



EXTENSION IN ACTION

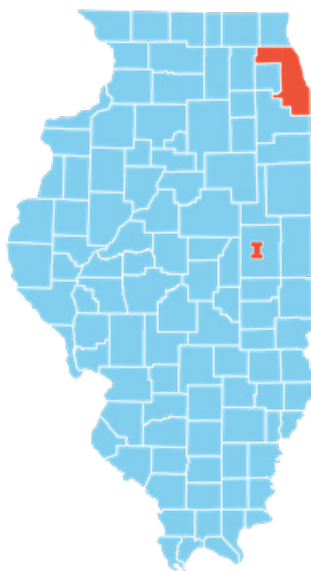
Serving Cook County

ILLINOIS EXTENSION 2023





Willene Buffett
County Director



A Note from the County Director

We live in an ever-evolving and rapidly changing world. Our new reality and technological advances have kept University of Illinois Extension nimble and responsive. They have pushed our creativity and sharpened our ability to adapt — and we are better because of it.

Virtual, asynchronous, and online programming make it possible to provide learning opportunities for more county residents. Videos, podcasts, blogs, newsletters, and online publications improve our ability to reach new audiences and connect with people where and how they learn.

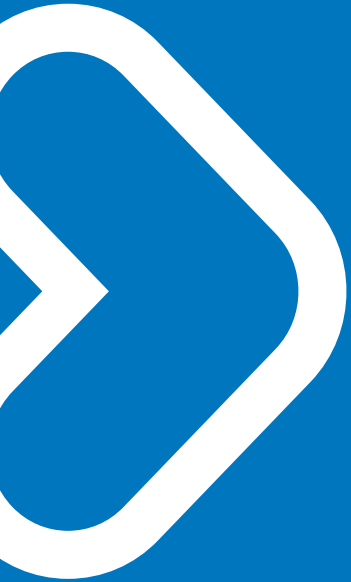
While we continuously adapt and search for innovative ways to improve the lives of Chicago and suburban Cook County residents, two things remain constant:

- Providing relevant, credible, and reliable information and solutions will always be our north star.
- A relentless commitment to making our programs inclusive and accessible to all will remain a guiding value that drives us.

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

I am pleased to share this 2023 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

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



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.



3,186

Attendees in all programs last year



116

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered



48

Gardens supported by Extension staff and volunteers



13,506 lbs

Of produce donated to local communities



\$23,230

Value of donated food*



65,273

Expert consultations and volunteer information services



41,193

Volunteer hours donated



\$1,346,202

Value of volunteer hours**

* Based on average value of \$1.66 per pound

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



Volunteers assisting shoppers during client-choice distribution hours



Volunteers and clients at Des Plaines Self-Help Closet & Food Pantry

SNAP-Ed welcomes new neighbors

Cook County witnessed a humanitarian crisis, recently welcoming more than 24,000 asylum seekers. Illinois Extension met our new neighbors at Blue Island, Melrose Park, and Des Plaines food pantries and connected them to sustainable food resources, bilingual nutrition information, and organizations with donation networks.

At Blue Cap Pantry in Blue Island and Mount Carmel Parish Pantry in Melrose Park, Extension staff noticed that some new neighbors were hesitant to try some foods offered at the pantry because they were unfamiliar with them. To address this, they used visual aids and familiar language to help them understand the food options and make them more culturally appropriate. Extension staff also shared recipes that did not require cooking, as many new neighbors lacked permanent housing and access to cooking sources.

In Des Plaines, Extension staff worked with the Self-Help Closet and Pantry to implement a client-choice shopping style, allowing individuals to choose from various fruits and vegetables that are more culturally appropriate for them. Signage in Polish and Ukrainian was also provided to accommodate immigrant populations.

Through partner relationships, Extension secured the donation of a refrigerator and slow cooker for the welcoming center used by new residents at Roberto Clemente High School.





