



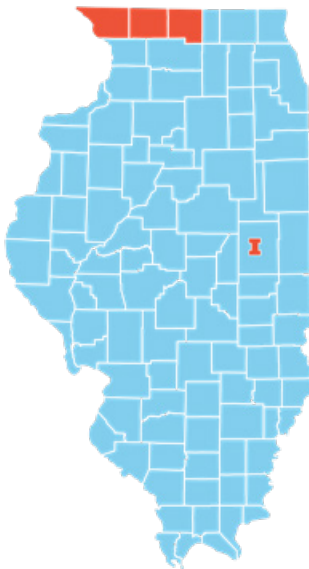
**EXTENSION**  
**IN ACTION**

Serving Jo Daviess, Stephenson,  
and Winnebago Counties





Margaret Larson  
County Extension Director



# Harnessing strengths and collaborating with others to make an impact locally

In our local communities, the impact of Extension programming extends far beyond just sitting at a desk in front of a computer. It's the dedication of our unit's staff and volunteers, their commitment to lifelong learning, and their proactive outreach to diverse partners that truly amplifies our impact.

Within Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, we are fortunate to have a team of dedicated staff available within a variety of program areas including, commercial agriculture, horticulture, local foods and small farms, natural resources, environment and energy, nutrition and wellness, SNAP-Education, and 4-H youth and development. These staff members possess a passion for their work and a commitment to ongoing learning and professional development. They continuously expand their skills and knowledge, staying abreast of the latest trends and innovations in their respective fields. This dedication not only enhances the quality of our programming but also enables us to adapt to evolving community needs and technological advancements.

Moreover, our staff recognize the importance of forging partnerships with diverse stakeholders and other staff throughout University of Illinois to maximize our impact. Whether it's reaching out to local schools for educational initiatives, collaborating with neighborhood efforts for programs, or engaging with environmental organizations for sustainability projects, our staff members are proactive in seeking out new and diverse partners.

In addition to staff, our volunteers are passionate about what they do and play a crucial role in extending our reach and impact

within the communities. These volunteers come from diverse backgrounds and bring a wealth of skills, experiences, and perspectives to our programming efforts. Whether they are assisting with workshops, organizing community events, or providing support to 4-H youth, their contributions are invaluable in enriching the experiences of our program beneficiaries.

What sets our volunteers apart is not only their enthusiasm and dedication but also their ability to connect with community members on a personal level. Their involvement enables us to reach communities and individuals who may otherwise be underserved or marginalized, thereby ensuring that our programming has a truly inclusive impact.

The strengths of our staff and volunteers lie not only in their individual expertise and dedication but also in their collective commitment to collaboration, learning, and community engagement. By continuously expanding their skills, reaching out to new partners, and extending our reach through volunteerism, they amplify the impact of our programming and create positive change in our local communities. As we continue to harness these strengths and build upon our collaborative efforts, we will further enhance our ability to address the diverse needs and aspirations of our community members, making a lasting difference in their lives and our communities.

I'm looking forward to seeing what our team achieves in the near future and beyond. It is an honor to lead these staff and volunteers.

Margaret Larson  
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Volunteers and youth collect various nuts.  
Photo credit: Karen Valkemmma



# Illinois Extension Makes an Impact

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's land-grant mission thrives each day through Extension's programs, resources, knowledge, and dedicated staff that are responsive to five grand challenge themes:



**Community:**  
Support Strong and Resilient Residents



**Economy:**  
Grow a Prosperous Economy



**Environment:**  
Sustain Natural Resources at Home and in Public Spaces



**Food:**  
Maintain a Safe and Accessible Food Supply



**Health:**  
Maximize Physical, Mental, and Emotional Health

## 2023 Engagement

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

657 Communities Served	745K+ Program Attendees	12.7M+ Webpage Views	58.5M+ Social Media Impressions	1.8M+ YouTube Views
555 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	90 Online Courses Accessed by 12K+ People	10,158 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,799 4-H Clubs	199,400 4-H Experiences

## Partnerships

5,682  
Program Volunteers

274  
Community Gardens

2,634  
School and Community Partners

## Resource Generation

\$15.2M+  
Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$463,368  
Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated

\$4M+  
External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners





## Research project brings together local young and beginning farmers

Extension in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties has been involved in a Young and Beginning Farmer Research Project for the last two years. The goal is to assess how young and beginning farmers leverage startup resources, identify potential market niches, and examine challenges and opportunities to increase production and expand markets. Additionally, the study served as an opportunity for Extension to connect with farmers to deliver educational programs. To start, program coordinator Jen Schultz interviewed more than 40 participants from across the region. On March 15, a special event was held in Freeport to share the progress of the research project and offer some great speakers sharing information on resources that had been identified during the interviews as areas where participants needed more information. The participants were also able to network with other local farmers.

Jen Schultz gave a brief update on the status of the research project. She was followed up by Iowa State University Extension and Outreach dairy specialist Larry Tranel, who presented on managing farm stress. A panel discussion on social media and other forms of marketing was led by three farmers — Andy Hazzard of Hazzard Free Farms, Phil Raines of Raines Honey Farms, and Drew Groezinger from Clara Joyce Flowers. Iowa State University Women in Ag program manager Madeline Schultz rounded out the day and spoke about succession planning and strategies to help prepare the farm business transition.





## Revitalized Durand community is a small town success story

Rural communities face many challenges — out-migration, an aging population, over reliance on large employers — but just because these rural communities are changing, does not mean that they are withering. A study by Mark White, Extension specialist and clinical associate professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, focused on 33 counties in northern and central Illinois, including Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties. The study, sponsored by Compeer Financial, used a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews to gather input from rural leaders.

