



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

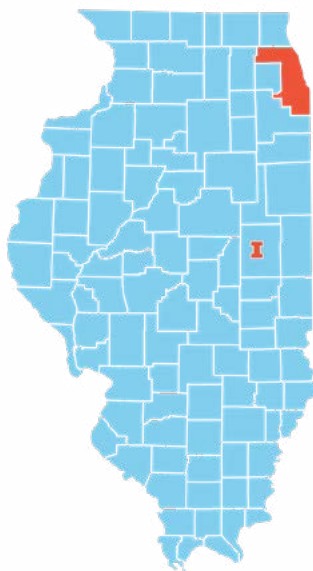


Serving Cook County
ILLINOIS EXTENSION IMPACT REPORT 2025





Willene Buffett
County Director



A message from the County Director

We live in an ever-evolving and rapidly changing world. Despite adapting to technological advances and the loss of some funding, University of Illinois Extension has remained nimble and responsive. We have pushed our creativity and sharpened our ability to adapt—and we are better because of it.

Virtual, asynchronous, and online programming enable us to provide learning opportunities for more county residents. Videos, podcasts, blogs, newsletters, and online publications help us reach new audiences and connect with people where and how they learn.

We continuously evolve and search for innovative ways to improve the lives of Chicago and suburban Cook County residents.

With the support of key stakeholders, the tireless effort of our volunteers, and partnerships with local agencies and organizations, our dedicated staff develops and provides programming that reflects the needs and concerns of the individuals and communities we serve.

I am pleased to share this Impact Report. You and your constituents can receive firsthand benefits from our programs. Please contact us for assistance.

Willene Buffett
County Director

Cover photo:
Master Gardeners work
with garden participants at
Sertoma Star Services in Alsip,
IL. Photo by Nancy Kreith

Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

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

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

2025 Engagement

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

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

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

On July 4, 2025, the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act eliminated all funding for Illinois Extension’s SNAP-Ed nutrition education program. Here’s the impact by the numbers:

Up to \$135M Estimated Annual Loss in Future Economic Returns on Investment in Illinois	2 million+ Residents Lost Access to Food and Health Education	1,754 Partners Including Schools, Food Banks, Early Childhood Centers, Public Health Departments, and Local Agencies Impacted	200+ Staff Members Affected by Layoffs	30 Years of Infrastructure and Network Building for the SNAP-Ed Program Lost
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Food and Agriculture



Maintain a safe and accessible food, fibers, and biofuel supply
Supporting the coordination and capacity building necessary for producing and maintaining economically viable, safe, equitable, culturally responsive, and resilient food, feed, fiber, and bioenergy systems in Illinois.



2,025

Attendees in all programs last year



116

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered



54

Gardens supported by Extension staff and volunteers



23,312 lbs.

Volume of produce donated to local communities



\$42,195

Value of donated food



397

Master Gardener volunteers



27,254

Volunteer hours donated



\$934,554

Value of volunteer hours



54,790

Information services provided by Master Gardeners



265

Expert consultations related to food



IAM-Chi Grant program supports innovative urban farmers in Cook county

Urban farmers have historically been unable to access USDA programs, even as their communities face affordability crises and food insecurity. To increase equity and supply chain resiliency in Chicago's urban food systems, Illinois Extension is piloting the Innovative Agriculture Micro-grant program called IAM-Chi. Twenty-nine projects have been supported across Cook County, including indoor, controlled-environment growing operations, raised-bed infrastructure, and solar-powered wash-pack stations.



Newly installed wheelchair accessibility mat.

A school on the southwest side of Chicago installed four high tunnels for increased food production for their community, leading students to “connect for the first time, the dots between agriculture, health, and their daily meals... Sparking curiosity and conversations about farming, climate resilience, and community impact.” The school estimates that more than 100 students have participated in programming through their hoop houses.

At a peri-urban farm, the school established a new irrigation system that “reduces the time our staff spend watering and prevents problems with giving plants too much or too little water.” With support from the IAM-Chi grant, they increased their community food subscription boxes by 33%.

In Edgewater, community organizers, led by their disabled colleagues, worked together to apply for a wheelchair accessible mat for their community garden. This transformed accessibility in their raised beds, opening the community space to a broader, more diverse audience.



Repairing raised beds at community outreach organization.



Moore at the farmers' market.