Illinois Extension supports expansion of Hines VA Medical Center Garden

University of Illinois Extension helped Hines Veteran's Hospital Garden members add 14 fruit trees and expand their space from 16 to 30 plots. Ten hospital departments were represented including 28 staff and six veterans. Employees took the harvest home and donated nearly 175 pounds to Hines Veterans Food Pantry and Freedom Path veterans' residence.

Extension helped facilitate a community atmosphere during workdays. Practical garden tips were shared with new gardeners and an experienced veteran farmer contributed his knowledge. Extension educators and Master Gardeners worked alongside gardeners, learned their names, and met as a group to develop common goals.



Master Gardener team supporting Hines Community Garden



Hospital employees and veterans supporting garden closing



Garden plots in bloom supporting pollinators and leafy greens ready for harvest.

Beyond assistance during garden workdays, Extension provided ongoing support. Extension offered a winter webinar series, provided consultation on garden expansion, and helped coordinate a corporate volunteer workday with Deloitte Financial employees. Extension staff and Master Gardeners also kept people safe by teaching post-harvest food safety and providing equipment for weighing and delivering produce.

Gardeners expanded their plant knowledge and expressed gratitude for the training and fellowship. The hospital workers and veterans felt a sense of camaraderie and wanted to contribute more time during off-work hours. Four more veterans supported the garden this year. The garden manager also took the online Master Gardener training. Fifteen gardeners finished the year with a harvest potluck celebration where awards were granted to staff and veterans.



University of Illinois researcher Kacey Athey explains insect monitoring techniques at a Field Day Friday.



Field Day Fridays help diverse urban farmers connect with USDA programs

Five Field Day Fridays were organized by Illinois Extension to connect urban farmers with demonstrations and research in urban agriculture, and new opportunities available via the USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resource Conservation Service. The field days took place at the Extension SoSuCo Farm in Matteson and in Chicago at the Gary Comer Youth Farm, Growing Home Farm, and Global Garden Refugee Training Farm.

In 2023, USDA created a new Urban Ag Office for FSA and NRCS to serve urban farmers. Three field days featured FSA and NRCS staff and two field days featured presentations from Extension specialists. These events allowed growers to see farming practices in action, learn advanced techniques, and connect with the USDA employees to hear how to get cost share funds for the demonstrated practices. This unique and practical approach to get growers the information and resources they need was well received by the partner farms, participants, and the USDA.

This program reached a diverse audience with 71 participants, of whom 25% reported Hispanic ethnicity, 13% Asian or Asian more than one race, and 44% as Black or Black and more than one race. This marks a significant change in reaching underserved audiences. There are plans to maintain good long-term connections with our program attendees, build current field day topic offerings, help urban farmers register with the FSA, and take advantage of the NRCS cost share programs.



NRCS agent Joseph Bridges explains the high tunnel cost-share program to Field Day attendees.



Chicago Urban Farm Solutions delivers fresh leafy greens to the Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church food pantry.



Promoting fresh produce from farm-to-food pantry partnership

University of Illinois Extension partnered with the Conservation Fund to build new connections between local farms and food pantries, and to strengthen healthy food access in South Cook County.

The 20-acre farm was purchased by the Conservation Fund's Working Farms Fund and is managed by Chicago Urban Farm Solutions. As part of plans for improvements, Extension has advised in the planning, and is evaluating the impact of the farm delivering fresh produce to two nearby food pantries at Emmanuel Christian Reformed Church and Respond Now. In 2023, the pantries were visited more than 8,000 and 6,000 times respectively.

Extension will work with the food pantries to promote healthy options for food pantry visitors. Additional partners in this collaboration include the Greater Chicago Food Depository and Interseed.





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 of life, 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 made up of farmland, agricultural operations, both large and small, represent a critically important contributor to the economic vitality of Illinois' local and state economy.



