower individuals and families to make informed lifestyle choices that support long-term health and independence.



SNAP-Education



"Need Food?" bus campaign lowers barriers to food access

Extension partnered with several community organizations, including the Rockford Mass Transit District, to launch a multi-layered public awareness campaign connecting residents to local food resources. The campaign utilized public transit as a platform to reduce barriers to food access. Key components included a bus route guide identifying which lines travel near local food pantries, updates to the Find Food Illinois website to display transit connections, rail cards placed inside all 43 city buses highlighting pantry access by route, and exterior bus signage featuring the message "NEED FOOD?" with QR codes linking riders to Find Food Illinois and the Greater Rockford Pantry Coalition website.

It is estimated that 5,000 people see the exterior bus signage daily, with additional riders engaging with the materials inside the buses. Among riders surveyed at the transit station who reported seeing the campaign inside the bus, 59% indicated that they have used the information, and the online food access guides have been accessed more than 300 times. Given the success of the Rockford campaign, Extension expanded the initiative by developing additional guides for communities across Winnebago, Jo Daviess, and Stephenson counties, increasing awareness of food resources across the region.

Building on this momentum, Extension also partnered separately with Northern Illinois Food Bank and the Rockford Mass Transit District to host a free food pop-up distribution at a transit location, providing food to 98 families in a one-hour period. Together, these efforts increased visibility of food resources, provided immediate food access, and reduced navigation barriers for individuals seeking assistance.



SNAP-ED Educator Tashara Grandys created a comprehensive pantry guide with the nearest bus stops to each pantry. Organizations posted and shared this resource with their community members.

Inspiring healthy habits in kindergarten and first grade classrooms

For the past three years, SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker Marcia McMahon delivered the OrganWise Guys program at Spring Creek Elementary School. This past year, Marcia taught the program to six Kindergarten and First Grade classes, and two special needs classes, reaching a total of 161 students.

Lessons for students in the special needs program were adapted in collaboration with teachers to match attention levels and developmental stages. Hands-on activities and visual supports proved especially effective, with activities such as picking apples to decorate Madam Muscle's outfit and selecting foods to pack in a basket for a trip to the park. These practices helped reinforce nutrition concepts in an engaging and meaningful way.

By the end of the eight-week program, students demonstrated a stronger understanding of healthy eating and the importance of physical activity, while also practicing trust, cooperation, and developing a greater enthusiasm for learning.



Students draw pictures of their favorite OrganWise Guys characters to thank McMahon at the end of her time at Spring Creek.



Local Foods and Small Farms



Extension Educator provides leadership for research at Freeport high school

In collaboration with Freeport High School, Local Food and Small Farms educator Grant McCarty is providing leadership for a research project funded by the USDA's Specialty Crops Block Grant. Previously, McCarty and Freeport High School's Student Vegetable Farm conducted research on day-neutral strawberries, an annual strawberry. The research results from that have lead to adoption of this crop in the region.

This project is different as it's examining the potential of growing tomatoes and cucumbers exclusively under high tunnels compared to being strictly in the field. A high tunnel, found at many Northern Illinois vegetable farms, is a structure similar to a greenhouse but without electricity, providing protection and increasing air/soil temperatures. It allows for growers to extend their season by starting early and ending later, sometimes an extra month on either end.

Results from this study will allow students at Freeport High School's Student Vegetable Farm to be engaged in official University of Illinois research that will be shared at regional and state conferences along with the Illinois Fruit and Vegetable Newsletter.



Visit the program area page
go.illinois.edu/JSWLocalFoodsSmallFarms



Students at Freeport High School have the opportunity to be engaged in official research with guidance from Grant McCarty. As part of the project, they grow cucumbers and tomatoes.

In the first year of this study, McCarty was able to guide and troubleshoot some of the growing conditions and challenges while collecting weekly data that will be utilized for future recommendations. The project will conclude in Fall 2026.



Read more about this research
go.illinois.edu/FreeportHSResearch



Stateline Growers Conference connects producers and experts

Held every February, the Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference is one of our Unit's premiere agricultural programs. It is meant to address the needs of specialty growers (fruit and vegetables) in our area that sell directly to consumers through pick-your-own orchards, pumpkin patches, farmers markets, and other opportunities. McCarty organizes this program with assistance from Unit staff. Speakers at this conference include Extension Specialists and Educators from University of Illinois along with other universities like UW-Madison. Topics are presented on insects, diseases, new crops, and general production. While most of the topics are geared towards established growers, sessions for beginning growers have been included since 2023.