Confidence gained as Illinois Extension training grows a business

Five years after completing Cook County Extension's Master Urban Farmer Training Program, Chamika Moore is busier yet more satisfied with life than she's ever been. She currently acts as development director of the Austin Garden Collective, which coordinates more than 25 garden spaces on Chicago's West Side. She also is the owner/operator of Sowed Up Farms, a 1/8-acre incubator farm on the South Side of Chicago.

Moore says that MUFTP provided her with a solid foundation that prepared her for the sustainable urban agriculture apprentice program she joined in 2023, as well as the incubator program that led to the establishment of her farm in 2025. To this day, she uses MUFTP resources as a guide and often finds the answers she's seeking in the class materials. "If I hadn't pursued education opportunities with Illinois Extension and Windy City Harvest, I wouldn't have had the confidence to start a business."

Moore has focused her growing efforts on "the healthy, nutritious food we've mostly forgotten about." She looks for vegetables that are not typically found in a grocery store—such as red habaneros, Carolina Red cow peas, collard varieties like tree, Georgia, blue, and purple, and edible flowers, such as nasturtium and marigolds. Her mission is to attract customers using these unique-looking varieties, so she can engage them in conversation about how "a farm is a pharmacy."

Reflecting on her journey to become an urban farmer, Moore says, "Twelve years ago, my mother-in-law was growing collards in her backyard. After cooking with them, I was inspired to grow what I could on a balcony right over the train tracks in Blue Island."



Produce from the garden.

Moore says, "Every day I think WOW I'm a farmer. I'm doing it! I can't believe all these crates of food are going to be eaten by someone else." She feels she's found purpose in life and was created to farm. Farming improves her life physically and emotionally, and more than a few people have said she's helped them, which makes her feel successful.



Moore's farm early in the growing season.



SNAP-Ed says farewell

For more than 30 years, our Community Outreach Workers have stood in classrooms, community centers, churches, food pantries, shelters, and parks across Cook County, asking the question that opens the door to connection: *“What’s your favorite meal?”*

Through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Education (SNAP-Ed), we have had the privilege of delivering nutrition education to countless children, families, and older adults in communities such as Des Plaines, Maywood, Cicero, Chicago Heights, Harvey, and Blue Island, among others.

You may have seen our **Eat.Move.Save.** brand on buses, trains, or billboards. We have been helping communities discover new foods, understand the power of balanced meals, and embrace physical activity. That commitment has grown into culturally meaningful recipes, a mobile app, and the Find Food IL map—a tool that connects residents with food pantries, meal sites, farmers markets, and SNAP-accepting grocers. We’ve partnered with food pantries to strengthen food distribution in ways that inspire healthier choices and greater dignity.

This year, we received difficult news: SNAP-Ed funding is ending.

But while this chapter is closing, our story is not ending. The University of Illinois remains committed to providing trusted, accessible nutrition education. In more than three decades, we have weathered name changes, leadership transitions, budget uncertainties, and technological shifts. Through it all, our mission and our heart have stayed the same.



Sensory gardening can benefit from the healing process of hospital patients



At Advocate Christ Hospital, a dedicated team of rehabilitation therapists—Caitlin Cronin (occupational therapy), Anna O’Connor (physical therapy), and Michelle Dilworth (recreational therapy)—has spearheaded an innovative garden program to support patient recovery and well-being. The team conducted extensive research on the therapeutic benefits of gardening, developed patient group guidelines, and integrated garden activities into therapy sessions.

Collaborating with Illinois Extension, the therapists received expert guidance on garden planning and design. Extension contributed raised beds, tools, soil, and plants to launch the program. Extension staff and Master Gardener volunteers also provide seasonal activities to engage patients.

- Spring: Patients planted herbs and pollinator-friendly flowers, later using the herbs in cooking therapy.
- Summer: Herb harvesting workshop allowed patients to learn about using and drying herbs while creating a lavender sachet (many patients’ favorite activity).
- Fall/Winter: Activities included harvest herbs, garden clean-up, and a winter container garden display workshop.

More than 15 patients, alongside staff, have actively maintained the garden year-round. Participants report enjoying the fresh air, hands-on activities, and sense of accomplishment. This program demonstrates how therapeutic gardening fosters physical rehabilitation, emotional well-being, and community connection, enriching patient care year-round.

Great experience! I learned quite a bit about gardening and when to plant flowers for different seasons. I love the twigs in the raised beds for the winter garden. I would have never thought to do that. How cool!”

Christ Hospital rehab patient



Advocate Christ hospital staff who work on the garden team.



