



# EXTENSION IN ACTION

Serving Cook County

ILLINOIS EXTENSION 2022







Willene Buffett  
County Director



# Addressing global issues from a local perspective

University of Illinois Extension remains fully committed to our mission of translating research into practical information that improves the lives of Cook County residents.

You know us as 4-H, SNAP-Ed, Master Gardner, Master Naturalist, or Extension and have come to know our work in different ways. Perhaps you:

- Learned new ways to prepare nutritious and tasty meals while stretching your food dollars
- Listened at the dinner table as your child gleefully described the fuzzy, colorful chicks that hatched in their classroom
- Enjoyed, volunteered in, or benefited from a community garden that supports food-insecure families
- Participated in a pumpkin smash event to reduce landfill waste and greenhouse gasses
- Are a veteran or medical professional who used horticulture therapy to combat depression and stress

- Are a local urban farmer who used our soil testing services to help with crop management
- Have a middle-schooler who can benefit from open-access, high-quality science curricula

We address global issues from a local perspective and strive to be your trusted source for reliable information. We collaborate with local agencies and organizations to develop programming that reflects the needs and concerns of the individuals and communities we serve. We believe that this is how change happens: To quote Libba Bray: “One gesture. One person. One moment at a time.”

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

Willene Buffett  
County Extension Director

# 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

## 2022 Engagement

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

643  
Communities Served

720K+  
Program Attendees

14.5M+  
Webpage Views

22.9M+  
Social Media Impressions

900K+  
YouTube Views

488  
Educational Sessions/Week  
(25K+ Annually)

95  
Online Courses Accessed by  
12K+ People

7,062  
Local Government Education Webinar Reach

1,807  
4-H Clubs

178,341  
4-H Affiliations

## Partnerships

5,941  
Program Volunteers

269  
Community Gardens

1,030  
School Partners

## Resource Generation

\$15,732,391  
Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$223,639  
Value of Donated Garden Produce



# Food

## Food Access

Research shows a strong link between food insecurity, poor health, and even poor academic outcomes for children. Food insecurity is not just about hunger. It's about not having access to food options that meet nutritional needs, which is particularly important for individuals and families with limited resources. Extension's network of volunteers and partners work together to address food insecurity in locally relevant ways.

## Food Production

Whether large commercial agriculture operations, small farms, or community and backyard gardens, the future of our food supply relies on use of practices that boost production and capacity. Growers at all levels benefit from effective, efficient, and sustainable approaches to cultivating produce, crops, and livestock that feed their families, communities, and the world.

## Food Safety

Foodborne illnesses cost society an estimated \$36 billion annually, with an average cost of \$3,630 per illness. Food safety is challenged everywhere, from the field to the kitchen. Safe growing, handling, and preservation practices can help reduce the social and economic impact of foodborne illness.



**1,477**

Attendees in all Food Programs Last Year



**115**

Educational Food Sessions Offered



**47**

School/Community Gardens Supported by Extension Staff and Volunteers



**36,639 lbs.**

Volume of Produce Donated to Local Communities



**\$60,821**

Value of Donated Food\*



**65,531**

Expert Consultations and Volunteer Information Services



**43,257**

Volunteer Hours Donated



**\$1,339,654**

Value of Volunteer Hours\*\*

\* Based on average value of \$1.66 per pound

\*\* Based on national average value of \$30.97 per hour

## Roots community garden supports food insecure families and more



A Cook County Extension Master Gardener started the Roots Community Garden over ten years ago. The intention was to create a community garden to help support families from the Partners for Our Communities (POC) Center who lacked food access and security. Over the years, the garden has provided the community with 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of produce per growing season.

When COVID-19 took its toll on the area, the garden became one of the few places where families could get together outside. It was also a space where they could get fresh produce since many community members could not work during the lockdown. But, there were not enough volunteers to sustain any programming.

In 2022, Master Gardeners again stepped in to help support the garden. Because of Extension's intervention, in addition to supplying food for POC families, the garden offers opportunities for Harper College ESL students to incorporate growing food into their curriculum and space for family visits for Early Childhood Developmental Enrichment Center families.

Extension and the garden coordinator, Kimberly Haas, teach families and students about growing, harvesting, and washing the produce. They also beautify the garden with annual flowers that increase the presence of pollinators and create a space that will be welcoming to the community.

"Master Gardeners were invaluable to me within the Garden," says Haas. "They taught me so much, from planting vegetables to flowers. I could not have done it without them!"



Children from local families play while watering plants.



## Extension reduces soil management guesswork for urban farmers

Cook County Extension delivered soil testing services and technical assistance to the local urban ag-growing community. The service was created to remove soil testing confusion and help the growing community better manage its operations.

By directly subsidizing multiple soil and media tests to urban farms, Extension reduces the guesswork and decision-making for Cook County farmers regarding which tests to take, when to take them, and how to interpret them. Additionally, this builds a baseline database to help growers make sound nutrient and media management decisions.