This year's speakers included Nathan Johanning, a commercial agriculture educator from southern Illinois, who provided relevant updates on pumpkin varieties and cover crops. This was his first time at Stateline and it meant that growers got exclusive information from him that he shares with his growers at his Pumpkin Field Day. Dr. Amaya Atucha, a fruit specialist from UW-Madison, presented on chemical thinning in apple production, which has been highly requested over the years as growers look to better balance their apple fruit load with high quality fruits. More than 130 growers attended the conference with 10 speakers and 15 sessions. The 2026 conference will be held again in February.



More than 130 growers attended the conference and were connected to the latest research to inform their growing choices for the year.



Fruit Tree Pruning program returns in all three counties

Since 2017, Grant McCarty, local foods and small farms educator, has taught fruit tree pruning classes for Northern Illinois growers, both commercial and noncommercial. His approach uses a color-coding system to help growers visualize the cuts they need to make and the shape their tree currently is or is heading. This unique approach combines education with consulting and coaching without McCarty setting foot in an orchard.

For the first time this year, the class was held mid-November to early December, which is earlier than previous years. This change gave growers ample time to prepare themselves to properly prune. McCarty received positive feedback about the change.

Classroom participants had the opportunity to share photos of their own trees for discussion, allowing for the program to serve as both a traditional Extension class and an individual consultation. In total, McCarty provided color-coded pruning guidance for 83 fruit trees. These included young and mature trees from backyard plantings with one or two trees to orchards with more than 100 trees. Most participants reported managing between one and four fruit trees.



Local Foods and Small Farms Educator Grant McCarty brought back his popular "Fruit Tree Pruning Fundamentals" program in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties.

Empowering community members and growers to Grow Great Apples

Led by Local Foods and Small Farms Educator Grant McCarty, Growing Great Apples brought growers, home gardeners, and apple enthusiasts alike together for an engaging learning experience. Participants in Jo Daviess, Stephenson and Winnebago counties learned about apple varieties suitable for Northern Illinois, seasonal management of common insects and diseases, and the fundamentals of establishing and maintaining fruit trees. They left equipped to select appropriate varieties, develop seasonal management plans, make informed planting decisions, and successfully grow delicious apples in Northern Illinois.



Grant McCarty showed attendees a variety of apples, with some bringing their own varieties to share.



Crop Sciences



Agronomy Summit goes statewide

The Northwest Illinois Agronomy Summit has been held in Stephenson County for the past eight years. It is a one-day conference aimed at local corn and soybean producers to provide the latest research updates in agronomy, pest management, nutrient management, and more from university and extension experts at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and our neighboring state universities. Recognizing the value this event brings to local producers, the Illinois Extension Commercial Agriculture team sought to replicate the Agronomy Summit across the state. In 2025, for the first time, the Agronomy Summit went from an event held exclusively in Stephenson County to being offered in five additional counties across Illinois.



Dr. Connor Sible, research assistant professor, Department of Crop Sciences, University of Illinois, shares 'What we Know Today About Biologicals in Illinois Row Crops.'



Talking Crop podcast returns for another season

Crop Sciences Educator Kathryn Seebruck's podcast 'Talking Crop' returned for its second season. Talking Crop is a seasonal row crop production podcast created to provide farmers and agribusiness representatives with topical information and actionable management considerations. During the biweekly podcasts released from May through September, Seebruck discusses current trends and research updates with crop production guest experts. Topics discussed during its second season include tar spot in corn, updated corn nitrogen recommendations, ag policy, and conservation implementation.





Local Agronomy educator spreads awareness of novel weed identified in Stephenson County

Asian copperleaf (*Acalypha australis*) was identified in a field in Stephenson County following corn harvest this fall. This is the first confirmed Asian copperleaf population in Illinois. Asian copperleaf is non-native to the U.S. The first confirmed populations of this species were documented in New York in 1990. The next time Asian copperleaf was positively identified in the U.S. was in an Iowa seed corn field in 2016. Since then, it has been confirmed in 10 counties across central and western Iowa. Illinois is the third state with a confirmed population of Asian copperleaf.



Asian copperleaf is non-native to the U.S. Illinois is the third state with a confirmed population of Asian copperleaf.

Kathryn Seebruck, Illinois Extension crop sciences educator, Dr. Aaron Hager, weed science professor and University of Illinois Extension weed science specialist, and Dr. David Zaya, botanist with the Illinois Natural History Survey, have worked together to raise awareness and track the spread of Asian copperleaf in Illinois. To raise awareness, the group put together an informational slide set on the species, sent out a local press release about the species being identified in Illinois for the first time in Stephenson County, wrote a Bulletin article on Farmdoc, and spread the word in various publications such as Farm Progress and FarmWeek Now.