White's findings from the study showed that rural communities can thrive, but to do so will require local action to actively address several basic issues: promote entrepreneurship, expand opportunities for agriculture enterprises, prepare young people for locally available jobs, invest in downtowns and other public spaces, fortify the community infrastructure and facilitate greater civic engagement and volunteer activity.

Turning these activities into concrete outcomes will require different resources, champions, and stakeholder coalitions.

Mark White with University of Illinois visited Durand in October. White is conducting research on small town vitality and has identified Durand as a success story due to its partnerships through community organizations such as Durand Charm.

For rural communities to make progress, they must support the people who are actively doing the work. This means supporting the volunteer groups, civic organizations, non-profits, and local government staff that organize, staff, and lead these efforts. Moreover, a broad array of community actors, including volunteers, funders, local government, non-profits, etc., must collaborate to pool resources and coordinate their efforts to move the community forward.

According to White, Durand, located in Winnebago County, is a good example of a community that revitalized its downtown through stronger volunteer efforts. To facilitate efforts, the community formed Durand Charm, a community wide, volunteer-driven, non-profit organization that strives to restore beauty, economic prosperity, teamwork, and pride to the village of Durand and the surrounding areas in 2014. Led by a core group of highly invested volunteers, this community group works to recruit partners, follow through with opportunities, and broaden its network of volunteers.

## Reinhold offers expert assistance

Understanding core health and wellness topics is an important aspect of your overall well-being. Nutrition and wellness educator Diane Reinhold, MPH, MS, RDN, develops and delivers research-based programming that addresses relevant issues based on local needs assessments. Reinhold offers a variety of programs to help people learn more about nutrition and wellness.



Diane Reinhold

Programs are divided into three topic areas:

- **Chronic Disease Prevention and Management:** One of Reinhold's main interests lies in programming devoted to preventing and managing diseases. Diabetes, heart health, and chronic inflammation are popular subjects.  
**Food Safety:** This area focuses on Food Preservation and Food Safety classes. Food Preservation classes are directed toward home consumers, while Food Safety classes fulfill an educational purpose for those serving food to the public, such as church groups, fire departments, school nutrition professionals, restaurant employees, and others where food safety is a concern.
- **Healthy Lifestyles/Living:** Staying healthy is a goal everyone strives for. This programming focuses on topics such as eating healthy foods on a limited budget, managing stress, physical activity, cooking for convenience, and more.



find more about Nutrition and Wellness programs at [go.illinois.edu/JSWNutritionAndWellness](https://go.illinois.edu/JSWNutritionAndWellness)



## School nutrition training — setting up schools for success in the cafeteria

Nutrition and wellness educator Diane Reinhold teams up with SNAP-Education educator Carol Erickson every August to offer ABCs of School Nutrition, which are free continuing education courses for area school staff. Through a partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education, Extension staff offered the program at three sites. This program is funded by ISBE and USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP.



14

Sessions in 2023



496

People participated in ABCs in 2023



Want to learn more about ABCs of School Nutrition? [go.illinois.edu/abc](https://go.illinois.edu/abc)

## Food Safety Trainings Offered for employees and volunteers



It's essential to ensure food safety practices are consistent and meet local and state regulations, create a food safety culture, and reduce the risk of food-borne illness. In 2023, Diane Reinhold, nutrition and wellness educator, offered the Certified Food Protection Manager's course for employees in the food industry as well as a course for non-restaurant food handlers called Serve It Safely.

CFPM courses were held in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, Winnebago, and Ogle counties in 2023. This two-day certification is designed to teach individuals to safely handle, produce, package, and store food products intended for sale to the public and is based on the FDA's Food Code.



62

People participated in Certified Food Protection Manager's course in 2023

Serve It Safely was held in Boone County. This half-day course focuses on volunteer group members and focuses on safe food handling practices, preparing, storing, and serving food for public consumption.



20

People participated in Serve It Safely in 2023



## Holiday programming centered around healthy recipes and swaps



In November and December, Diane Reinhold held holiday programming centered around healthy recipes.

In the Healthy Holiday Charcuterie Board program, participants learned how to create charcuterie boards. Reinhold started with the basic elements of the charcuterie board and then offered simple modifications that could help one enjoy it without feeling guilty.

Another favorite program was Air Frying 101. Reinhold taught participants how to make seasonal foods without the added mess and fat of traditional fried methods.





## Social media engagement campaign promotes healthy living

Nutrition and wellness educator Diane Reinhold is working to harness the power of social media with health and wellness campaigns by promoting healthy living and healthy lifestyles. Reinhold collaborated with community partners to post the campaigns on their social media accounts throughout northern Illinois.

The focus of the campaign was on raising awareness about the importance of choosing a healthy lifestyle to prevent and manage chronic health conditions. Additionally, the campaigns directed subjects to University of Illinois Extension resources, increasing state and local website traffic and engagement.



53,776

Total reach of social media campaigns



## Preserving food at home safely

Preserving fresh produce at home continues to be extremely popular, whether due to increased food costs, the desire to know what is going into your food, or because it benefits the environment by reducing one's carbon footprint. There are many ways to preserve food, including freezing, dehydrating, and canning, all of which were covered in Diane Reinhold's Yes, You Can: Home Food Preservation courses.



37

People participated in 2023



## Testing pressure canner gauges is a free safety service offered by Extension

Over time, the dial gauge calibration on a pressure canner needs to be tested for inaccuracies. It's recommended that gauges be tested once a year, as incorrect pressure during the canning process can cause bacteria and harmful toxins to build up in the canned food and cause illness or death. Nutrition and wellness educator Diane Reinhold tests these gauges for free year-round at all three county offices.