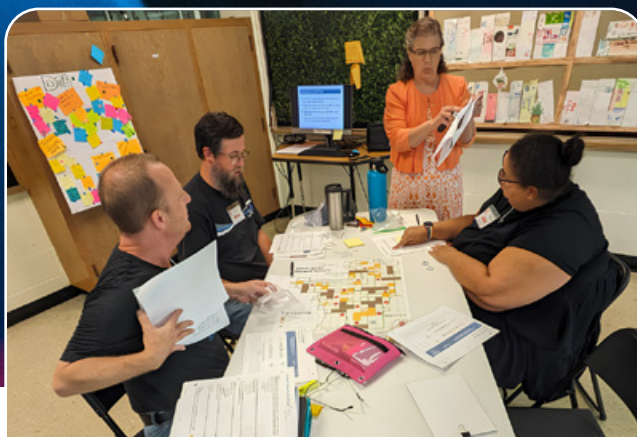
13,793

Attendees at all programs last year



366

Educational sessions offered



Teachers in biology unit work on the ecosystem game.

Illinois Extension hosts OpenSciEd professional learning for teachers

Local teachers are diving in to make the shifts called for by the Next Generation Science Standards. To advance science learning for all students, the NGSS demands new approaches to curricular materials and professional learning. To fill this need, Illinois Extension partnered with OpenSciEd, a non-profit dedicated to creating high-quality open-access NGSS-aligned materials and curriculum-based professional learning.

As an OpenSciEd Certified Professional Learning Provider, Illinois Extension hosted two four-day curriculum launch professional learning sessions in June 2023. OpenSciEd PL was a new experience for 90% of the teachers, and it significantly increased their knowledge of the curricular approach. It provided them with the “reasoning behind why [OpenSciEd] is so successful with students,” noticing “it is rigorous in a different way than traditional classrooms” and “students are an integral part of constructing reasoning.”

Across the board, teachers cited the value of engaging in the units as students. A high school teacher who taught a unit before and after professional learning said that engaging in this way cemented the need for student coherence and “the epiphanies found in [the PL] led to a more engaging OpenSciEd experience for [their] students in this second year.”

The sessions were attended by 15 middle school teachers from 11 schools and 26 high school teachers from 17 schools. In each case, teachers prepared to teach the first unit for their grade, earning a total of 1,293 professional development hours toward licensure renewal.





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.



2,983

Attendees in all programs last year



98

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered



143

Youth enrolled in 4-H clubs



646

Volunteers involved



\$1,474,830

Value of services performed by volunteers



Youth engaging in STEM activities.

Empowering youth in marginalized communities through STEM education



Because of limited resources, outdated materials, and insufficient technology, youth from historically under-resourced neighborhoods lack access to high-quality STEM education in the classroom. To supplement this need, an Afterschool Alliance study found that 69% of young people were getting some form of STEM education through an after-school program — but for every child engaged in a program, two were waiting to get in.

To address this challenge, Illinois Extension collaborated with the Chicago Public Library to make after-school STEM activities available to more youth from marginalized communities. The 4-H Stations series are engaging and interactive activities that foster curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Each hands-on learning experience encourages teamwork and helps to develop a deeper understanding of STEM concepts.





4-H Mixed Feelings Summer Camp

Middle School years can be challenging for youth as they grapple with their emotions, undergo physical changes, and navigate the complexities of friendships. In response, Illinois Extension developed the Mixed Feelings 4-H Summer Camp, a nurturing environment where youth aged 10-13 can develop skills for leading well-rounded lives.

The four-week camp addresses critical social and emotional health issues and focuses on physical, mental, and emotional well-being by emphasizing healthy choices, emotional intelligence, and the cultivation of resilient relationships.

For the youth, the camp was transformative. They found new friendships and delved into activities like gardening, cooking, sewing, and outdoor adventures, offering a much-needed break from phones and technology. Notably, the camp fostered personal growth. One participant credited the camp with helping them shed negative thoughts and become a better person. Others mentioned newfound abilities to open up to people and improve their well-being.