By tracking its spread, the group of experts aims to understand the spread so they can mitigate the plants impact. Subsequent plans include creating a factsheet for distribution and conducting field trials and other research to better understand this species.



View the Asian Copperleaf Informational Slides
go.illinois.edu/CopperLeafSlides



Listen to Talking Crop
go.illinois.edu/TalkingCrop



The Illinois Forage Expo is sponsored by the Northwestern Illinois Forage and Grasslands Council and the Illinois Forage and Grassland Council. Program Coordinator Nikki Keltner and Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy educator Stanley (Jay) Solomon are members of the planning committee.

Extension Educator and Specialist present at Illinois Forage Expo

In July, Extension supported the Illinois Forage Expo, organized by the Northwestern Illinois Forage and Grasslands Council and the Illinois Forage and Grasslands Council. The expo is a statewide event highlighting forage production practices and equipment. The 130 participants heard from Kathryn Seebruck, crop sciences educator with University of Illinois Extension, who gave a talk during the educational session: Pasture Improvement and Weed Control. University of Illinois Extension beef specialist, Travis Meteer, also led a presentation: How Can Forage Quality Impact Animal Performance.



Crop Sciences Educator Kathryn Seebruck brought farmers up to date on cover crop research during programs and field days.

Local growers learn how to get started with cover crops

Crop Sciences Educator Kathryn Seebruck brought the latest research on cover crops to local farmers through a variety of programs. In Jo Daviess County, Seebruck equipped producers with the knowledge needed to determine if cover cropping is right for them at her program, Getting Started with Cover Crops. Extension also partnered with the Winnebago County Soil and Water Conservation District to hold a Cover Crop Field Day, where participants observed standing cover crops, learned about cover crop application with drones, and received education on cover crops from Seebruck. Attendees left knowing how to best get started with cover crops.





Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy



Partnership flourishes with Northwest Illinois Forestry Association



The collaboration with the Northwest Illinois Forestry Association continues to provide forestry management education for area residents, landowners, and forest managers. Extension cosponsored and cross-promoted several forestry-focused events with NIFA. Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy educator Stanley (Jay) Solomon serves as a NIFA Board member and Extension Liaison. Part of Solomon's role is to help facilitate the video conference capabilities for NIFA winter board meetings. NIFA has attracted new board participation due to the virtual meeting access, which was greatly needed to maintain the organization.



Extension Specialist in Forestry Justin Vozzo presented on pruning forest trees at the Tri-State Forest Stewardship Conference. Photo credit: Eli Willard

Local Extension staff play critical role in Tri-State Forest Stewardship Conference



Designed specifically for forestry landowners, professionals and consultants in the Midwest, the Tri-State Forest Stewardship Conference was held in Dubuque, Iowa. The event was co-sponsored by University of Illinois Extension, Iowa State University Extension, and the University of Wisconsin Extension.

The day-long conference featured keynote speakers and several sessions on forest management and conservation. The day ended with a discussion with Forestry leaders from each state on programs, cost-share opportunities, and new initiatives available to landowners. University of Illinois and University of Illinois Extension offered many presenters breakout sessions. Forest Management and Ecology Extension Specialist Kevin Rohling presented on Emerging Invasive Species in the Tri-State Region. Forestry Extension and Research Specialist Chris Evans shared the basics of forest management plans. Holly Coates with University of Illinois shared research on The Effects of Forest Management on Eastern Whip-poor-wills. Extension Specialist in Forestry Justin Vozzo presented on pruning forest trees.

Local staff played an integral part in planning the day. Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy educator Stanley (Jay) Solomon sits on the planning committee for the conference, and program coordinators Alex Burbach and Nikki Keltner assist with promotion and registration.



Invasives programming with Forest Preserves of Winnebago County draws in new audiences

University of Illinois Extension and Winnebago County Forest Preserves combined efforts to teach the public about how to identify and manage invasive plants. Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy educator Stanley (Jay) Solomon took a program that was traditionally focused on the removal and containment of invasive plant species on timber and prairie acreages managed by owners or hired managers and refocused it based on previous gardening program presentation successes. The new presentation focused on creating awareness among gardening and home landscape audiences.

Solomon collaborated with Forest Preserves of Winnebago County on an invasive plant management walk-through at a preserve site where control efforts were underway. The program was well received and attended, reaching new audiences who had not previously attended Extension programs.