Community



Support strong and resilient youth, families, and communities

Building more resilient youth, families, and community organizations across the state through greater civic engagement, volunteerism, and leadership.



2,277

Attendees in community programs last year



11,072

4-H experiences



1,728

Volunteer hours donated



81%

Minority youth engaged in 4-H



37%

Hispanic youth engaged in 4-H



\$59,253

Value of services performed by volunteers



Chicago HS for Agriculture student leaders explore food insecurity

Students at Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences identified food insecurity and agricultural literacy as key community issues through experiences in Illinois Extension programs. With guidance from Illinois Extension staff, they developed a team named Planting the Future and researched food access within the south side of Chicago. Students planned a Day of Action with the first-year class and created 500 microgreen grow kits to use as an educational tool within food-insecure neighborhoods. Student leaders led a workshop at Sherman School of Excellence, reaching 66 elementary school students. Planting the Future students continue to learn more about their food system and food justice within Chicago through service opportunities and hands-on experiences provided by Illinois Extension.



Investing in teen leaders who support youth.

4-H Teens as Teachers strengthens youth leadership across Cook county

The 4-H Teens as Teachers program provides teens with meaningful opportunities to develop leadership, communication, and teaching skills while supporting youth in their communities. Many after-school and summer programs struggle to find trained mentors who can engage children in hands-on learning. At the same time, teens often desire leadership roles but lack structured opportunities to practice and develop their leadership skills.

This year, Cook County Extension trained 16 Teen Teachers in lesson planning, youth engagement, and facilitation. Teens then led activities in STEM, gardening, Social & Emotional Learning, and healthy living at camps and afterschool programs. Their work reached 163 youth who benefited from relatable, near-peer role models.

The experience helped Teen Teachers grow in confidence, responsibility, and communication. Several shared that they now feel more comfortable speaking in front of groups and see themselves as leaders. One teen noted, "I learned how to guide younger kids and how much my voice can make a difference."

Because of Extension's support, communities gained enthusiastic mentors, young children experienced high-quality learning, and teens discovered new pathways in education, youth development, and service. The Teens as Teachers program continues to show how empowering youth creates lasting impact for both the teens who lead and the children they inspire.



Health



Maximize health equity and access and support health promotion

Advancing health equity, healthcare access, disease prevention, chronic illness management support, childhood wellness, and health promotion through integrated education, community partnerships, and systemic organizational changes.



27,507

Attendees in all programs last year



1,736

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered

INEP Community Partnerships



32

K-12 schools



70

Agencies, community centers, early childhood centers, or emergency food sites



694

Nutrition education classes



47

PSE changes adopted by partner organizations



Illinois Extension mental well-being programs bolster individual and community resilience

Cook County faces a large unmet need for mental health services. In 2023, 35% of the 1.2 million Cook County residents who needed behavioral health services did not receive them. Friends and family can be important influences in helping someone access the support, treatment, and services they need.

Illinois Extension conducted programming aimed at enhancing mental health. How to Boost Your Mental Well-being, Putting Self Back into Self-Care, and Racial Healing Circles equipped participants with mindful, practical self-care strategies.



Putting Self Back Into Self-Care program participants.

These initiatives reached older adults, residents at a women's shelter, library patrons, Spanish-speaking families, churchgoers, and working professionals.

These statements highlight what 100 participants took from these programs:

- "...I plan to change my narrative as that's the only thing I can change as I spread awareness and kindness."
- "...to be more aware of things that I used to think or say without really being aware of the impact it has on me or other people."
- "This workshop helped me realize how attainable and effective self-care can be..."

Self-care can play a role in maintaining a person's mental health and supporting treatment and recovery in people living with a mental illness. These Extension initiatives will contribute to enhanced quality of life, longer lifespan, better family life, and societal benefits such as higher productivity, improved educational outcomes, lower crime rates, and a stronger economy.



Racial Healing Circle program participants.



EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH NATURE

Illinois Extension is expanding opportunities for residents to connect with nature for increased health and well-being. The Nature Wellness Walk program leads residents on mindful and sensory walks through forest preserves in southern and western Cook County. A new partnership with Green Hills Public Library in Palos Hills expanded the program to Little Red Schoolhouse in Willow Springs. This partnership allows the program to expand its reach and offer the walks to a new audience. Seventy-nine Cook County residents have joined the walks to date, and the instructors were recently certified as Forest Therapy Practitioners by Forest Therapy Hub.



