



Cook County Extension Council Meeting  
Thursday, June 18, 2026  
4747 Lincoln Mall Dr Suite 604  
Matteson, IL 60443  
Minutes

**Meeting Attendees:** Geri Redd, Dedra Ries, Eric Meredith, and Richard Juarez

**New Council Members:** Lissette Ortegon

**Staff Attendees:** Rainah Folk, Aida Peralta, Leonard Parker, Willene Buffett, Elizabeth Cook, and Yvonne Izquierdo

**Welcome and Introductions**

Chair, Richard Juarez, called the meeting to order at 10:03 AM

**Minutes of Previous Meeting**

Minutes from the March 19 meeting were reviewed and approved.

**County Director Updates**

**Civil Service New Hires.** *Dir. Buffet.* 1 additional coordinator, Stryder Rodenberg, has been hired to support the 4-H program. Interviews for an Office Support Associate (OSA) for the Westchester office have been conducted to replace the former OSA, Shannon Towers, who has been promoted to program coordinator for the Community Health team.

**Find Food Illinois.** *Elizabeth Cook.* Elizabeth Cook, Food and Health Systems Educator, shared about the program she has been working on, *Find Food Illinois Navigators*—an initiative that she has been part of since its initiation in 2023 within Peoria, Tazwell, and Woodford counties. The program works to help navigate families through the complex safety net and find food resources that work for them. Proving the human connection to help families with personalized guidance that connects people with resources, specific resource/service providers, and following up long-term. Two pilots are taking place in Peoria and Chicago, where Extension has begun to train Food Navigators at different levels to solicit feedback and understand the process of helping communities and families get connected with food resources. The next steps are cohort development to understand what topics matter most to the community partners so that resources and trainings are reflective of community needs.

- Lissette: How does someone connect or get connected with a food navigator?
  - Elizabeth: Trainings are done through host organizations where the staff are trained as navigators. Those trained staff members go out into communities (food pantries, libraries, etc.) to help those who are looking for resources.

**Food and Nutrition.** *Yvonne Izquierdo.* Yvonne Izquierdo, Food and Nutrition Educator, is a licensed and registered dietitian nutritionist. She shared her program goals, to provide practical, accessible nutrition education that is grounded in evidence and responsive to community needs. Her programming will focus on providing food safety education for volunteers and students, SERV Saf training for cottage food makers who are starting food businesses, food preservation in connection with home gardening, agriculture and emergency preparedness. Other programmatic focus will be tailored to topics such as food as medicine and chronic illness prevention and management. She will tailor statewide programmatic offerings to meet the need of Cook County. Will explore and collaborate with colleagues around opioid use and recovery programming.

**Old Business**

**HB5728 Extension Funding Bill Update:** *Dir. Buffett.* The \$10M increase in funding has not been approved, we will continue to receive the line-item funding as allocated yearly to Extension. Talking points have been provided to County Directors should Council Members be in the presence of elected officials that represent Cook County. Council members are encouraged to meet with Director Buffett, Assistant Director Parker to determine how to approach meeting with elected officials about what is happening with Extension in Cook County and the state-wide funding request.

**ISU Fellows Update:** *Dir. Buffett.* ISU fellows provide key and vital support to the Cook County unit. They bring a wealth of experience in community engagement. For the 2026-27 academic year, we will have two fellows. More information about the fellows will be shared at the next meeting.

### **New Business**

**Council Reappointments.** *Rainah Folk.* Members should update the council grid if they intend to serve out their full term. The Council Roster is due to the Regional Director June 15.

**Officer Appointments.** *Rainah Folk.* DEFERRED to next meeting.

**Extension County Board.** *Dir. Buffett.* Every reasonable effort must be made to establish a functioning County Extension Board that consists of four extension council members and three appointed Cook County Commissioners. 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. Letters and emails have been sent to Cook County President, Toni Preckwinkle, requesting names for Cook County Commissioners to serve on the board. No response has been received. Director Buffett will appear at a future County Board meeting to make a public testimony. With the five-year intergovernmental agreement with the Forest Preserves of Cook County, there is a possibility for successful partnership in getting commissioners appointed to the Extension County Board. Recommendations for the Extension County Board council members will not be discussed until 3 names are received from President Preckwinkle.

- Geri: Is there anything that you need from council members to support you in this effort
  - Dir. Buffett: If you have any contacts with commissioners, please share names and we will arrange a time to meet with them to have conversations.
- Richard: Elections are approaching, should this be considered before making connections?
  - Dir. Buffett: We understand things can change.
- Dedra: We should know which commissioners are focused on Extension priorities. Make sure we are finding connections with people who are interested in what Extension has to offer. Will do a bit of research, but think it is important as we begin to be more strategic about who should be on the Board.
  - Dir. Buffett: Having those one-on-one conversations about new program areas and initiatives is important. Send an email or note to have some quick face-to-face conversations about priorities of the new Dean and Director of Extension regarding health and nutritional education.
- Richard: Can we get the current list of commissioners who are on the Forest Preserves Board?
  - Rainah: It will be sent with other items to be shared.

**Open Meetings Act Training.** *Rainah Folk and Dir. Buffett.* Proof of completion of the Open Meetings Act Training is required to be on file for all current council members. If you have completed OMA training through your organization, you do not need to redo the training. Council members should send evidence of completed training to Aida Peralta.

**Audit Committee Selection.** *Rainah Folk.* DEFERRED to next meeting.

**Updates from Meetings with Program Teams.** *Council.* No discussion was held.

**Council Recruitment Updates.** *Rainah Folk.* A meeting with a potential extension council member was held. They are interested in joining the council with a background in finance. We will move forward with an official letter to join the council. If there are other suggestions, please send them to Dir. Buffett, Asst. Dir. Parker, and Rainah.

**2026 Meeting Schedule.** *Council.* No discussion was held.

**Council Evaluations.** *Rainah Folk.* A fillable evaluation will be shared with council members. Paper copies will be available at the next meeting.

The next meeting date is September 17, 2026, at Chicago South Branch Office (8751 S Greenwood, #100, Chicago, IL 60619)

The meeting adjourned at 11:09AM

Minutes respectfully submitted by Rainah Folk.