23

Pressure canners tested in 2023



## Healthy Trails Challenge encourages families to get out and explore

This family-friendly, interactive event took place in June in Stephenson County and will continue in 2024 and 2025 in Jo Daviess and Winnebago counties during National Trails Month. The event, created by Diane Reinhold, encourages individuals to connect with nature and move more. Reinhold works with local community partners to help promote each event.

The challenge is simple. Follow the signs, answer the questions, do the activities, take the quiz, and send a picture using QR codes on the signs. Each sign contains health information aimed at helping people develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle.



## Online EMPOWER weight loss program promotes healthy lifestyle

Over the past 18 months, nutrition and wellness educator Diane Reinhold worked with researchers from University of Illinois on the EMPOWER research feasibility study. This online weight loss program focused on individuals in rural communities. The program incorporated lifestyle, nutrition, and behavioral health education, empowering participants to create a personalized diet plan based on targeted levels of protein and fiber to promote weight loss. Although the program resulted in significant weight loss, with most components of the program being ranked satisfactory, there was a low retention rate of individuals for the study. This may be due to a disconnection with the needs of those living in rural communities. Future studies are beginning again in early summer 2024 and will explore the need to include community champions as well as make adjustments to improve some of the web applications for increased satisfaction and usability.



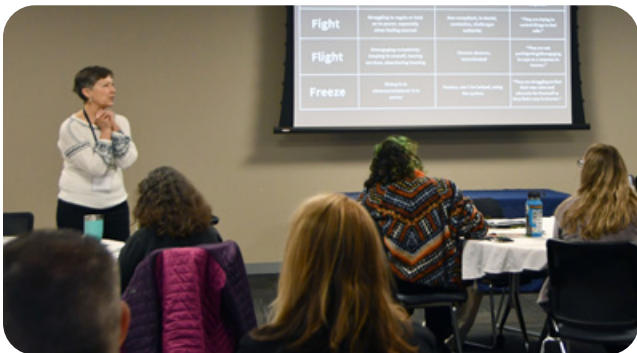
Find more about the Empower Weight Loss Program at [publish.illinois.edu/empower-uiuc](https://publish.illinois.edu/empower-uiuc)



## Interfaith Community Garden grows

SNAP-Ed educator Carol Erickson serves on the leadership team for the Rockford Interfaith Community Garden, a garden that engages local faith communities in southeast Rockford. Goals for this community garden include bringing different groups together and collaborating to grow produce for local food pantries and neighbors in need.

Volunteers from the Muslim Association of Greater Rockford, Life Church/South Campus, Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, Creekwood, Baha'i House of Worship, and Zion Lutheran Church have had an active role in creating this garden. Over 40 volunteers, including some young children, helped. A harvest picnic happened at end of July at the Muslim Community Center. The event is for sharing the vegetable harvest with their neighbors, eating a meal together, and talking with fellow gardeners. The garden harvested vegetables at least once a week and delivered them to two local food pantries.



## Creating awareness about trauma and food insecurity

One of the many issues SNAP-Ed educator Carol Erickson passionately created awareness on throughout the year was Trauma and Food Insecurity. This program, which was often presented along with Reducing School Food Waste, defines how trauma can influence securing and selecting healthy food options. Erickson uses a “trauma-informed” lens to get participants to rethink how they can better serve individuals with unknown trauma.



## Extension works with Congolese neighbors to grow native food

In the fall of 2022, SNAP-Ed educator Carol Erickson made a connection with people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in central Africa who were living in Rockford. They were interested in volunteering in the neighborhood gardens and wanted to grow some of their native greens — callaloo and lenga lenga. Both callaloo and lenga lenga are easy to grow and are in the Amaranth family. Similar to other greens grown in the U.S., the leaves are cooked and are rich in nutrients.

The Congolese women adopted one of the raised beds at the Growing Together Garden in Rockford and met a few times a week to water and weed their greens. They also helped with the other 17 raised beds. The women were so proud of their harvest and excited to take it home to their families.



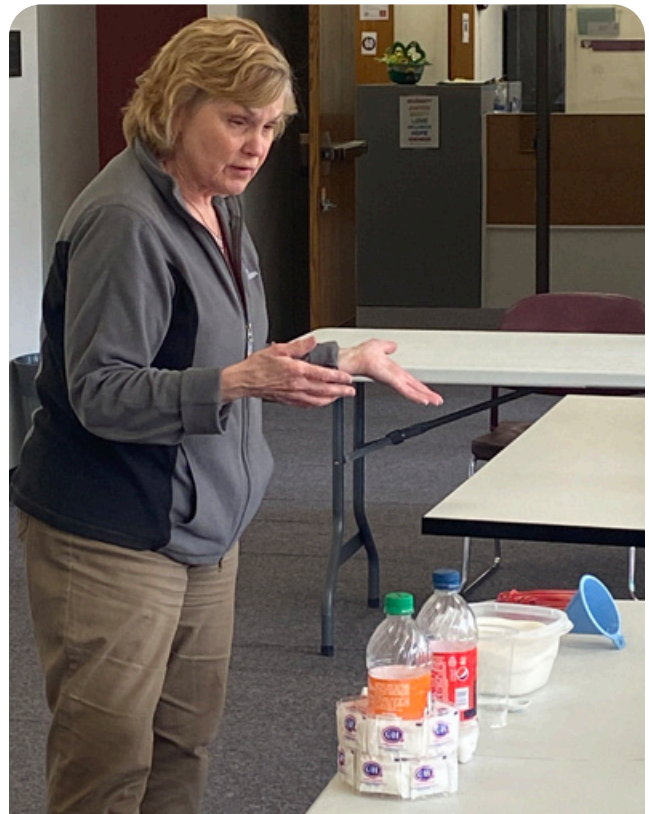




## SNAP-ED community workers help limited income households

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program community workers Barb Curry, Erin Garner, Marcia McMahon, and Maria Perez hold educational classes in Freeport and Rockford as well as set up booths at markets and food pantries. Together they have helped limited income households focus on healthy diets as well as reached youth in local schools and after school programs.