Initial results create clarity about the nutrient quantity, intensity, and availability of crops growing in these urban farming systems. Extension can now make more concise recommendations to partner farmers. Most of these recommendations will be to reduce the usage of large amounts of compost seasonally and, instead, target nutrients for precise crop management.



Soil and tissue samples are collected from participating urban farm.



## Food Safety Training Returns to In-Person

After a two-year hiatus due to COVID, in-person training for produce safety has returned to Cook County. In collaboration with the Chicago Botanic Garden-Windy City Harvest, Cook County Extension, and the Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Extension trained 34 urban farmer participants at the Windy City Harvest Arturo Velasquez Institute campus in April of 2022. This ongoing partnership continues to ensure new and current urban farmers are up to date with produce safety practices to ensure a safe food supply.



Participants at the first in-person food safety training since 2019.



## Increasing food access in schools through Share Tables

Cook County Extension partnered with Special Education Joint Agreement School District #802 (SPEED 802) to support their implementation of Share Tables, a program to redistribute eligible unused school foods to reduce waste and provide additional servings to children in need.

Reducing food waste from the school lunch program helps to protect the environment. Increased access to food in the school helps reduce the hunger experienced by students. SPEED 802 received materials to set up a share table. District leadership received a training covering the policy background for share tables, variety of share table models, examination of acceptable foods and beverages, safety considerations, and best practices for success.

At the project's conclusion, the district will receive a cost-benefit analysis to estimate savings from redistributing food that would have been otherwise wasted.



Youth place food they would like to share with classmates on school share table.



## Community garden provides for local shelter residents

The Beth Tikvah community garden has been a source of inspiration among the Jewish community in Hoffman Estates for many years. Led by the expertise of Cook County Extension Master Gardener Susan Schwartz, the garden has become a space to grow food and learn the impact of community involvement and collaboration.

The garden has provided for multiple pantries throughout the year and is now working to provide produce specifically for the northwest suburban Wings shelters. With the help of community volunteers, they have donated thousands of pounds of produce over the years and given access to fresh produce to those in need.

In the coming years, Susan hopes to inspire more youth to take the lead and continue working with Extension for educational outreach for the community and those they serve. This garden has been a success story for many years and continues to grow its impact.





# Comfort Food



## Cook County Extension supports Hines VA Medical Center Garden

Hines VA Medical Center employees and veterans joined forces to build 16 garden plots for growing edible and pollinator-friendly plants. Cook County Extension taught garden members how to grow seasonal nutrient-rich foods. Nearly 200 pounds of produce was grown and distributed to veterans and medical center employees during the growing season.

The bulk of the project was funded through the employee wellness program. Illinois Extension provided in-kind support, along with plants and garden materials. After the Extension educator coached wellness staff on garden member recruitment and community garden establishment, they followed up with support during installation, planting, and harvesting. Fourteen garden members were recruited, of which four were veterans, and all plots were adopted. The employees and veterans donated their time to maintain the garden.

Before joining the community garden, I didn't have much to do with my time. Being part of this community gave me a purpose. I enjoyed helping other gardeners with watering. Gardening was work that made me feel really good.

Veteran

Access to fresh food was not the only benefit. Numerous studies show that horticulture therapy has a healing effect on veterans by reducing blood pressure, heart rate, depression, and stress. During one of the planting days, one veteran with PTSD commented that gardening is her therapy. Additionally, news reports indicate that medical workers are severely overworked and stressed. For this very reason, the Hines employee wellness coordinator contacted Extension to help install a garden to help alleviate employee exhaustion.

Extension staff felt honored to have provided the following for Hines VA Community Garden:

- Community garden online training series for wellness staff
- Basic vegetable garden workshop to garden members
- Consultations on garden location, layout, design, and plant choices
- Soil testing to ensure there were no contaminants
- Instructional sessions in the garden
- Materials and plants for plot installation
- Connection to local Master Gardener volunteers

There is room for garden expansion in the future as more employees and veterans show interest. Illinois Extension will offer an online lecture series for beginning gardeners and provide on-site support during garden planting days. Additionally, space was reserved for five veterans to take the Illinois Extension Master Gardener training.



Master Gardener assisted Hines VA staff and veterans harvesting leafy greens.





## Cook County Extension and Real Foods Collective bring fresh produce to local food desert

Cook County Extension works with communities and families to provide nutrition resources, education, and access to healthier foods. The Village of Maywood has limited access to affordable and nutritious foods. Almost 16% of the residents live in poverty and rely on local food pantries and grocery stores outside the community for fresh fruits and vegetables.

SNAP-Ed educator Constance Willis forged a partnership with Real Foods Collective mobile market that allows residents to purchase fresh produce at a reduced rate using their EBT card for payment.