Attendees of the Invasive and Nuisance Plants in the Landscape program participate in a hike, where they are able to see sites where invasive management measures are taking place.

Based on the strong interest, Solomon also presented a classroom workshop later in the fall for those who could not participate in the walking workshop. In total, 49 community members gained knowledge of the environmental impacts of invasive plant species on our environments, as well as tools to identify and manage them. These programs opened the doors to a thriving partnership with the Forest Preserves of Winnebago County, with plans to continue invasives education, as well as other natural resource topics. Solomon also brought the program to Jo Daviess County.



Visit the program area page
go.illinois.edu/JSWNREE



Popular naturalist program Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales returns

The annual Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales day program returned for another year at the scenic Torstenson's Education Center. The day drew in nature enthusiasts for a day of outdoor exploration and indoor inspiration. State Master Naturalist and Climate Change Specialist Duane Friend discussed weather trends and how these trends can affect Illinois wildlife and ecosystems, such as wetlands. Friend led a second session on the basics of clouds. Master Naturalist volunteer Connie McIntosh presented her popular program, Fabulous Frogs. Master Naturalist volunteer Kim Johnsen gave tips on how to identify birds that have been seen at the Nygren Wetland preserve, described their behavior, and shared what kind of environment they like. Attendees also had the opportunity to go on a winter hike.



University of Illinois Extension staff and Master Naturalists lead sessions at Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales.

Compost programs bring necessary education to volunteers and the public

Natural Resources, Environment, and Energy educator Stanley (Jay) Solomon recognized the need for education about composting. In response, Solomon brought compost programming to Winnebago and Jo Daviess counties. In Winnebago, Solomon did a specific training for Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists, where they sharpened their skills in compost management and design. A program for the public on managing landscape waste with composting took place in Jo Daviess and Winnebago counties.



Stanley (Jay) Solomon and Master Gardeners collaborate on how to better manage the compost bin at the Winnebago office.





Program Coordinator Erin Garner teaches youth participants about watersheds with an interactive game at Dive In! with Illinois EPA.

4-H Youth Development



Extension staff inspire youth to protect local environments

In Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, University of Illinois Extension staff planned and participated in Stewardship days in partnership with local schools and agencies. In Winnebago County, staff presented at Dive In! with Illinois EPA. In Stephenson County, Keepers of the Land returned to educate youth. In Jo Daviess, STEM days at local schools expanded reach. Between the three events, Extension staff reached approximately 700 youth in a matter of weeks, teaching them the importance of protecting our natural environment and resources.



Hands-on sewing class equips youth with lifelong skills

The Made By Me Sewing Classes provided youth ages 11 to 18 with hands-on learning experiences that built practical life skills and creativity. Offered free of charge at the Extension office during the summer, the five-session series was made possible through collaboration with two dedicated volunteers. Participants learned how to safely operate a sewing machine and developed foundational sewing skills by creating a personalized dish towel, a pillowcase, and lounge pants using a pattern with both straight and curved seams. Enrollment was limited to eight students due to equipment capacity, and the program quickly filled with a waiting list, demonstrating strong community interest. Each participant received a certificate of completion, celebrating their new skills and accomplishments.



Made By Me Sewing Class teaches youth practical life skills through hands-on learning experience.



Mindful Me program teaches youth social-emotional skills

4-H Youth Development Metro Educator Gina Adams partnered with Northwest Community Center to teach Mindful Me, a State Signature Program. Mindful Me was delivered at the Northwest Community Center's after-school program for students in grades K through 2. Through engaging, hands-on activities, youth explored essential social-emotional learning skills with a focus on mindfulness. Participants practiced mindful eating, created calming Mood Jars, learned positive affirmations, explored the gift of presence, identified and described feelings, and developed quiet listening skills. Lessons also emphasized self-esteem, encouraging youth to see themselves as heroes in their own stories. By building emotional awareness and self-regulation skills early in life, Mindful Me supports healthy development and positive relationships.