Success stories for community workers might be as small as asking someone to sample healthier options such as hummus or whole wheat options or offering a recipe for a healthier version of a favorite meal. Other times, it's the educational value of helping shoppers learn how to make healthier choices on any budget. Consistently operating booths at these locations leads to relationship building and trust between community workers and the shoppers.



SNAP-Ed Community Worker Barb Curry spent time with youth at the Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois Spring Break Camp in March. Over the three days, Curry taught students how to Snack Smart, Drink Right and Move More. Above, Curry shows the amount of sugar in different types of beverages. The kids enjoyed the hands-on activities during these lessons.

## Healthy Kids Out of School program reaches youth during spring break

SNAP-ED community workers offered the Healthy Kids Out of School program to local youth during spring break. Barb Curry taught the program in Freeport during the Family YMCA of Northwest Illinois Spring Break Camp.

The curriculum is designed to encourage healthy eating habits and increase physical activity that kids can replicate in other areas of their lives. Lessons included exploring different tastes and textures of fruits and vegetables; physical activity ideas and being able to differentiate activity levels; learning the health benefits of different kinds of food and beverages; exploring sugar content in various beverages and discovering the importance of drinking water and trying flavored waters.

## Illinois Junior Chefs program builds confidence, teaches kitchen basics

Cooking classes for youth happened in several locations in Stephenson and Winnebago counties. Each site had five two-hour sessions. Class time involves lesson, learning different kitchen skills, hands-on recipe making and taste-testing recipes.





Left to right, Gina Adams, 4-H metro youth educator, and Becky Gocken, Winnebago County 4-H youth program coordinator, were interviewed by local news media about the Youth Leadership Conference.

## Rockford Leadership Conference gives youth tools to succeed

4-H youth development educator Kelly Lafferty organized a Youth Leadership Conference in December in Rockford with Gina Adams, metro youth educator, and Becky Gocken, Winnebago County 4-H youth program coordinator. Lafferty led the conference with leadership skill-building activities for youth ages 12-18. Local community leaders came and shared their experiences. It was a great way for youth to learn about the wide variety of opportunities for leadership within the community.

The program was sponsored by a memorial in honor of former Illinois Extension employee Tom Schingoethe.



## Programming available for youth centered on mental health and wellness

Studies have shown that youth who partake in mindfulness and wellness activities are more calm, less stressed or anxious and more aware of their feelings and emotions. 4-H youth development educator Kelly Lafferty has programs set up in various school districts throughout Stephenson and Winnebago counties to help youth learn techniques through mindfulness training and yoga exercises.



## Plentiful Pantries program teaches teens how to make nutritious snacks at home

With monetary support from a grant, Kelly Lafferty, 4-H youth development educator, was able to host the Plentiful Pantries hands-on program in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties. This program shows teens ages 12-18 how to make healthy snacks from items in their kitchen cupboards at home. Youth left with recipes and ingredients needed to make the recipes.

Once the program finished, Stephenson County Ambassadors created a meal plan and then shopped within a budget. The food was donated to various pantries.



## Wee Nats program connects young people with nature

This fun, interactive program for youth ages 4-7 offers an environmental education stories, activities, crafts, and hikes. 4-H youth development educator Kelly Lafferty started this monthly program in Freeport and has expanded to also offer it in Pecatonica.





## Extension staff participate in Arbor Day fun with local students

Local groups came together with the Freeport Golden K Kiwanis Club to celebrate Arbor Day with 100 students from Freeport-area schools. Together, they spent their morning planting trees, learning about nature through activities led by Extension staff and other volunteers from the Freeport Park District as well as the Northwest Illinois Audubon Society. Each student received an oak tree sapling to take home.



## Ready 4 Work program piloted at Winnebago Juvenile Detention Center

Over the course of eight weeks in early 2023, Winnebago County 4-H youth development coordinator Becky Gocken visited the Winnebago County Juvenile Detention Center and worked with 10 teenagers ages 13-18 years old in a new workforce readiness program. This program teaches life skills that are necessary to increase the number of qualified applicants for the workforce. Through this program, Gocken taught them how to apply and interview for a job, how to handle customer service issues, learning about social media etiquette, and how to tie a tie.



## STEM activities stimulate minds

Gina Adams, 4-H youth development educator, started in her new position by spending time at the Patriots Gateway Community Center in Rockford teaching STEM activities to youth at the after school program. Practicing creative problem solving and an innovative way of thinking through STEM activities can carry over skills learned into art, sports, baking, communication, entrepreneurship, and more.



## Youth at day camp get hands-on fun

Jo Daviess County 4-H program coordinator Angela Miller and 4-H youth development educator Kelly Lafferty spent four days in August leading hands-on activities at the Galena Art and Recreation Center for kindergartners up through sixth graders. Program topics included wildlife, dairy, pollinators and STEM.





### 4-H participation continues to grow

Extension staff plan activities and events for youth year-round. Local 4-H clubs meet monthly, keeping youth engaged and learning. In each county, youth leadership groups are also held monthly to develop leadership skills. The number of youth in 4-H continues to increase yearly as youth programs continue to rebound from the pandemic. Youth exhibiting at the local 4-H shows can choose from over 60 different project categories.



Jo Daviess, Stephenson, Winnebago 4-H  
[Facebook.com/UnitOne4H](https://www.facebook.com/UnitOne4H)

### Jo Daviess youth attends 4-H Congress

Kyle Haas was one of 10 Illinois delegates selected to attend the National 4-H Congress in Atlanta, Ga., in November. Delegates are selected for their outstanding 4-H accomplishments. National 4-H Congress is an educational event filled with workshops on diversity, cultural experiences, leadership and team development.