OPIOID OVERDOSE PREVENTION AT FOREST PARK LIBRARY

Cook County Department of Public Health reported 686 opioid-involved overdose deaths in suburban Cook County in 2022. One of the neighborhoods most affected was Forest Park. Illinois Extension has provided an opioid overdose prevention program, along with the distribution of free naloxone, since 2023. Recently, Extension started distributing free fentanyl test strips because 90% of the deaths in suburban Cook County involved fentanyl. In September 2025, Extension partnered with Forest Park Library to deliver the program to 14 participants. Results: 86% stated they were somewhat or very likely to use something learned in the program, and 93% were somewhat or very likely to share the information presented.



ILLINOIS EXTENSION LAUNCHES NEW WEBINAR SERIES "JOURNEY TO HEALTH"

Illinois Extension in Cook County hosted a seven-week webinar series called "Journey to Health" to share practical resources, try to reduce negative health outcomes, inspire positive behavior, and strengthen communities through knowledge, conversation, and action. Throughout the series, a total of 87 participants learned about sleep, stress and burnout, polyvagal theory, maternal wellbeing, plant-based eating, mindful eating, and fatal opioid overdose prevention. Survey results demonstrate that participants plan to take time to decompress and breathe, be more aware of physical and mental health needs, and slow down and enjoy their food. Extension plans to offer other health-focused webinars.





Economy



Grow a prosperous economy through lifelong learning and development

Fostering a resilient and future-ready workforce through delivering educational programs and promoting lifelong learning.



12,606

Attendees in all programs last year



181

Educational sessions offered



This experience shifted teachers' mindset toward student-centered instruction grounded in classroom discussion.



STEM team connects K-12 teachers to high quality science

Since adopting the Next Generation Science Standards, the STEM Team has focused on helping local teachers understand the what, why, and how of NGSS-aligned teaching and learning through curriculum-based professional learning.



Teachers work together to understand science content and practices.

This fosters a resilient and future-ready workforce in two ways:

- It advances teachers' professional expertise.
- Students, the future workforce, benefit from enhanced NGSS-aligned instruction and are thus better prepared for college, career, and citizenship in the 21st century.

To advance teachers' understanding and skills with NGSS-aligned instruction, the STEM team has hosted OpenSciEd Summer Institutes every June since 2023. OpenSciEd is a non-profit focused on disrupting science education by providing open-source (free), NGSS-aligned K-12 curricula. In 2025, for the first time, the STEM team was able to support teachers of all grades from K-12 by offering comprehensive professional learning institutes for Elementary, Middle, and High School OpenSciEd curricula.

Institute evaluations show a strong shift in teacher confidence in the efficacy of and ability to facilitate strategies that leverage student ideas and student sensemaking — or “figuring out”. The PL shifted teachers' mindset toward student-centered instruction grounded in classroom discussion. Teachers across K-12 intend to implement units as written (vs. modifying or just using a few strategies) and to facilitate more student-led discussions.



OpenSciEd Elementary curriculum development draws to a close

Since Illinois adopted the Next Generation Science Standards in 2014, K-12 teachers have been seeking instructional materials to bring this new vision for science education to life for students. OpenSciEd meets this need by creating open-source, high-quality curricula for K-12 science education. Illinois Extension STEM educators Susan Gasper and Meghan McCleary have served as OSE curriculum writers since 2019, developing and revising multiple units at various grades, K-12. In 2025, OSE held a major share of the middle school science curriculum market, outpacing commercial publishers. OSE's full K-12 sequence will be available in early 2026 when the final elementary units are published online.



STEM team meets schools and districts where they are

Like many Extension teams, STEM Educators develop audience-specific programming and facilitate existing nationally recognized programming to meet community needs. This year, the STEM team did both, supporting school districts working to adopt high-quality instructional materials in science by adapting existing OpenSciEd professional learning programs to meet district time constraints and staffing models. They prepared teachers and administrators to make curricular decisions by analyzing how curriculum features can meet district needs, and they developed programs to support teachers in learning about and adopting reform science pedagogical strategies, regardless of which curriculum they use.