The farm stand took place in Maywood weekly for 19 weeks from July through October and was visited by over 600 individuals. Real Foods Collective purchased produce from local farmers for this weekly farm stand. Residents were able to buy a variety of fresh produce: okra, zucchini, collard greens, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, cucumber, avocados, peppers, blueberries, watermelons, dragon fruit, celery, bell pepper, garlic, carrots, onions, hydroponic lettuce, kale, eggplant, green tomatoes, prickly pear, and dragon fruit. Real Foods Collective received grants and other funding to continue providing residents with fresh produce via farm stands all year round.

Extension provided recipes that used the produce offered at the market and printed materials to give participants ideas how to use the fresh produce at home. All of the information is from the SNAP-Ed MyPlate and Eat. Move. Save. curricula. Extension community outreach workers delivered interactive nutrition education during the events and invited participants to attend upcoming SNAP-Ed events and classes.



Extension and Real Foods staff helped a resident at the garden.



## Illinois Extension and Maywood Park district join forces to help seniors

The Village of Maywood has approximately 3,500 seniors, almost 16% of which live in poverty. Village residents have limited access to affordable and nutritious foods. Many rely on local food pantries and grocery stores outside the community to access fresh fruits and vegetables.

The Maywood Park District has recreational facilities that provide meals and socialization opportunities for seniors at risk for isolation. SNAP-Ed educator Constance Willis partnered with the park district to provide nutrition education and resources to help seniors stabilize or minimize chronic diseases. She also created a nutrition policy with the park district to continue providing nutrition support to Maywood's senior residents.

Additionally, to address Maywood's increasing food insecurity in the senior population, Illinois Extension assisted with the park district's on-site garden in a joint effort. Community youth started the garden this summer by planting produce, such as bell peppers, radishes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and fresh herbs.

Cook County Extension works with various communities and families with the greatest need to provide nutrition resources, education, and access to healthier foods. For many participants, purchasing fresh produce can be a barrier.



Local children helped plant a garden.



## Extension provides food and training for diverse learners

Maryville Academy was originally an orphanage with an 880-acre farm to teach children food production and life skills. The Maryville Jen School has continued that tradition by having diverse learners work within the greenhouse, garden, and native garden spaces to combine their education and life skills training with an understanding of horticulture and sustainability.

Cook County Extension Master Gardeners have supported the site for over ten years and dedicated thousands of hours to the program, including starting seed, teaching pest management, and harvesting. The garden is integral to the school's programming and has become a favorite space with the students and faculty.

"Maryville Jen School has been an incredible site for Cook County Extension to not only support the community garden, but also vocationally train the diverse learner population within the garden space," says Navraaz K Basati, Extension horticulture program coordinator.

Master Gardeners have been intentional in making the space accessible to the diverse learner population, incorporating different aspects of food production and ensuring that there is a continuous supply of food for the students to be able to harvest. From lettuce plugs to apple trees, the students can work alongside Master Gardeners to learn about growing seasons and the value of our green spaces.

Recently, students learned how to use native plants to create rain gardens that help keep the water from flooding the raised beds.

Maryville Jen will expand its campus to Niles next year. Master Gardeners have been invited to continue their efforts at the Des Plaines Campus and help establish learning gardens in Niles.



Lettuce plugs were donated from Extension.



Photo credit: Colin Boyle, Block Club Chicago

## Cook County Master Gardeners come to the aid of lifelong community gardener

Lifelong community gardener Gregory Bratton was facing cancer for the fourth time and needed help from friends. Over the decades, Bratton has helped create over 100 gardens in underserved areas. In addition to supplying free fresh produce in a food desert, Gregory's gardens provide access to green space. Equally important, his gardens bring communities together either as volunteers working in the garden, patrons benefiting from the harvest, or as a conduit, connecting residents to local organizations and the resources they provide.

Extension Master Gardener Meg Marsan contacted Gregory to see how they could help. His priority was a garden near his home, named for Laquan McDonald, a young man he mentored in high school. Master Gardeners assembled a group of volunteers and went to work on phase one. They removed garbage, pulled weeds, tilled the soil, and created the garden's foundation. The plan is to start phase two in the spring: cover the lot in wood chips and build raised garden beds.



Photo credit: Colin Boyle, Block Club Chicago







# Environment

## Enhancing and Preserving Natural Resources

The survival of our planet depends on the quality of our water, land, and air. These shared resources must be managed through sustainable practices that support ecological balance. We must take steps now to effectively steward these resources for generations to come.

## Engagement with Home and Community Landscapes

There is growing evidence that time spent around plants and in green spaces has many benefits including improved health, better interpersonal relationships, and a higher quality of life. Sustainable home landscapes also increase property values and build stronger ecosystems for plants and wildlife.



**11,211**

Attendees in Environmental Programs Last Year



**256**

Environmental Educational Sessions Offered



**579**

Master Gardener and Master Naturalist Volunteers



**\$1,339,654**

Value of Volunteer Hours\*

\*Based on national average value of \$30.97 per hour



## Rainscaping in Cook County reduces flooding and stormwater runoff

Throughout the summer, Illinois Extension provided a six-session series across Cook County to empower residents to mitigate stormwater runoff and flooding.