### Stephenson youth takes top honors at Illinois 4-H Dairy Contest

Eighteen 4-H dairy project members from across Illinois took part in the 2023 Superior Young Dairy Producer Award program on Aug. 19 in conjunction with the Illinois State Fair. Ben Bremmer of Stephenson County was one of three youth awarded a \$1,000 scholarship as one of the top three overall winners.

### Winnebago youth are sharp shooters

Winnebago County youth took top honors in the .22 Small Bore County Division at the 2023 4-H State Rifle Shoot in October. Liadan Gray placed first in the .22 Small Bore Rifle Individual division and Corbin Gray placed second. Top individuals are eligible to go to the National 4-H Shoot.

### Robotics teams win awards

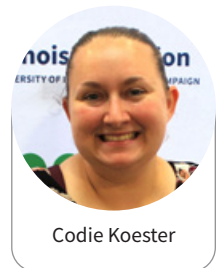
Two teams — a junior rookie team and the senior advanced team — won the Teamwork Award for their respective divisions at the 4-H Hydrobot Robotics Competition at the McLean County Fairgrounds in May. Teams were challenged to build an autonomous underwater vehicle by adopting a conservationist mindset as part of the competition.

### Jo Daviess youth awarded scholarship

The Illinois 4-H Foundation awarded 45 youth with \$1,000 scholarships based on merit and demonstrated standard of 4-H excellence. Jenna Haas of Jo Daviess County was awarded the Healthy Living and Nutrition Award for her focus on helping her community make healthy decisions and lead healthy lifestyles.

### Koester recognized as Young Alumni

Codie Koester was chosen as the Illinois 4-H Young Alumni Award recipient. Codie is a valued volunteer of the Jo Daviess County 4-H program. As a third-generation 4-H alumna, Koester began her 4-H career as a Cloverbud in the Top Notchers 4-H Club and excelled in her 11-year 4-H career. Codie is still committed to 4-H and is serving as a 4-H club leader, fair superintendent, and fair judge and is a member of the unit's Extension Council.

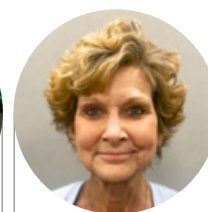


### Volunteers inducted into Hall of Fame

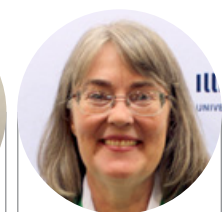
The Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame recognizes 4-H volunteers who have a track record of exemplary service to 4-H and outstanding career and community achievement. This year, three volunteers were named to the Illinois 4-H Hall of Fame for their leadership and mentoring roles. Volunteers honored for their dedication to the 4-H program included:



Betsy Muehleip,  
 Jo Daviess  
 County



Julie Miller,  
 Stephenson  
 County



Elizabeth Russo,  
 Winnebago  
 County





## Extending a helping hand

Stanley “Jay” Solomon has over 25 years of experience providing educational programs at local, state and national levels on diverse topics in agriculture, residential, and commercial areas. His areas of focus involve energy conservation, development of alternative energy sources and enhancement and protection of natural resources.



Stanley “Jay” Solomon

Solomon’s expertise in natural resources, environment and energy topics relating to agriculture can help you reduce costs, increase the natural assets of your land and at the same time protect and preserve natural resources and improve profitability. Popular program topics include forest management, invasive plant species management, livestock grazing, rainscaping, climate issues, geothermal energy, and radon testing.



## Composting project at Jo Daviess office leads to hands-on experience

Master Gardeners in Jo Daviess County take care of the gardens outside of the Extension office. Knowing there was an excessive amount of unwanted yard waste, natural resources, environment and energy educator Jay Solomon saw the opportunity to build a compost bin on site as part of a Composting for the Homeowner program. Solomon worked with program coordinator Alex Burbach to build a backyard composting system economically using wooden pallets and T-posts. In August, a bigger compost bin was created and garden debris and compost waste were moved to the larger bin. Solomon was happy to see the materials were starting to break down. Eventually, the compost will be re-used in the gardens.



## How to manage invasive and nuisance plants in the landscape

Jay Solomon, natural resources, environment and energy educator, brought back a popular program on managing invasive and nuisance plants with spring and fall sessions. The program focused on seasonal management of different plants and discussed the difference between plants going rogue in the garden versus those that are invasive. Solomon also covered basic information about garlic mustard, English ivy, poison hemlock, wild parsnip, poison ivy and poke weed.



## Certified Livestock Management Training

Jay Solomon hosted eight in-person Certified Livestock Management trainings across Illinois in January and February. He is also responsible for the online training which is open year-round. This was the first year the certification test was offered in Spanish.



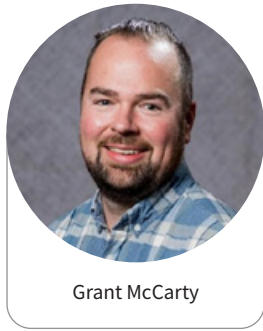
## Building robust meat supply chains in the driftless region

Jay Solomon was also part of a community discussion on meat production, processing and distribution in Northwest Illinois. The April 6 event included about 20 beef producers and served as a starting point to connect local residents to the University of Wisconsin Grassland 2.0 project that has been working in the Driftless region of Wisconsin.



## Supporting local foods and small farm programs of all sizes

Local food systems and small farms educator Grant McCarty works with commercial and backyard growers and producers by providing resources in fruit and vegetable production. His areas of expertise include soil management, organic and sustainable crop production, alternative crops, and general fruit and vegetable production. He further assists stakeholders in expanding their operation, adopting new practices, reading soil tests, and better managing their current production.