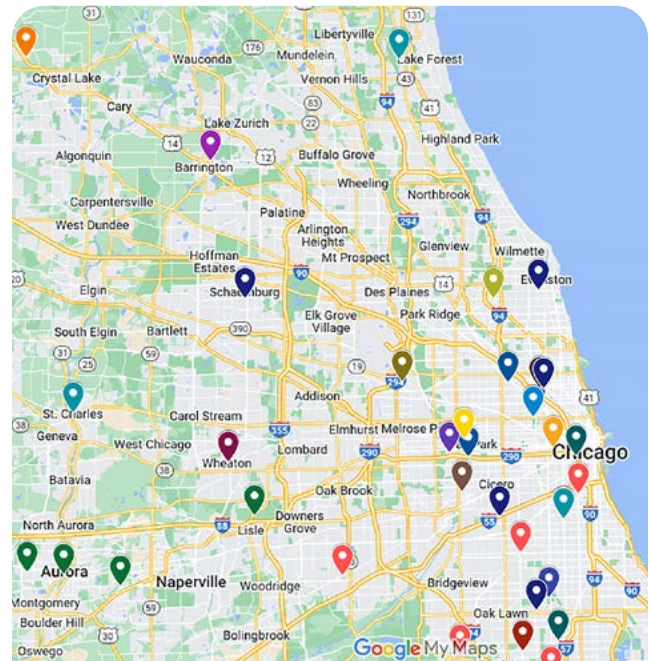
New program connects teachers to high-impact strategies for the science classroom

Making Sense of Sensemaking, a new program, focuses on the high-leverage strategy of facilitating sensemaking. Sensemaking, embedded into quality science curricula, engages students in key science practices, positively impacts learning, and contributes to equitable science learning environments. MSS responds to a need for professional learning experiences that motivate K-12 teachers to take up key practices aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards. Initial feedback shows that teachers increased their understanding of the role of sensemaking in science learning, their comfort in responding to students' ideas in ways that expand sensemaking, and their readiness to adopt these shifts in the classroom.

Teachers increased their understanding of the role of sensemaking in science learning, and readiness to adopt these shifts in the classroom.

Extension's Seed Swap Map promotes biodiversity and community in Chicagoland

Annually, Cook County Extension compiles a list of Chicagoland Area Seed Swaps. We support many of these seed swaps with seed saving and viability fact sheets, pest ID cards, and other educational resources to promote biodiversity and food sovereignty. Our 2024 seed swap map received more than 45,000 views. Seed swaps are an excellent way for gardeners to try new varieties, find unique heirloom seeds, preserve diverse plant genetics, and build community.



Map of Chicagoland Seed Swap locations.





Extension in the News

LOCAL TEAM AND CAMPUS ONLINE COURSE STAFF RECEIVE THE ILLINOIS EXTENSION EXCELLENCE IN INNOVATION AWARD FOR FIELD-BASED PROGRAM STAFF

Illinois Extension advanced landscape education through its Virtual Native Landscape Design Workshop, equipping Cook County residents with the expertise to establish sustainable native gardens. Over three years, the program engaged 455 participants, delivered individualized coaching to 199, and was supported by 48 volunteers and nine staff. By leveraging the University's digital course tools, the team streamlined submission and review processes. Outcomes were significant: 90% intend to plant native species, 70% will remove invasives, and 86% rated coaching “excellent.” Participants departed with tailored designs, plant resources, and connections to Conservation@Home.



ENGAGING URBAN COMMUNITIES: 2025 NORTH CENTRAL NATIONAL URBAN EXTENSION LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Cook County Extension shared the success of the Nutrition for Recovery program with North Central peers. The multi-session program illustrates how proper nutrition and other healthy lifestyle habits can support the recovery process. Through facilitated discussion, colleagues explored the challenges of substance use in urban communities, as well as the roles Extension can play in supporting individuals in the recovery process. Studies demonstrate that nutrition education is an essential component of substance use treatment programs and can improve substance use treatment outcomes.

COOK COUNTY RECOGNIZED DURING EXTENSION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Excellence awards are a way that Illinois Extension acknowledges the efforts of individuals and teams across the state in developing programs that improve their communities. Two Cook County Extension staff members, Whitney Baldwin, commercial agriculture educator, and Maria Gutierrez, 4-H youth development (Metro) educator, received the Inclusive Excellence Award for Field-Based Program Staff, Team, for their work on the Illinois 4-H Better Together Committee. The committee drives inclusion and equity by implementing the statewide 2022-23 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access Strategic Plan.



Environment



Sustain and restore natural resources in home and public spaces
Bolstering climate resilience through education and outreach for a sustainable future.