According to the 2021 Illinois Climate Assessment, Illinois is expected to see increased rainfall over the next 30 years. With these increased precipitation events, Illinois stormwater systems are at risk for decreased water quality due to combined sewage overflow; therefore, it is essential areas with high impermeable surfaces increase their resiliency in the case of stormwater. Rain gardens, a form of green infrastructure, increase the retention of stormwater in a landscape by absorbing as much as 30% to 40% more water than a standard lawn.

Over four online lectures, and two in-person coaching sessions, residents of the Chicago suburbs and Chicago proper learned to:

- Assess their properties for installation, establishment, and maintenance of a rain garden
- Develop a rain garden design and maintenance plan
- Install a rain garden

At the end of the series, once they submit their completed rain garden plan, participants receive \$200 for start-up costs for their own rain garden.



To learn more about Rainscaping and to bring this workshop to your community, contact [aeg9@illinois.edu](mailto:aeg9@illinois.edu)



## Conservation@Home

Illinois Extension, in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County, held programming with organizations throughout Cook County to provide the basics of the Conservation@Home program. This certification program guides property owners who are conscientiously improving their homes for the environment and humanity in a neighborhood-friendly way.

The green space in Cook County is fragmented and separated by asphalt and concrete. The climate is changing, chemicals are running into the drainage systems, and weather systems are becoming more extreme. All of these conditions result in poor habitats for native animals and plants.

### Conservation@Home's goals are:

- Protecting and restoring natural areas by using native plants in yards and gardens
- Promoting good water resource practices:
  - Rain barrels
  - Rain gardens
  - Native plants that reduce runoff and filter rainwater
- Recognizing home, school, community members, and students that practice good conservation measures
- Educating gardeners, community members, and students about how they can improve plant and wildlife habitats.

Small steps can lead to a big environmental impact. When residents know more, they do more. The ecological influences are documented on the Chicago Living Corridor Interactive Mapping System.



Become a Compost Ambassador  
[go.illinois.edu/CookCountyCompostAmbassador](https://go.illinois.edu/CookCountyCompostAmbassador)

## Gardener completes the first compost passport

Compost Ambassador is a new Cook County Extension offering. Unlike Master Composter, this program does not require an annual volunteer requirement. Instead, trainees are given a Compost Passport which includes activities to complete and organizations to visit or volunteer with to learn more about composting. Trainees fill out passport pages to track what they do. After completing five activities, they submit photos of the pages for a free compost thermometer.

The lessons gave me an in-depth grasp of the technical details and a broader understanding of different composting options. I had no experience with vermiculture, nor was I aware of municipal or commercial services that have become available. Overall, I gained confidence and will continue educating others about composting.

Mary Lou Tortorello,  
 Cook County Master Gardener

Mary Lou Tortorello, a Cook County Master Gardener, was the first to submit. She completed seven activities, including volunteering at three community compost collections and a pumpkin smash. She is most proud of convincing her brother to purchase a backyard composter. Her favorite activity was the pumpkin smash.

"Despite the weather, I enjoyed the kid's excitement and explaining how tons of material can be diverted from landfills," Mary Lou says. "It's so relatable because so many people have Halloween pumpkins which opens the door to discussing composting as a better way to deal with food and yard waste."

Before the program, Mary Lou was using an outdoor compost bin. However, she knew little about the science of composting.



Pumpkin smash events keep pumpkins out of landfills.



# Community



## Connectedness and Inclusion

A strong sense of community brings people together to support each other in times of need and growth. Accepting and celebrating differences creates an environment where all voices are important and heard. When strong networks of peers and organizations support youth and families, even the most vulnerable community members feel they belong and are valued.

## Involvement and Leadership

When people volunteer or advocate for a local issue, they see themselves as part of the solution and their community pride soars. Providing decision-makers with practical, timely, and research-based information gives leaders the tools they need to strengthen their communities and improve the quality of life in rural and urban areas throughout Illinois.

## Thriving Youth

Thriving youth are the core of healthy, robust communities. Illinois Extension's mentorship-based youth development model focuses on social competence, academic success, career development, and community connection. The 4-H experience creates opportunities and environments for all youth to thrive now and in the future.