4-H youth and volunteers planted 25 oak trees as part of the 4-H Green Communities Tree Program



4-H volunteers help restore native oak tree population

The River Ridge CUSD is now home to 25 new oak trees with the help of the Jo Daviess County 4-H program and the Jo Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation District. Together, these volunteers participated in the 4-H Green Communities Tree Program, which addresses the decline of native oak trees throughout Illinois. "The loss of our oak trees is a global issue, and it is important that our youth see the difference they can make locally by simply showing up and giving their time! When Mindy Pratt at the Soil and Water Conservation District reached out to express their interest, we started the planning process. Pratt found our location, and our 4-Hers and volunteers planted the trees," says Angela Miller, 4-H program coordinator. "It is exciting to know that our 4-H members who go to school here, those who visit, and those who will someday send their own children to River Ridge School will remember that they helped plant those trees." Throughout the spring of 2025, youth in 49 counties participating in the 4-H Green Communities Tree Program planted groupings of 25 oak trees on public properties in their county, with a goal of 1,225 newly planted trees across Illinois, with help from Soil and Water Conservation Districts.



Visit the program area page go.illinois.edu/JSW4-H



Northern Illinois 4-H Camp- "A Camp Where Everyone Belongs"

4-H Camp is a five-day, four-night residential camping experience conducted cooperatively by University of Illinois Extension staff in Boone, Carroll, DeKalb, Jo Daviess, Lee, Ogle, Stephenson, Whiteside, and Winnebago counties, as well as the professional staff at RRCC. Historically, parents have sent their children to 4-H Camp for a variety of reasons: to have fun, to make new friends, to develop new skills, to be physically active, and to appreciate nature. Unit 1 boasted 15 counselors and 71 campers who attended 4-H camp.



Seventy-one campers from Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties attended 4-H camp.



Wee Nats helps youth develop as environmental stewards

4-H Youth Development Educator program brought the Wee Naturalist program back to Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties. The Wee Nats program is an engaging and enriching introduction to nature and environmental stewardship for children ages 4 to 7. The goal of Wee Nats is to help children foster an understanding of their role as environmental stewards. Each month features a new environmental theme and begins with a children's book related to that theme. After reading, the children participate in a STEM-related activity before heading outside to explore in a way that ties back to the day's lesson.



Wee Nats is catered to youth ages 4 to 7 and introduces nature and environmental stewardship through a monthly theme with a book, an activity and a hike.

Chase Dittmar: 2025 Illinois 4-H Young Alumni Award Recipient

Chase Dittmar received the 2025 Illinois 4-H Young Alumni Award. A Jo Daviess County 4-H alum and nine-year member, Dittmar exemplifies the values of honesty, hard work, and a commitment to making a positive impact. His journey began with a 4-H beekeeping workshop that sparked a passion for apiculture and environmental stewardship. At just 21 years old, he is the founder, owner, and operator of Dry Creek Beekeeping. This agritourism business offers immersive experiences, including tours, honey tastings, classes, and a “boot camp” for aspiring beekeepers. “Chase’s journey as a Jo Daviess County 4-H member is marked by impressive accomplishments, leadership roles, and active participation in a wide range of projects and events,” says Angela Miller. “I hope Chase’s story serves as an inspiration to current and future members.”



Chase Dittmar

Chase’s journey as a Jo Daviess County 4-H member is marked by impressive accomplishments, leadership roles, and active participation in a wide range of projects and events.

Angela Miller, 4-H Program Coordinator

Volunteers inducted into Hall of Fame

The Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame recognizes 4-H volunteers who have a track record of exemplary service to 4-H and outstanding leadership skills. Three volunteers were honored for their dedication to the 4-H program due to their leadership and mentoring roles within each county.

Debra Girot, Jo Daviess County

Debra Girot was inducted into the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame in recognition of her 17 years of service as a 4-H leader. Her commitment has left an unforgettable mark on the Jo Daviess County 4-H program. She also raised four children in the 4-H program. Her involvement spans countless roles: food stand coordinator, club leader, community service organizer, parent, fundraiser, and steadfast supporter. One of her club’s most impactful projects is the creation and maintenance of a community garden in Elizabeth, IL.



Debra Girot,
Jo Daviess County

Rita Koch, Stephenson County

For the past 25 years, Rita Koch has served as the 4-H poultry project superintendent in Stephenson County. She has also hosted clinics to teach youth showmanship skills, ensuring members are well-prepared for success. As a Certified Pullorum Tester, she has tested birds for countless 4-H youth in both Stephenson and Ogle counties.



Rita Koch,
Stephenson County

Koch has also been a poultry project leader, assistant club leader for the Country Cuzins 4-H Club, and a poultry judge for neighboring counties for 15 years. In addition, she serves on the Stephenson County 4-H & Extension Foundation Committee, supporting the growth of 4-H programs countywide.

Karalin Lyons, Winnebago County

Karalin Lyons has been in 4-H as a youth, now as a club leader, and a parent to her kids, who are 4-H members. In her 22 years of involvement in 4-H, her dedication to helping community youth thrive and learn life-long skills stands out. Lyons stepped into the role of club leader when the club was going through a transitional period, and was at risk of ending altogether. Now, more than a decade later, the club is still thriving.



