



Cook County Extension Council Meeting
Thursday, March 19, 2025
University of Illinois Extension
8751 S. Greenwood Ave., Suites 112-122
Chicago, IL 60619
Minutes

Meeting Attendees: James Flagg, Eric Meredith, Geri Redd, Mary Harkenrider, Dedra Ries, Chera Parham, and Richard Juarez
Staff Attendees: Leonard Parker, Katie Boynton, Dominique Cobbs, Rainah Folk, James McCombs, and Aida Peralta

Welcome and Introductions

Chair, Richard Juarez, called the meeting to order at 10:05 AM.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

Minutes from the December 18 meeting were reviewed and approved.

County Director Updates

New Unit Positions. *Asst. Dir. Parker.* The previously named Family and Consumer Science team, now known as Health and Community Wellness (HCW), has three specialized areas of expertise: Food and Health Systems, Food and Nutrition, and Health and Family Wellness. The Cook County unit has hired individuals to fill two specialized areas: Food and Health systems (2 educators) and Food and Nutrition (1 educator). A decision was made to delay filling the Health and Family position.

Forest Preserves 5-year agreement. *Asst. Dir. Parker.* The Forest Preserves 5-year agreement has been signed by the county board president (Toni Preckwinkle) and other key Forest Preserve officials (finance director and newly appointed Forest Preserves Director, Adam Bianchi). Director Buffett has shared copies of the agreement for the regional, campus, and Extension Cook County files, respectively.

Old Business

Extension council recruitment updates. *Asst. Dir. Parker.* Recommendation of new members for the council has been shared with Leonard. Efforts are continuously being made to recruit new members.

- James Flagg proposed new candidates for Extension Council Membership.
 - Asst. Dir. Parker will follow up with candidates once contact information is received.
- Dedra asked for clarification on the total number of council members allowed
 - The council should be comprised of a minimum of 15 members.

Updates from meetings with program teams: *Council.* Council members are asked to share updates about their interactions with Extension programs, teams, etc.

- Mary Harkenrider: Local Foods Systems and Small Farms Business Plan presentations for new and beginning farmers. Finalists presented business plans with ~150 attendees
- Geri Redd: Raised concerns with ESAC about volunteer concerns with registration system. Dr. Vann has noted the issue. Proposals to the state for increased funding for Extension.

New Business

Extension County Board. *Rainah Folk.* Under Illinois Law 505 ILCS 45/7-8, a county board shall be established in each county upon the request of the director of extension of the University of Illinois to facilitate effective cooperation between the extension councils and the county governing board. Every reasonable effort must be made to establish a functioning County Extension Board that consists of extension council members and appointed Cook County Commissioners.

- Asst. Dir. Parker provided additional clarification about target commissioners near Extension offices.
- Mary asked for clarification about number of members required for the Extension County Board.
 - Rainah: 2 men and 2 women from the Extension Council and 3 appointed commissioners make up the Extension County Board.



- James Flagg asked for clarification on Extension Council member appointments to the Extension County Board.
 - Leonard: We are moving in the direction towards nominating and appointing member to the County Board.
- Geri asked for clarification on the timeline for establishing the Extension County Board.
 - Rainah: The Extension County Board should be established at the start of the new program year.
- Mary asked for clarification about the establishment of the Extension Law and if there had previously been a board.
 - Rainah: The law was established in 1963. With the turnover of the Cook County Board President in 2013, the Extension County Board was dismantled.

Team Updates. *James McCombs and Dominique Cobbs.* James McCombs has transitioned from SNAP-Ed program to the newly established Health and Community Wellness team. His new role, Food and Health Systems Educator, focuses on nutrition education, expanding reach and engaging in new topics, reaching audiences that are outside of the target area which SNAP-Ed has defined under the former grant. Educators have been tasked with focusing on various aspects of social relations—developing professional development, workforce development and awareness materials. Dominique Cobbs is working with an Illinois Science Policy Program scholar, Mary, who has helped to conduct a virtual forum targeted at decision makers in suburban cook county to bring awareness to the maternal and child health crisis. The findings from the virtual form will help to develop a policy briefing.

- Mary asked for clarification about how the HCW team will put forth education for those engaged in hydroponic farms across the south suburban areas and what the partnership looks like.
 - James: For walking trails, the team provides best practices and guidance around accessibility, connect partners with educational resources that can be used to promote physical activity and engagement. For food pantries, the team provides educational materials to promote underused items within the food pantry setting, and strategies to promote healthy food items through displays and bundles.
- James made a comment about making connections to CEDA service, delivery and offerings. He is Interested in connecting to further promote equity, workforce development, and community impact for programming aligned with the tasks of the HCW team

New Hires. *Asst. Dir. Parker.* The Cook County unit has hired individuals to fill two specialized areas: Food and Health systems, Educators will not start until April 16, 2026.

Open Positions. *Asst. Dir. Parker.* The unit will hire 1 additional coordinator for the 4-H program and 2 coordinators for the Community Health team. The anticipated start date for these positions is mid-April.

ISU Fellow Updates. *Rainah Folk.* The Cook County unit has the opportunity to host 2 fellows from Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development. Eight candidates have been interviewed for the position. ISU Stevenson Center fellows grant the unit the capacity to extend outreach efforts and assess community needs through the County. The fellow may work with any program area that interests them. We expect to hear back about the fellow decisions sometime in late April or early May.

Announcements

- Cook County Extension to host the Missouri Community Action Network Poverty Simulation in October. Location, times, and dates are to be determined.
- CEDA has piloted a special projects initiative specifically to suburban cook county youth ages 16-24 about leadership development, building soft skills to go into their opportunities. Will connect us with Michelle Anderson and Dr. Michae Wiley who leads the initiative.
- Asst. Dir. Parker and Rainah will be present at the Illinois Extension Legislative Day to advocate for funding.
- CEDA is conducting a survey to collect real-time data about community needs. In addition to the survey, they are conducting focus groups across the county with partner organizations and specialized populations.

The next meeting date is June 18, 2026

The meeting adjourned at 10:51 AM

Minutes respectfully submitted by Rainah Folk.