**1,167**

Attendees in Community Programs Last Year



**115**

Educational Sessions Offered Last Year



**178**

Youth Enrolled in 4-H Clubs



**613**

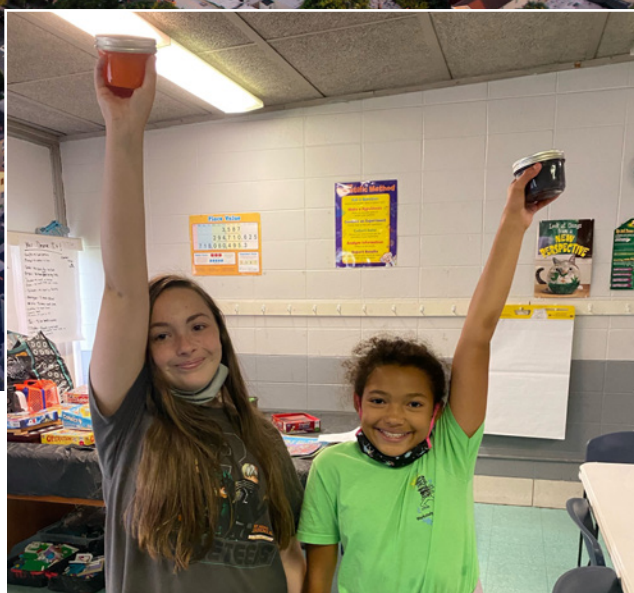
Volunteers Involved



**\$1,440,740**

Value of services performed by volunteers\*

\*Based on national average value of \$30.97 per hour



## Illinois Extension helps young people manage their emotions

Adolescents experience a wide range of stressors and struggle with understanding their emotions. Developing skills to manage emotions is vital to academic success and mental well-being.

Many schools have incorporated social and emotional learning into their curriculum. Still, there is a gap during the summer when youth, especially those from underrepresented communities, lack the continuing support needed to promote healthy emotional development and mental health.

Cook County Extension provided the Mindful Mechanics series to 30 sixth through tenth grade students during the Character-Building Summer Camp in Matteson. During the series, youth focus attention through guided meditation and yoga, examine and name their feelings, and develop emotional management skills. At the end of the series, participants received a toolkit to reinforce and build upon the lessons learned during the workshops.

One of the activities, forest bathing, uses nature to help youth unplug from technology, de-stress, and relax. A trained forest therapist leads the session, helps participants observe small details in their surroundings, and shows them how to use all five senses to connect with nature. Research shows that forest bathing sessions can lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety. Youth stated they “felt more relaxed” after the forest bathing walk.

As a result of the workshop, the participants can identify an increased range of feelings from basic (happiness, sadness) to complex (jealousy, disappointment), better manage their emotions, and know how to ask for help when needed.





## 'I pledge my hands to larger service'

Juntos members and parents are putting their 4-H pledge into action: *"I pledge my hands to larger service."* The focus for 2022 was for youth to become more helpful in their club and communities. Some of the critical elements include applying effective strategies to build civic skills, including social behavior and strengthening communities.

Juntos members and parents volunteered over 100 hours with various organizations to achieve this. Their community service efforts included the Forest Preserve of Cook County, Bank of America, Red Cross, Girl Scouts, Corrida de Mariachi 5K, Trunk or Treat, and Loyola Health Care Collaborative. Studies show that civic engagement benefits communities and impacts the youth and community residents by reducing isolation and creating networking opportunities.



4-H'ers distributed water at the Chicago Marathon.



## Embryology brings STEM education to Cook County youth

Cook County youth in underserved and underrepresented communities lack quality STEM education and do not receive the science and technology foundation needed to compete successfully in high school. Additionally, without STEM exposure, youth miss opportunities to develop and practice the critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, leadership, and socialization skills needed to be successful.



Cook County Extension offered the Incubation and Embryology program to address the situation. This hands-on project allows students to hatch chicks in their classrooms. Over 21 days, youth learn the life cycle stages, prepare the incubator, turn the eggs, and test eggs for fertility. Extension supplied almost 360 dozen fertilized eggs to schools, organizations, 4-H clubs, and families. Participating youth develop an understanding of biology concepts through direct experience and increase both STEM and life skills.

## 4-Hers gather to kick off the new year

The Cook County 4-H program hosted its annual kick-off event for over 50 new and returning participants at the Izaak Walton League in Des Plaines. For the past seven years, Cook County 4-H has hosted this county-wide event to get existing 4-H clubs re-engaged, re-energized, and re-enrolled while offering opportunities for new youth and families to become 4-H members.

The Kick-Off is a space for club members and adult leaders to reconnect. But equally important, it is an opportunity for those interested in 4-H to engage with staff, volunteers, adult club leaders, and families. Adult club leaders get new ideas to incorporate into their clubs, and the 4-H program team has an opportunity to engage one-on-one with dedicated and trusted adult leaders, youth, and volunteers.

Activities enjoyed by participants were a nature scavenger hunt, meditation in a bottle, forest immersion walk, nature art creations, leaf rubbing, giant bubbles, and a unique game led by tenured club leader Pat Sturgeon. The Kick-off is an inclusive environment focusing on 4-H's goal for all youth: Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery.

Every year since the initial 4-H Kick-Off event, youth, families, leaders, and volunteers have shared with the team the importance and impact this event has on returning and new youth club members and families. Our primary goal is to ensure youth and families grow, learn, and develop while having fun!







# Economy

## Workforce Preparedness and Advancement

The global pandemic has reinforced the ongoing need for Illinois to develop innovative ways to nurture its workforce through career exploration, training and re-training programs, and other opportunities for refining skills of the current workforce and the workforce of the future. Having a prepared, skilled, and resilient workforce in place ultimately increases tax revenue for the state.