22,742

Attendees in all programs last year



424

Educational, online,
or asynchronous sessions offered



133

Master Naturalist volunteers



9,422

Volunteer hours donated



\$323,084

Value of services performed by volunteers



61

Expert consultations related to the environment

The Gray School Garden will provide a calming, natural gathering space for students, staff, and the local community while promoting responsible ecological stewardship through showcasing the beauty of native plants and educating visitors about their myriad benefits.

Dr. Nicholas Kotis,
Principal, Gray Elementary School



Volunteers certify CCA Academy's PermaPark as a Conservation@Home site in North Lawndale

Conservation@Home certified the CCA Academy's ½-acre food forest in North Lawndale this fall, a space that incorporates permaculture practices, robust pollinator support, rain gardens, bioswales, and dozens of native plant species. Their curricula, for all grades, include a focus on urban agriculture, agroforestry, and native ecosystems. During the certification, Jerry Hossli – a Master Naturalist and Master Gardener – recounted trees he planted here years ago. The facility is open 24/7 year-round, and has multiple gathering spaces (or "living rooms"). All are welcome any time. This certification is in a key Chicago neighborhood and serves as an excellent example for other schools and community groups.

Native school garden connects community and students to nature in Portage Park

At William P. Gray Elementary School in Chicago, students, teachers, and the community designed a garden not only to beautify but also to contribute to the local ecosystem. With the guidance of Jessica Pupovac (garden project lead) and Master Gardener Sarah Staggs, the new native garden contributes to local stormwater management, attracts pollinators, and teaches students and the local community about using native landscape design to help control flooding.

Program Coordinator Meg Marsan worked with teacher Halina Fuja to teach 20 students about native design and how to make seed balls for use in the garden. With support from Illinois Extension, students prepared and planted garden beds and collected seeds.



Master Naturalists lead educational programs throughout the Forest Preserves of Cook County

The Master Naturalist program in Cook County offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities, including environmental education programs, community science, restoration and stewardship, and the Conservation@Home program. In August 2025, MNs partnered with the Forest Preserves of Cook County for the All About Birds event at Twenty-Sixth Street Woods. Volunteers ranged across all levels of the MN program, some with a decade of volunteering as naturalists, and others having recently completed the volunteer training in Spring 2025. During All About Birds, MNs presented tables on the biology of birds found in the Forest Preserves, created arts and crafts with kids, gave away birdhouses to those who wanted to create habitat in their own yards, and guided event attendees on bird hikes along the Salt Creek trail system.



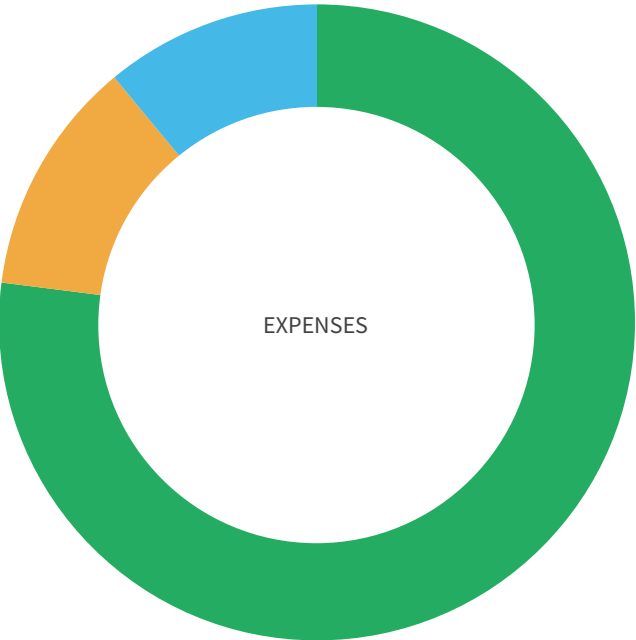
Master Naturalists lead a Tree ID program for families at Trailside Museum.

Throughout the year, many of these Master Naturalist volunteers lead environmental education programs at nature centers around Cook County. At River Trail Nature Center and Little Red Schoolhouse, volunteers facilitate experiential education tables year-round, on selected Fridays when the nature centers would otherwise be closed to the public. As the first naturalists that visitors see when they enter these Forest Preserves, MNs teach families about wildlife, native plants, and seasonal changes throughout the year. At the Trailside Museum, you can find MNs leading educational tables once a month on Thursdays, from April to October.



Master Naturalist teaches residents at the All About Birds event.

Financial Report



Amount	Source
77%	Wages
12%	Operating Expenses
11%	Leases

An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.
Benjamin Franklin



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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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