The 4-H Summer Camp engaged 31 African American youth participants and three teenage camp counselors from Cook County. The Camp also served as a catalyst for positive change, leaving its mark on the campers and the teen camp counselors, offering them opportunities for growth, development, and motivation.



Summer camp participants



A camper enjoying the day at Go Ape Zipline and Adventure Park.



Youth participating in team-building activities.



4-H Soccer for Success engages nearly 300 Chicago area youth

Parents want to raise their children in safe communities with quality schools and understand that where they live positively impacts their children's health outcomes and quality of life. This is especially true in historically marginalized and underserved neighborhoods where disparities in quality education and human services have long histories.

To address this issue, Illinois Extension provided coach-mentors, equipment, and safe spaces for nearly 300 K-8th grade youth to play and learn about soccer. 4-H Soccer for Success is a group mentoring program created to combat childhood obesity and foster character development. It uses soccer to creatively teach nutrition education and critical life skills while engaging youth in 90 minutes of physical activity per session.

Cook County youth who completed the program demonstrated an improved understanding of how to make healthy food and beverage choices, the need for exercise, and the importance of getting more sleep.

As a mentoring program, a nationwide independent evaluation found that participating youth feel better about their future and try harder in school. Additionally, the U.S. Soccer Foundation has seen that the program improves attitudes about fighting and staying out of trouble and can be an effective tool to discourage gang involvement and prevent juvenile delinquency.



Extension in the News



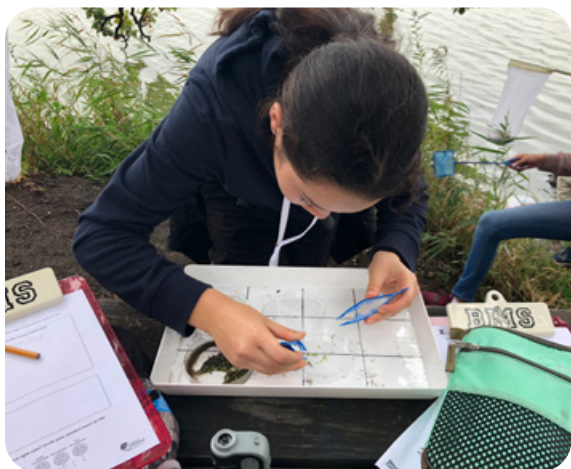
COOK COUNTY EDUCATOR PRESENTS AT EXTENSION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

At the 2023 Illinois Extension Annual Conference, Local foods and small farms educator Zack Grant presented a poster highlighting three years of efforts conducting multiple soil, compost, media, and tissue tests to a cohort of urban farms in Cook County. The ongoing project will help urban growers make better nutrient and media management decisions. Survey results indicated that growers' understanding of how and why to utilize soil testing improved by 35% after participation in the program. The results and future of the project were shared with other Illinois Extension educators at the conference during a poster session. The poster was also submitted for consideration at two national conferences.

FAMILY LIFE EDUCATOR WINS EXTENSION INDIVIDUAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

For 31 years, family life educator Molly Hofer has helped individuals age well. Her “classroom” is the Chicago metropolitan area and beyond. To date, Molly has presented 1,579 programs, reaching 41,905 participants. In visual terms, her participants collectively could fill Chicago’s United Center nearly twice!

Molly co-developed 32 curricula and two award-winning publications - Walk In My Shoes and Wits Workout, that have provided organizations the ability to facilitate programs and build Extension’s capacity to help others on a national scale. Molly is skilled in recognizing the diverse needs of older adults and was recognized for this with the Extension Individual Excellence Award.



COLLABORATION GRANT'S SCIENCE LEARNING ACTIVITIES PUBLISHED

Through an Extension Collaboration Grant, staff from Illinois Extension, the University of Illinois College of Education, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County worked with local teachers to explore ways to integrate outdoor teaching and learning into their science classrooms. In the summer of 2021, the team worked with teachers to identify common ground between the Next Generation Science Standards and the field of environmental education. Two tools for teachers emerged out of this work: a set of guiding questions for designing meaningful science learning activities and a checklist for productive outdoor experiences. The team’s work was recently published in the Fall 2023 issue of *Science Scope*.