## Financial Wellbeing

Financial instability can negatively affect physical, mental, and social health and can ultimately lead to bankruptcy. Illinois Extension supports financial wellbeing tools for all ages and stages which helps improve self-sufficiency, reduces the need for communities to provide support services, and creates opportunities for individuals to protect and build wealth.

## Economic Vitality

Economically resilient communities are built on a solid foundation with plans for growth, plans for responding to emergencies and disasters, and innovative approaches to promote economic vitality. With 75% of the state devoted to farmland, agricultural operations, both large and small, represent a critically important contributor to the economic vitality of Illinois' local and state economy.



## Addressing inequities to create a vital STEM workforce in Illinois

Written by Carissa Nelson

A collaborative effort between the School of Social Work and Illinois Extension is working to address social inequities that negatively impact the vitality of the Illinois workforce. Researchers seek to use social emotional learning in math and science classrooms to improve student grades and enhance teacher effectiveness while increasing interest in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers.

"Illinois has the fifth largest STEM workforce in the country, but Black and Latinx professionals represent only 11% of Illinois' overall workforce and only 5% of the STEM workforce," says Durriyyah Kemp, University of Illinois Extension regional assistant director. "This program is a great way to start to diversify and build a more diverse pool of future candidates."

Social and emotional learning focuses on building student self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and promoting responsible decision-making. This project allows teachers' and students' lived experiences to become the driving force for meaningful curriculum change.

"Teachers have described their students' foundations as 'upside down wedding cakes,'" says Kevin Tan, University of Illinois School of Social Work assistant professor. Addressing the needs of these teachers is so important to us."

The team conducted focus groups to determine the needs in middle and high school cohorts and worked to ensure all staff understood the foundations of inequity through professional development. Finally, researchers began bi-weekly coaching sessions as the teachers started actively implementing SEL lesson plans into their math and science classrooms.

The initial round of the research will move into a formal evaluation phase at the start of the next school year to see how the program promotes positive student and academic outcomes as well as any racial healing components.

This research also aligns with Extension's commitment to provides practical translations of cutting-edge research to help people, businesses, and communities find answers to some of the most pressing issues of our modern world.



28,453

Attendance at Workforce Programs Last Year



693

Workforce Educational Sessions Offered Last Year

# Extension in the News

## FOUR SEASONS GARDENING WINS STATE EVALUATION AWARD

Cook County horticulture educators Gemini Bhalsod and Nancy Kreith and their webinar series team won the Excellence in Extension Award for Evaluation. The Four Seasons Gardening Webinar Series addresses home and community garden issues encouraging residents to protect their environment, grow their food safely, and save money by reducing unnecessary inputs. Since 2019, in addition to the customized session evaluations after each webinar, the team has implemented an end-of-the-year survey of registrants to track action changes based on the subject matter. This process of combining session evaluations with end-of-the-year survey results in robust data that informs future webinar topics, demonstrates how Master Gardeners will apply knowledge gained, and evaluates the impact of the series on a statewide level.



## BUILDING A CULTURE OF COMPOSTING

### RECEIVES EXTENSION FOUNDATION ACCELERATOR GRANT

Building a Culture of Composting in Greater Chicagoland received an Extension Foundation Accelerator grant for 2022-23. Cook County educator Kathryn Pereira leads a team to increase education on the benefits of composting, spur increased access to compost services, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions from landfills.

The program engages residents during Pumpkin Smash events by partnering with organizations and schools. The team will also convene compost professionals at a summit in May 2023 and develop models for small food business to handle their food waste in environmentally friendly ways.

“Our goal is to increase economic development via compost collection, environmental equity, access to composting services, finished compost for local food production, and education for all on the benefits of organic waste separation,” says Pereira. “Ultimately, we believe composting should be as ubiquitous and accessible as recycling.”

## WITS WORKOUT PRESENTED AT TWO NATIONAL CONFERENCES

Molly Hofer, Cook County Extension family life educator, along with other members of the research team, co-presented results of a randomized controlled trial assessing the efficacy of Wits Workout, a University of Illinois Extension brain health curriculum, at the Aging in America National Conference in New Orleans and the Gerontological Society of America Annual Scientific Meeting in Indianapolis.





## HEALTH ROCKS PRESENTED DURING HIV/AIDS AND SOCIAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND PREVENTION WEBINAR

The National Council of African Women, Illinois Branch hosted an HIV/AIDS and Social Health Awareness and Prevention webinar. Leonard Parker, Cook County Extension 4-H youth development-metro educator, presented information from the Health Rocks curriculum designed to reduce risky behavior relative to tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and vaping for high school students. During the session, engaged teens asked in-depth questions regarding health, decision-making, and avoidance of risks.

“The impact of your Health Rocks presentation has been overwhelming; with your support, we were able to provide an invaluable virtual educational experience to students in the South Suburban community,” says Dr. Gwendolyn Maxie-Brown, one of the hosts. “With your continued support, we will be able to help families and individuals meet essential daily needs and work towards a brighter future because knowledge is power!”