Karalin Lyons,
Winnebago County

I volunteer as a club leader because I learned so much and grew as a person and a leader in my years in 4-H as a youth, and I wanted my own kids to be able to enjoy the same experience. Adding more kids and families to our fun, and growing and leading a long-standing Illinois 4-H club has been such a fun and worthwhile endeavor!

Karalin Lyons, 4-H Club Leader



Choosy Eaters Can Become Healthy Eaters, Too!

Tashara Grandys, MS RDN



Workforce Excellence



TAMMY BENÉ RECEIVES INDIVIDUAL EXTENSION EXCELLENCE AWARD

Office Support Specialist Tammy Bené received an Individual Extension Excellence award for her adaptability, organizational leadership, and commitment to service, which have significantly impacted staff, volunteers, and the community. Bené exemplifies professionalism, customer service, and dedication, consistently going above and beyond her role since starting in 2016. Her collaboration, mentorship, and problem-solving foster strong teamwork and high office morale.



DIANE REINHOLD AND TEAM AWARDED INTERDISCIPLINARY STATE TEAM EXCELLENCE AWARD

Nutrition and Wellness Educator Diane Reinhold and her team received the Interdisciplinary State Team Excellence award. To combat food waste and promote healthy eating, Illinois Extension's Nutrition and Wellness and SNAP-Ed teams launched the educational project, "Picking, Preparing, and Storing Fruits and Vegetables", to help families better select, store, and prepare fresh produce.



DEB KOCH RECOGNIZED WITH MERITORIOUS SUPPORT SERVICE AWARD

Office Manager Deb Koch received the Meritorious Support Service Award. This nationally authorized recognition is designed to pay tribute to the many staff who have shown support for the mission, program, and professional staff of Cooperative Extension. Koch demonstrated outstanding support for Extension staff, programming, and fiscal management throughout her 14-year career. Koch has been an integral part of the Unit 1 team, proving to be adept with policy, people, and processes.



ANGELA MILLER PART OF NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED TEAM

Jo Daviess 4-H Program Coordinator Angela Miller was recognized with her team at the National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals conference in Georgia. The team, which organized a two-day, hands-on Campapalooza field trip event, was awarded the North Central Regional winner for the Excellence in Peer Professional Development Award and the National Winner for the Excellence in Peer Professional Development Award.



KELLY LAFFERTY AWARDED STATE AND NATIONAL AWARDS

4-H Youth Development Educator Kelly Lafferty was awarded the Distinguished Service Award from Illinois Extension Professionals for Youth Education. Lafferty also received a Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals. These awards recognize outstanding contributions from professionals with seven to 15 years of service.





Volunteers: The Heart of Extension



Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists help others learn to grow

Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties stay involved in their communities throughout the year. Their impact has been felt and seen by community member and partner organizations.

Throughout our counties, Master Gardener volunteers are involved in a wide array of projects, including demonstration gardens, community gardens, historic gardens, educational presentations, plant-a-row for the hungry, Master Gardener Helpline, and more. Master Naturalists also volunteer in many ways, such as seed collections, citizen science, invasive control, educational presentations, and more.



125

Master Gardener Volunteers



4,923

Volunteer Hours from Master Gardeners



34

Master Naturalist Volunteers



1,500

Volunteer Hours from Master Naturalists



188

Master Gardener Help Line calls resolved



Master Gardeners Barbara Flores, Karn Mejudhon, and Lorna Carlson accept the Hunger Champion award from Rockford, IL Mayor Tom McNamara alongside County Director Margaret Larson.

Master Gardeners recognized with Hunger Champion Award

Rows of produce, hands in soil, and hearts dedicated to making sure their neighbors are fed— that is what earned Winnebago County Master Gardeners this year’s Hunger Champion award at the 2025 Mayor’s Hunger Luncheon. Illinois Extension Master Gardeners were recognized and awarded the Hunger Champion award for their participation in and implementation of Plant a Row for the Hungry in Winnebago County. The Hunger Champion Award honors individuals and organizations that demonstrate an ongoing commitment to ending hunger through meaningful action in their community.