Grant McCarty

Winter is a great time for educational opportunities and McCarty offered several programs to help stakeholders grow new varieties, adopt best practices, and prepare for the upcoming growing season. One of the resources that enhances these in-person classes is archived webinars on YouTube. As many of the 2022 in-person programs were also delivered virtually in 2021, this has been an added bonus for presentations. Those unable to attend in-person or those who missed a program are able to access these recordings.



For instructional videos and webinars, visit [go.illinois.edu/JSWYouTube](https://go.illinois.edu/JSWYouTube)



## Beginning Livestock Webinar Series focuses on backyard and hobby farmers

Educator Grant McCarty coordinated a new webinar series to help address the questions and needs in the community for new and beginning farmers. Topics included Getting Started with Swine, Meat Goat Production, Farm-Scale Manure Management, and Getting Started with Grazing.

These webinars are set up to provide an overview of best practices in getting started and for those who are raising to sell directly to consumers via farmers markets, websites, and other avenues. Many of the topics we will cover are ones we commonly get questions about at our Extension office and have provided programs on previously. However, we've seen a number of new farmers in the last five years reach out looking for some of these topics to be more introductory.

Grant McCarty,  
local foods and small farms educator



## Day-neutral strawberry research for specialty growers concludes

In October 2023, a research study on the feasibility of growing day-neutral strawberries in Northern Illinois concluded. Funded by a USDA Specialty Crops Block Grant in 2022, three different varieties of strawberries were grown in partnership with Freeport High School's Student Vegetable Farm and Terrapin Orchards to determine whether these annual strawberries could be recommended. The purpose of this study was not only to determine how they would grow but also to see if they would fit well with the different needs of growers. Commonly, strawberries are both June-bearing and perennial, which provides a short berry season and is impacted by overwintering challenges on survivability. With day-neutral strawberries, the hope was to have a longer season, with yields beginning in late August to October, and remove the overwintering.

At both sites, the 'Albion' and 'Seascape' varieties produced good yields and overlapped with the orchard season. The third variety, 'Mara Des Bois,' produced small berries, and is would not recommended. It should also be noted that labor and other factors will impact these berries.

Season-long growth meant that insects were a major problem, especially when grown near other vegetable rows. The drought conditions of 2023 eliminated one of the sites where berries are not commonly irrigated. Growers looking to add these to their operations should determine if they have a market demand, labor, and irrigation in order to achieve the yields needed to justify these berries.







## Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference held in Rockford

The 2023 Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference took place in February. This annual conference provides updates for commercial fruit and vegetable growers along the Wisconsin and Illinois border who sell directly to the public via orchards, pumpkin patches, and farmers markets. Nearly 75 farmers attended the program which included University of Illinois research updates from Mohammad Babadoost and Kacie Athey. We were also joined by Illinois Extension Educator, Zack Grant, and University of Wisconsin Educator, Sam Oschwald-Tilton. For the first time, Michigan State was a part of the conference with a keynote on roots provided by Emily Lavelly. She also provided a fruit tree pruning lecture. Feedback was very positive with a number of new farms joining for the first time.

## McCarty selected for National Extension Leadership Development program

Local food systems and small farms educator Grant McCarty was selected to participate in the National Extension Leadership Development program. Hosted by University of Missouri, this year-long program brings together representatives from three different Extension systems to develop and sharpen leadership skills and strategies for use within their own Extension systems. As one of the representatives for Illinois, McCarty traveled to three different cities to network and concentrate on leadership development, ending in a capstone project in Washington, DC.

It was a great experience that allowed me to understand more about the role I have in our counties and enhance my leadership skills. By engaging with other educators and specialists in different systems, it further opens the network we have to enhance our local extension programming. One example would be an educator from Minnesota whom I met through this experience and have invited to speak at our yearly Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference in 2024.

Grant McCarty,  
local foods and small farms educator



Illinois Extension Beef Specialist Travis Meteer presents on Dry Lot Beef Cow Calf Systems at the Driftless Beef Conference. Dan Shike, from University of Illinois, also presented at the conference.

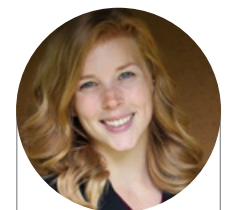
## Driftless Beef Conference draws in beef producers from tri-state area

Preparations for the Driftless Beef Conference held in January often start four months ahead of time. Staff such as Jay Solomon, natural resources, environment, and energy educator, play a large role in organizing this successful two-day conference. The educational program focuses on production needs and timely topics from Extension specialists in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin. This two day event drew over 175 producers and students and about 30 vendors.

## Local questions, local answers from a trustworthy agriculture source

Kathryn Seebruck works with producers and agribusinesses in the area to support the production of row crops and forages. As an Extension educator, she will work with local Extension staff to develop educational sessions, field days and other events to connect with local stakeholders.

Seebruck provides research-based educational programming on crop production to local farmers and agriculture industry professionals to help provide topical research information and actionable management considerations for the issues that producers face. “My goal is to be a local resource for the growers in our area by helping with the unique challenges and circumstances that we face here in northwest Illinois,” Seebruck said.



Kathryn Seebruck

Seebruck has a masters in Crop Sciences from University of Illinois. Her background in weed science and the research she has conducted related to herbicide resistance, along with other issues farmers may face, makes her a valuable resource to the local agriculture community.





Master Naturalist Judy Uchno volunteered her time to help with kids crafts at the Severson Dells Nature Center's Pollinator Palooza in April.