## CONNECT EXTENSION

### WELLNESS WEDNESDAYS: BEGIN WITH YOU

#### PRESENTED AT NATIONAL URBAN EXTENSION CONFERENCE

Cook County Extension community health educator Sonia Lopez attended the National Urban Extension Conference - *Reimagining Our Future ... Together* to present on the *Wellness Wednesdays: Begin with You* series. Sonia highlighted the first three iterations of the community health team's virtual series. The goal of *Wellness Wednesdays: Begin with You* was to advance self-care skills around mental health and physical wellness. The six-session series covered information on stress, seasonal affective disorder, mindful eating, sleep, self-compassion, and mental wellbeing serving as a valuable reprieve for overburdened staff across multiple sectors. Two new iterations of the Wellness Wednesday series have followed since the conference presentation — one in collaboration with family life educators that included self-care, brain health and memory, and aging. The other offered Spanish-speaking participants an abbreviated version of the original six topics.

### EXTENSION EDUCATORS PUBLISH NEW SCIENCE CURRICULUM

OpenSciEd is a non-profit aiming to transform science education by developing high-quality, open-access instructional materials based on a design framework grounded in research. Cook County Extension STEM educators Sue Gasper and Meghan McCleary published their final sixth-grade unit for OpenSciEd.

The following is an excerpt from the latest unit summary. *This unit launches with students hearing about an injury that happened to a middle school student that caused him to need stitches, pins, and a cast. They analyze doctor reports and develop an initial model for what happens in our body when it heals. Students investigate what the different parts of our body are made of, from the macro-scale to the micro-scale. They figure out parts of our body are made of cells and that these cells work together for our body to function.*





# Health

## Chronic Disease Prevention and Management

More than half of Illinois adults have a known chronic health condition, in part due to risky health behaviors, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health. People of all ages need trusted and reliable research-based information to make health decisions that improve their quality of life. Creative solutions are needed to assure that these supports are available when and where people need them.

## Social and Emotional Health

Even before the global pandemic's new social, economic, and life challenges, mental health was a growing concern. Illinois residents of all ages and walks of life need to know where to turn for resources to help cope with the daily stressors that threaten mental health and wellbeing.

## Healthy and Safe Community Environments

Personal health decisions are not made in a vacuum. We must create environments where healthy choices are not only possible but are also encouraged. Classrooms, school cafeterias, food pantries, workplaces, and other built environments play an important role in promoting health and safety.



40,180

Attendees in Health Programs Last Year



1,729

Health Educational Sessions Offered Last Year

## INEP Community Partnerships



28

K-12 Schools



50

Agencies, Community Centers, Early Childhood Centers or Emergency Food Sites



560

Nutrition Education Classes



34,247

Total estimated SNAP-Ed reach



EFNEP community outreach workers conducted virtual classes.

## EFNEP staff provides cooking schools for Women Infants and Children centers

For 16 years, Cook County Extension has partnered with Catholic Charities to facilitate annual Summer Cooking Schools for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Food Center clients. The WIC Food Centers in Chicago are unique because they provide a space for pregnant women, new mothers, and young children to purchase healthy foods.

Illinois Extension staff conduct week-long sessions that focus on maximizing WIC benefits and cooking skills with WIC clients. Over 14 years, Extension has administered the program in four WIC centers and served over 200 families. Due to COVID protocols, the cooking school has been held virtually for the last two years. One of the collaboration's critical successes was securing additional incentives and food boxes for families to take home and prepare meals during the program. Because of innovative strategies to promote behavior change, the participant retention rate increased from 75% to 95%.

EFNEP, a nutrition education program for low-income communities, reduces nutrition insecurity for adults, families, and youth in Cook County. The EFNEP program focuses on behavior change by implementing a program series promoting improved diet quality, increased physical activity, and food resource management and safety. The EFNEP program is successful because of the peer-educator model and hands-on learning and dialogue education that promote behavior change in north, west, and south side Chicago families.

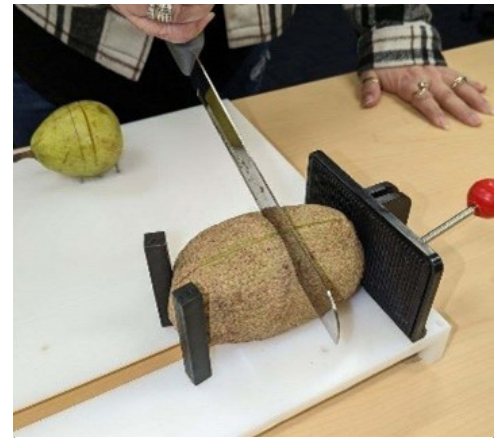




## ADAPTIVE COOKING TOOLS HELP RESIDENTS WITH PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed community outreach workers have acquired adaptive cooking tools to use when delivering direct education to audiences with physical challenges. These tools aid in making cooking more accessible. Using these tools increases Cook County Extension's ability to ensure inclusivity with their audiences.