25,000

Pounds of produce donated from Plant-A-Row

Horticulture



GARDENING FOR FOOD, FLOWERS, AND FUN RETURNS FOR ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

The annual Gardening for Food, Flowers, and Fun continued to be a popular early rite of spring. The day drew in nearly 100 participants, who attended a keynote session and two breakout sessions. Regional experts and local Master Gardeners led a variety of educational sessions, on topics like the hidden world of plant galls, edible gardens, floral arranging, and embracing sustainability in your landscape. The day ended with a keynote presentation by Mark Dwyer of Landscape Prescriptions by MD, who shared his presentation on incorporating annuals into the landscape.



JOYS OF GARDENING CONNECTS COMMUNITY TO LOCAL EXPERTS

Joys of Gardening in Stephenson County brought local Extension staff and experts and their knowledge to nearly 100 garden enthusiasts. The day consisted of a keynote speaker and two breakout sessions. David Stevens, curator at the Longenecker Horticultural Gardens, was the keynote speaker and gave an introduction to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum and the Longenecker Horticultural Gardens. Participants chose from a variety of breakout topics, such as seed starting, growing great apples, designing a whimsical garden, fruit tree pruning, and more.



SPRING GARDENING SERIES OFFERS VARIETY OF TOPICS

Each year, the Spring Break Gardening series in Jo Daviess County brings many education programs to community members. Topics this year included seed starting, rainwater management, vermicomposting, spring centerpieces, invasive species, herbs, gardening with wildlife, pollinators, and tree health. With class sizes ranging from five to 15 participants, attendees were able to participate in engaging discussion with local expertise, do hands-on learning, and gather research-based information.



NEW MASTER GARDENERS TRAINED IN STEPHENSON COUNTY

The Stephenson County Extension office hosted a Master Gardener Training. During the training, 13 participants attended eight educational sessions, gaining the skills needed to be successful gardeners and volunteers. Course topics include soils and fertility, woody ornamentals/pruning, organic gardening, vegetables, houseplants, fruits, insect identification and control, weed management, composting, and University of Illinois resources. Master Gardener Trainees go on to join as volunteers, serving their communities through many paths. These new Master Gardeners have gone on to do community outreach, garden support, educational presentations, and more.





Offices and Staff



Barb Curry Retires after 30+ years of dedication to Extension

After 30+ years with Extension, Barb Curry retired. Working most recently as a SNAP-Ed community worker in Stephenson county, Curry's commitment to her community and the mission of Extension was clear. She has been a trusted community partner in Stephenson County for many years. Her work with local agencies and organizations, teaching nutrition lessons to those in need, has had a lasting positive impact in Freeport and beyond. Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago staff are sad to see her leave, but wish her well in her next journey.



Barb Curry most recently served as a SNAP-Ed community outreach worker. Staff celebrated her retirement after 30+ years of dedication to Extension's mission.



7
Educators serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties



19
Full-time staff

Extension staff and Educators serve local communities

Housed in four offices in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, University of Illinois Extension is proud to have 18 full-time staff, including seven educators. Local staff provide many services to their communities, including educational programs hosted by Extension, conferences bringing an array of expertise to community members, and professional assistance, to name a few.

Promotion recognition: Kelly Lafferty

4-H Youth Development Educator Kelly Lafferty received a promotion, for which she was recognized at the Illinois Extension Annual Conference. Lafferty has greatly impacted the lives of many youth in our community during her years serving as an educator.



Kelly Lafferty, 4-H youth development educator

Extension Council

The Extension Council is an advisory group that meets four times a year and provides information and feedback to the Extension director. Council members are from each county and are invited to serve on multi-year terms. The composition of the Extension Council closely reflects the counties they represent. Our council members may be our biggest champions but, more importantly, they serve as representatives of their communities and advocates for Extension success.

Jo Daviess County

Ray Massingill	Mike Dittmar	Amy Hardwicke
Garnet Fee	Cody Koester	Drew Groezinger

Stephenson County

Deborah Lischwe	Ethan Trampel	Sheila Keene
Tom Scheider	Chris Urish	Kevyn-Ann Sutter

Winnebago County

Christopher Scrol	Mia Chase
Jim Webster	Dan Obert
Aaron Booker	Constance McCarthy
Lori Walsh	Ann Somers