## Master Gardeners volunteer time, skills, and knowledge for communities

Master Gardeners volunteer their time in many different ways. Creating and managing public gardens may be the most recognized, but you can find them sharing information and promoting the Master Gardener program in booths at public events, answering questions through the Helpline, and even helping organize and teach horticulture events sponsored by the Extension office. In 2023, trainings were held for the Master Gardener program in Stephenson and Winnebago counties. This program is designed for adults of all ages who desire to learn about horticulture and positively impact the local community.



## Attendance increases to pre-pandemic levels in horticulture programs

Extension staff, along with Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists, plan multiple horticulture programs throughout the three counties during the year. Local educational events feature presentations from speakers across the Midwest, innovative and new ideas for your plants and gardens, as well as the latest information about pest and weed management and how to overcome other challenges. Some of the larger programs for 2023 included Winter Trails & Naturalist Tales, Joys of Gardening, Gardening for Food, Flowers & Fun, and Hort for the Holidays. These events are well-attended and give the opportunity for gardening enthusiasts to interact with others.



## Master Naturalist program provides awareness, inspiration, and education

Master Naturalists facilitate conservation and restoration in the community as well as educate others about natural resources. In 2023, Master Naturalists in Winnebago County hosted the annual Winter Trails and Naturalist Tales event on a snowy day in January. Master Naturalists Stacey Clark and Connie McIntosh presented on birdwatching and observing wildlife. Tricia Bethke from Morton Arboretum talked about plant and pest interactions. After the presentations, participants went on a birdwatching hike at Torstenson Farm.





## New lilac program proves to be popular

One of the most fragrant plants in the spring is the lilac, but did you know it's best to prune the lilac after it has blossomed? Jo Daviess County Master Gardener Michael Lacomini presented on lilac care and pruning in June. After learning about lilacs, the group went outside to the "lilac lab" for a demonstration of pruning. This class was so well attended that a second one took place in Winnebago County as well.



## Master Gardener Volunteers recognized at state conference

Three Master Gardener Volunteers from Stephenson County were recognized for their volunteer efforts at the State Master Gardener Conference. Mary Blair, Bernard Lischwe and Deb Schwartz received the Outstanding State Master Gardener Award, recognizing their dedication to the volunteer program. This award is presented to 2% of the membership annually.

Mary, Bernard, and Deb combine their love of gardening and their heart for volunteering to impact their community positively. They are dedicated volunteers that embody the Master Gardener mission of helping others learn to grow.

Nikki Keltner,  
Stephenson County program coordinator



Mary Blair



Bernard Lischwe



Debbie Schwartz



An end of season gathering was held in October to celebrate a successful growing season and community partnership. Pictured at the FHN Community Garden are FHN CEO Mark Gridley, Illinois Extension Master Gardener Bernard Lischwe and Extension program coordinator Nikki Keltner.

## FHN Community Garden produces a bounty of produce



This year, the Stephenson County Master Gardeners partnered with FHN to maintain the FHN Community Garden, a long-standing garden that was on the edge of being closed due to maintenance issues. Extension program coordinator Nikki Keltner provided leadership and coordination of volunteer Master Gardeners to care for the common area and any open plots not being used by community members. Produce from the plots was donated to local food pantries. It was a successful partnership and hopefully the first of many years to come.



## Four new staff members join Extension

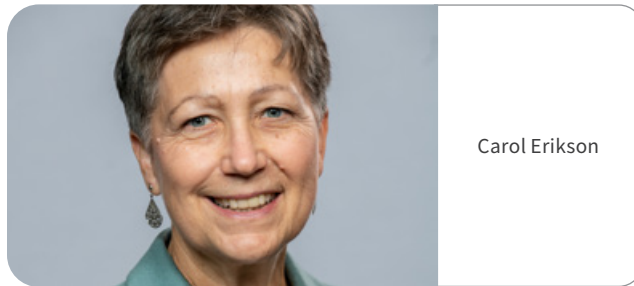
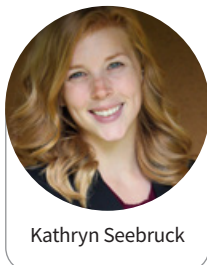
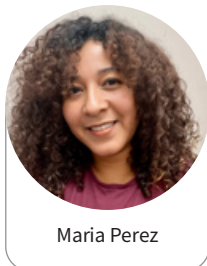
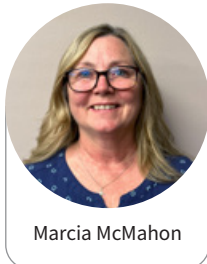
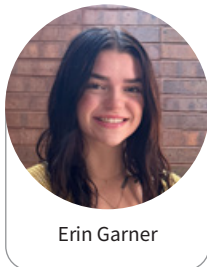
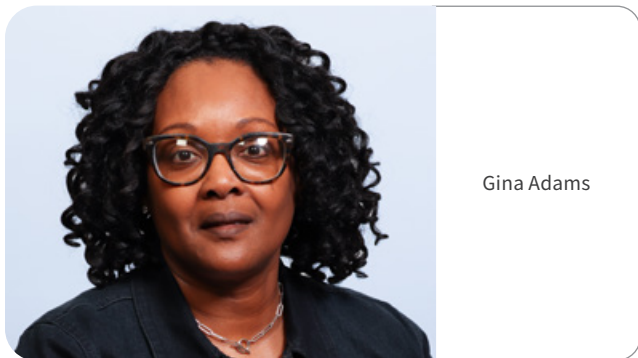
Extension is proud to have four new staff members join the team in 2023. With four offices located in Jo Daviess, Stephenson, and Winnebago counties, it's crucial to have staff to support the mission of Extension, linking local community needs to university research.

In the spring, three new community outreach workers joined the Rockford office to support the goals of the Supplemental Assistance Education Program. Marcia McMahon, Maria Perez, and Erin Garner will lead classes and provide information to local adults and youth in basic nutrition, physical activity, and food access for individuals and families in need. They will work with other local agencies and partners to reach the targeted audience.