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.



13,594

Attendees at all programs last year



342

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered



605

Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers



\$1,346,202

Value of volunteer hours



Illinois Extension convenes Greater Chicagoland Compost Summit

Food waste makes up to 37% of the material in Cook County landfills, where it becomes methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Diverting this food to a compost bin makes a major difference in the fight against climate change.



Summit participants discuss strategies for building a culture of composting.

Through its Building a Culture of Composting in Greater Chicagoland project, Illinois Extension hopes to make composting as second nature as recycling. In May, the team convened a compost summit to co-create action steps to make composting easy and accessible.

Through interactive facilitation, 16 Illinois Extension staff fostered communication and collaboration among 79 participants from community, commercial, educational, and municipal organizations in Cook and six nearby counties. Participants identified action priorities relating to educational resources, composting incentives and subsidies, and legislative priorities.

Attendees valued the time to collaborate, saying, “This event was incredible. I’m still processing everything I’ve learned. The contacts I made were worth the trip alone.” A local policy advocate reported hearing the perspective of a large waste hauler was “eye-opening.” This fall priorities were already being addressed by attendees. In 2024, further follow-up will occur to identify new partnerships working to support composting adoption.



Read the Extension Foundation report
bit.ly/2023_Extension_Compost_Summit



Master Naturalists identify trees for a restoration project.



Illinois Extension course and volunteers help restore natural areas

Trailside Museum of Natural History staff sought to restore a portion of the Thatcher Glen woodland area by removing damaged and overabundant species and planting native plants. Illinois Extension Master Naturalist Jerry Hossli offered to organize a tree inventory to help identify the trees that needed removal. He had recently participated in Extension's Urban Tree Health and Identification program and felt inspired to apply that knowledge. Using the skills he had gained in the course, he organized and facilitated six sessions with Extension and Forest Preserves of Cook County staff.

Jerry taught participants how to identify trees from their leaves, bark, and twigs. Participants then worked in teams to systematically identify each tree and assess any signs of disease or damage. By the end of the six sessions, 20 volunteers identified 400 trees in the 2.5-acre area.

The data was sent to a Forest Preserves biologist, who determined which trees must be removed — the inventory created by Extension and the volunteers allowed for early restoration efforts to begin in 2024. Jerry hopes to develop a tree walk to help others learn more about the trees in that area and build a greater understanding of the land.

Illinois Extension and the Forest Preserves of Cook County often work together to achieve land conservation and natural resource restoration goals. With nearly 70,000 acres of land, the Forest Preserves rely on volunteers such as Extension's Master Naturalist to help restore and manage the land.



Thatcher Glenn tree restoration efforts will continue in 2024.



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.



27,467

Attendees in all programs last year



1,916

Educational, online, or asynchronous sessions offered

INEP Community Partnerships



27

K-12 Schools



74

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



611

Nutrition education classes



Extension staff deliver programs in Spanish and English.



Nourishing resilience and transforming health outcomes with WIC families

Illinois Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program plays a pivotal role in combating nutrition insecurity among Chicago-area families, especially those affected by community disinvestment and structural inequities. Our recent work implementing a trauma-informed nutrition curriculum supports the efforts of youth and families to find their best health. In the spring of 2023, EFNEP staff acquired new skills through the Around the Table curriculum training and integrated mindfulness techniques into their programs.

This approach recognizes that we need to be aware of how toxic stress influences our health decisions and offers concrete ways to build resilience so we can experience better health. Community Outreach Workers guide families in dialogue, creating brave spaces where individuals can share their stories about food, family, culture, and emotional well-being.