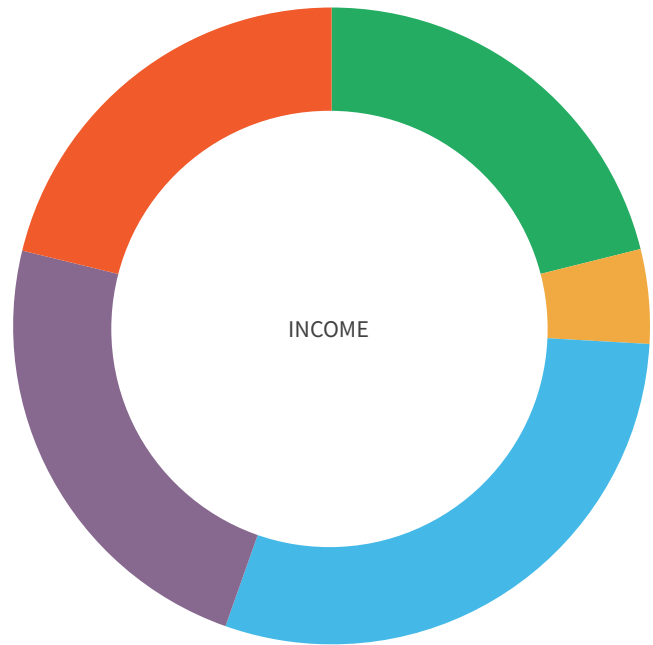


Unit staff meet as a group four times a year for professional development.

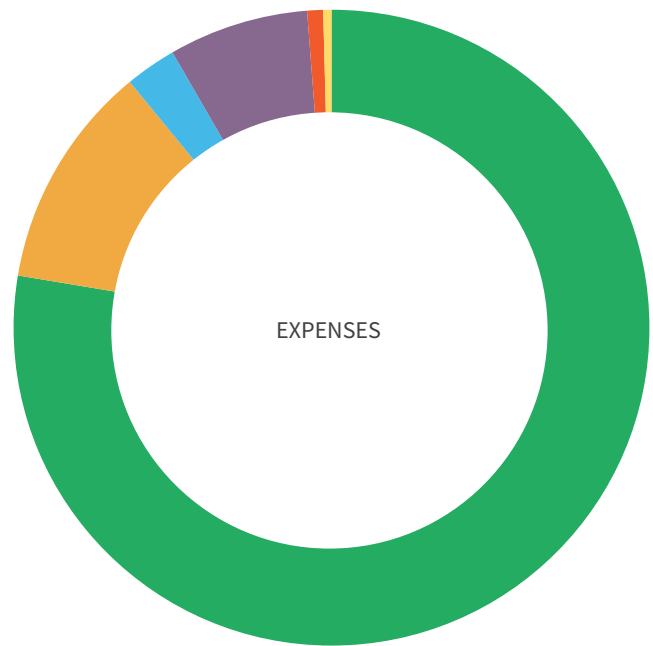
Finances

We are fortunate to have financial support from five local entities with whom we partner: The Boone-Winnebago Farm Bureau, the Jo Daviess County Extension and 4-H Foundation, the Stephenson County 4-H and Extension Foundation, the Winnebago County 4-H Show Board, and the Winnebago County 4-H and Extension Foundation.

The Show Board and the Foundations are led by volunteers with a commitment to supporting 4-H and Extension activities, and although their role on the boards is focused on fundraising in support of us, they are most often tireless champions of the work of Extension and 4-H in our communities, and many hold additional volunteer roles.



	Amount	Source
	\$352,885.00	County Board
	\$80,000.00	Local Donations
	\$493,012.75	State
	\$390,942.87	Self-Supporting Funds
	\$354,263.01	FNP/Federal



	Amount	Source
	\$1,297,185.00	Salaries/Wages
	\$191,077.16	Rent/Utilities
	\$43,500.00	Travel
	\$118,841.47	Program Expenses
	\$13,500.00	Equipment
	\$7,000.00	EEOC/Accommodations



STAFF

Margaret Larson
County Extension Director

Gina Adams
Educator, 4-H Youth
Development-Metro

Tammy Bene
Office Support Specialist

Holly Breuer
Office Support Assistant

Alex Burbach
Program Coordinator,
Jo Daviess County

Barb Curry
SNAP-ED Community Worker,
Winnebago County

Erin Garner
Program Coordinator,
Winnebago County

Tashara Grandys
Educator, Snap-ED

Nikki Keltner
Program Coordinator,
Stephenson County

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Kelly Lafferty
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Development

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Educator, Local Food Systems
and Small Farms

Marcia McMahon
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Winnebago County

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Program Coordinator,
4-H Jo Daviess County

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Wellness

Jennifer Schultz
Program Coordinator,
4-H Stephenson County

Kathryn Seebruck
Educator, Crop Sciences

Stanley (Jay) Solomon
Educator, Natural Resources,
Environment & Energy

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youtube.com/@jodaviess-stephenson-winne8448



Illinois Extension

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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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