- Angled measuring cups have large grip handles and increase the visibility of measurements.
- Clear and self-leveling measuring spoons provide visibility of the contents.
- The palm peeler fits over the user's finger and into their hand for comfort while keeping fingers out of the way.
- The rocker knife is helpful for individuals experiencing challenges with hand control, strength, and fine motor skills. It allows the user to apply pressure despite experiencing wrist pain, hand weakness, or tremors.
- The cutting boards have prongs to hold items in place while cutting, providing more control and use with one hand.



Adaptive cutting board allows for one hand use.



## SNAP-ED STAFF TEACH HOW TO ADD VARIETY TO MENU WITHOUT ADDED EXPENSE

Cook County Extension uses the Create Better Health curriculum and hands-on cooking demonstrations to help county residents add nutritious and tasty meals to their menu without additional expense. What sets the program apart is variety. Each lesson includes a recipe and recipe template. Participants can use the complete recipe or use the template to make recipe variations based on pantry or cultural items they prefer. Recipe templates include healthy alternatives to satisfy each recipe component. For example, the Create a Salad recipe offers a variety of protein choices (chopped boiled eggs; cooked and diced chicken, turkey, ham, beef, fish, or pork; or beans (pinto, black, white, kidney, lentils)). The recipes are versatile enough for participants to use fresh, frozen, or canned foods, allowing them to maximize their SNAP funds.



## EXTENSION STAFF GAIN VITAL SKILLS TO HELP RESIDENTS REACH HEALTH GOALS

The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in Cook County learned how to support families more deeply in their health journeys. EFNEP staff discovered how communication, shared power, and connecting with community resources can help families identify and reach their health goals through the Empowerment Skills for Family Workers course. This vital training equipped the team to include social and emotional learning tools in their coaching and support of parents and caregivers of young children. One staff member shared that the tools "help her feel ready to approach the whole person" in her classes with families. This credential prepares the team to deepen their knowledge with a new social and emotional learning based, trauma-informed curriculum in the coming year.



County Director Willene Buffett, left, and Assistant Dean Jennifer McCaffre, right, recognized community outreach worker Martina Rivera Curry for 41 years of service in Extension. Curry was one of 11 community outreach workers from the state to receive the Empowerment credential.



## COMMUNITY HEALTH TEAM SERIES HELPS RESIDENTS CREATE 'MINDFUL MOMENTS'

COVID-19 shined a spotlight on the importance of healthy lifestyles. Extension saw vivid examples of how infectious diseases intersect with chronic health conditions and exacerbate medical complications if obese or overweight. It also reminded us that mental health is vital to physical well-being. Recognizing that we sometimes eat in response to stress rather than hunger, Illinois Extension educator Sonia Lopez created the Mindful Eating Practices workshop to encourage participants to view mealtimes as opportunities for mindful moments. Mindful eating is not about counting calories or restrictive dieting; however, incorporating mindful eating practices often leads to weight loss. People who practice mindful eating often see an increase in their motivation to make healthier food choices. The U.S. adult obesity rate is at an all-time high: 42% among whites, close to 57% for African American women, and 45% for Latinx adults.





## Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund and Illinois Extension: A 15-year partnership



Collaborative partnerships with organizations play a vital role in Illinois Extension's educational outreach mission. Through collective efforts, Extension helps organizations address the needs of their clients.

For 15 years, Extension has worked with the Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund (IMRF) to provide programs that help their retirees better manage their lives in retirement. Each year, wellness topics like brain health, positive aging, and mindfulness were delivered. Topics were selected with input from IMRF and Extension staff and the retirees themselves. Programs were offered statewide, with several locations in Cook County. Because of the pandemic, the program pivoted to a virtual format.

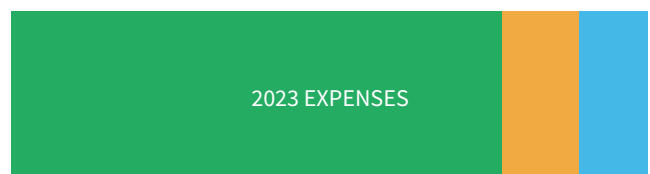
This year, 212 retirees attended the webinar, *Happy Hacks for More Positivity and Improved Well-Being*. Because life has its share of stressors that can negatively impact one's health, it is important to find ways to manage stress and increase happiness. "Happy hacks" are simple practices that help with positivity and productivity. The program helped participants identify intentional ways to increase happiness and manage stress.

We have the ability to bring joy into life by the personal choices we make each day.  
Program Participant

Through this annual initiative, IMRF adds life enrichment opportunities to the retirement services they offer, and Extension expands its participant reach to thousands of Illinois retirees.

Illinois Extension looks forward to continuing this valuable partnership with IMRF for many years to come.

## Financial Report



- 77% Wages
- 12% Operating Expenses
- 11% Leases

Success doesn't just happen it is planned for.  
Anonymous



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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.

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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