During the subsequent summer, EFNEP implemented these strategies in the annual Summer Cooking Schools, catering to clients from Women, Infants, and Children Food Centers. These schools reached over 35 families, with a focus on maximizing WIC benefits and expanding cooking skills. During the two week program, Community Workers emphasized mindfulness techniques for navigating stress, highlighting the impact of stress on health decisions. Impressively, over 50% of enrolled participants expressed the need for mindfulness exercises, revealing a growing demand for practices that promote healing and empowerment.



Putting the finishing touches on a low-cost, healthy, and refreshing beverage



Recipe examples.



A participant and child painting together during health workshop.

Health series incorporates art to manage stress and promote self-care



Being in a constant state of stress can affect a person's physical and mental health and have a ripple effect on those around them including their families. Amongst a myriad of effective ways to manage stress, healthy coping mechanisms include prioritizing tasks, sleep, nutrition, and exercise. Creative outlets also can help those suffering from stress manage it in a fun and artistic way.

Stress'n the Arts, a health education series by Illinois Extension, integrates health and self-care lessons with the creation of visual arts and the use of music to manage stress and encourage self-awareness and expression, while interacting socially with others.

In the south suburbs of Chicago, mothers with young children expressed some of their frustrations and released part of their tension through expressive means during these facilitated discussions and art activities in Spanish. Participants appreciated that the creative methods can be replicated at home with their children during trying times or to redirect their attention to something positive.



A finished art piece and a daily reminder for participant.

Acknowledging research demonstrating that making art provides therapeutic benefits, Stress'n the Arts highlights how activities like painting, coloring, writing, and singing or listening to music can aid in personal well-being and self-care.



Extension staff and participant chat between presentations.



Women share the Latina lived experience managing mental health

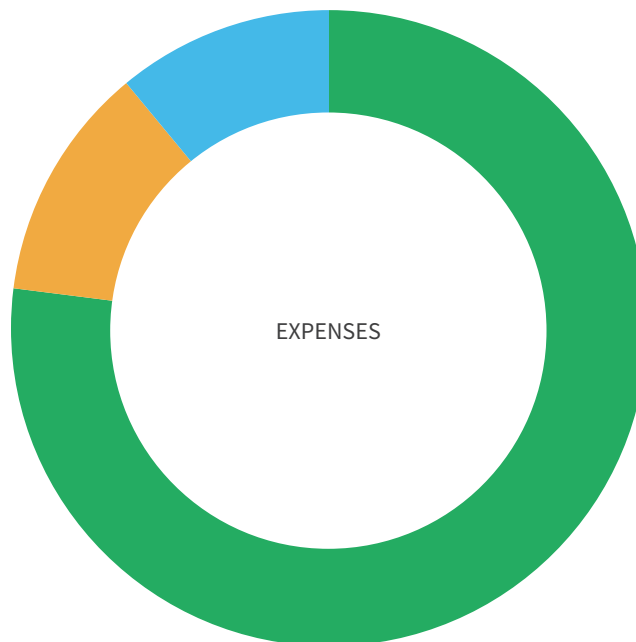
Although Latinos show similar susceptibility to mental illness as the general population, they are less likely to seek help and may experience disparities in access to mental health services. Latinx women have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts compared to non-Hispanic white women.

To address this issue, Illinois Extension provided two one-hour break-out sessions on Managing Mental Health at the Gamma Phi Omega, a Latina-oriented sorority, National Conference. The participants learned about factors that contribute to sound mental health, beneficial lifestyle choices, and resources to enhance mental well-being. Participants also had the opportunity to convey how culture and identity influence their self-care with other attendees.

For those that identify as having come from communities that may stigmatize caring for one's mental health, the Managing Mental Health breakout session provided a valuable and rare opportunity for women to reflect on positive and negative experiences around mental well-being. This is an important step in addressing inequities that may result in a higher risk for more severe and persistent mental health conditions.

Fifty participants attended the sessions and 38 provided perspectives about what they associate with mental health.

Expense Summary



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



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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.

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