Over the summer, Extension also welcomed Kathryn Seebruck to the staff as the crop sciences and Agronomy educator. Seebruck will work with producers and agribusinesses in the area to support the production of row crops and forages. As an educator, she will work with local Extension staff to develop educational sessions, field days, and other events to connect with local stakeholders.

## Adams takes on new role in Extension

Gina Adams moved into a new 4-H youth development educator role in July. Previously, she worked for Extension within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for over eight years. Within the new position, Adams will concentrate on underserved youth and focus on critical youth development issues while working with local partners, including community centers, agencies, and schools.



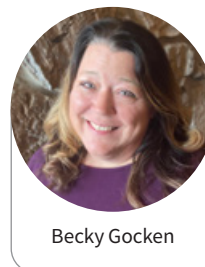
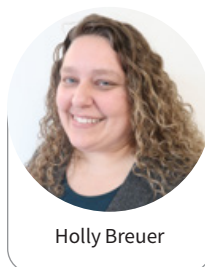
## Erickson retires from Extension

December 31, 2023, saw the end of a long career in Extension's SNAP program for Educator Carol Erickson. Carol joined the local staff in 2009 to work in the SNAP program in Rockford after serving many years in central Illinois. Through her more than 30 years with SNAP, Carol worked a variety of positions and played many roles, always with the goal of serving the community and those in need. In her final role as SNAP educator, Carol worked in the Rockford area with many partners, coalitions, and committees, addressing issues dealing with policy, systems, and environment as related to food access, hunger and poverty.

Carol has assured us she will stay involved serving those in need through her work with community gardens and other committees. We hope she also enjoys her free time to hike more, be a grandma more, and enjoy life!

## Breuer, Gocken, and Lafferty take leadership training programs

Professional development is an important aspect at Extension. This year, Jo Daviess County office support associate Holly Breuer graduated from the Jo Daviess County Leadership Forum; Winnebago County 4-H program coordinator Becky Gocken graduated from the Leadership Rockford program through the Rockford Chamber of Commerce; and 4-H youth development educator Kelly Lafferty graduated from the Highland Community College Leadership Institute. These programs offer leadership skill-building and community awareness to the participants as well as creating a network of local leaders.



I'm always happy to support staff attending these programs because, in the end, it contributes to the strength of our local team.  
Margaret Larson, county director



## Extension recognizes staff service

Two staff members were recognized for 10 years of service with Extension. Staff were Grant McCarty, local food systems and small farms educator; and Diane Reinhold, nutrition and wellness educator.

We are fortunate to have dedicated staff that want to help make a difference in our local communities. Grant and Diane are great examples of our Extension team. Their willingness to help others and advocate for education are the very reasons Extension is successful.

Margaret Larson, county director



Grant McCarty



Diane Reinhold

## 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 serve as representatives of their communities and advocates for Extension success.

### Jo Daviess County

Ray Massingill Warren, IL	Robert Heuermann Stockton, IL	Amy Hardwicke Galena, IL
Garnet Fee Galena, IL	Cody Koester Shullsburg, WI	Drew Groezinger Stockton, IL

### Stephenson County

Deborah Lischwe Freeport, IL	Ethan Trampel Rock City, IL	Sheila Keene Lena, IL
Tom Scheider Freeport, IL	Chris Urish Freeport, IL	Kevyn-Ann Sutter Freeport, IL

### Winnebago County

Angie Goral Rockford, IL	Lori Walsh Rockford, IL	Dan Obert Roscoe, IL
Jim Webster Rockton, IL	Mia Chase Loves Park, IL	Constance McCarthy Machesney Park, IL
Aaron Booker Winnebago, IL	Sue Gallant Leaf River, IL	Ann Somers Rockford, IL

## 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 Showboard, and the Winnebago County 4-H and Extension Foundation.

The showboard 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 tireless champions of the work of Extension and 4-H in our communities, and many hold additional volunteer roles.



● 37%	FNP/Federal
● 24%	County Board
● 23%	State
● 12%	Self-Supporting Funds
● 4%	Local Donations



● 76%	Salaries/Wages
● 13%	Program Expenses
● 7%	Rent/Utilities
● 3%	Travel
● .55%	Equipment
● .45%	EEOC/Accommodations

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## STAFF

Margaret Larson  
County Extension Director

Kathryn Seebruck  
Educator, Crop Sciences

Nikki Keltner  
Program Coordinator,  
Stephenson County

Maria Perez  
Community Worker,  
SNAP-ED, Rockford

Gina Adams  
Educator, 4-H Youth  
Development

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

Alex Burbach  
Program Coordinator,  
Jo Daviess County

Deb Koch  
Office Support Specialist

Carol Erickson  
Educator, SNAP-ED

Rebecca Gocken  
Program Coordinator,  
4-H Winnebago County

Barbara Curry  
Community Worker,  
SNAP-ED, Freeport

Julie Miller  
Office Support Assistant,  
Stephenson County

Kelly Lafferty  
Educator, 4-H Youth  
Development

Brenda Heimann  
Program Coordinator,  
4-H Stephenson County

Erin Garner  
Community Worker,  
SNAP-ED, Rockford

Tammy Bené  
Office Support Associate,  
Winnebago County

Grant McCarty  
Educator, Local Foods  
& Small Farms

Angela Miller  
Program Coordinator,  
4-H Jo Daviess County

Marcia McMahon  
Community Worker,  
SNAP-ED, Rockford

Holly Breuer  
Office Support Assistant,  
Jo Daviess County

Diane Reinhold  
Educator, Nutrition & Wellness

Jen Schultz  
Extension Program Coordinator

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**Illinois Extension**

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

If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs are funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

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