

Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

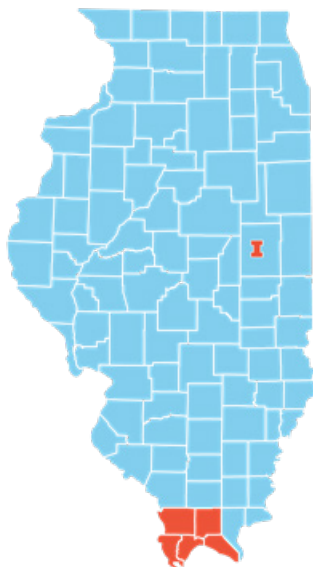


Serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Jody Johnson
County Director



A note from the County Director

University of Illinois Extension, serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties, made remarkable strides in 2024, addressing critical needs and fostering community growth through innovative programs and dedicated outreach. This annual report highlights the outstanding achievements of Extension staff and volunteers, whose unwavering commitment has enriched the lives of residents and strengthened the region's natural, economic, and social resources.

One of the year's standout efforts was Trash Blasts in the Shawnee National Forest. This initiative mobilized local organizations, volunteers, and Master Naturalists to clean up over 6,700 pounds of litter, transforming the forest into a cleaner and healthier public space. Such projects underscore Extension's commitment to environmental stewardship. Extension staff also prioritized sustainability and conservation education through the natural resources, environment, and energy team. From removing invasive species at Garden of the Gods to hosting interactive events for youth, these efforts reached hundreds of participants, fostering a deeper connection to the environment.

Food security initiatives flourished in 2024. The Pilot Garden yielded over 1,350 pounds of produce, and the Plant a Row, Watch COPE Grow program doubled its food donations to local families. Youth gardening programs such as Garden Tales captivated young learners with hands-on activities and educational experiments, inspiring future generations of gardeners.

Extension's commitment to health and economic development was evident through SNAP-Ed initiatives promoting nutrition and the community and economic development team's efforts to address food insecurity. Their collaborative strategies earned the 2024 Interdisciplinary Team Excellence Award, reflecting the impact of their work and how we added new members to our team.

4-H youth development programming in the unit exemplifies positive youth development by meeting youth where they are and providing diverse, inclusive opportunities for growth. From floriculture at Gunn Farm Flowers to financial literacy simulations and shooting sports, 4-H fosters essential skills such as responsibility, teamwork, and leadership. Programs like the Livestock Ambassador initiative and livestock exhibitions cultivate agricultural knowledge and life skills, while community service and awards like the Experience Awards and Hall of Fame celebrate dedication and achievement. Volunteers and partnerships ensure accessibility and equity, empowering youth to explore their passions, develop resilience, and become engaged, confident leaders in their communities.

Together, these accomplishments exemplify the transformative power of collaboration, education, and innovation, affirming Extension's vital role in empowering communities across our five-county community. None of this would be possible without the continued support of people like you. I hope you enjoy reflecting on this year's highlights.

Jody Johnson
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Drone footage of rural Johnson County.

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 eight strategic priorities:



Community



Economy



Environment



Food and Agriculture



Health



Partnerships



Technology and Discovery



Workforce Excellence

2024 Engagement

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

730

Communities Served

805K+

Program Attendees

9.7M+

Webpage Views

22.4M+

Social Media Impressions

2.5M+

YouTube Impressions

547

Educational Sessions/Week
(28K+ Annually)

90

Online Courses Accessed by
12K+ People

12,484

Local Government Education
Webinar Reach

1,840

4-H Clubs

67,917

Fair Exhibits

20,339

Members

261,012

4-H Experiences

Partnerships

5,563

Program Volunteers

266

Community Gardens

2,922

School and Community Partners

\$15,735,213

Value of Volunteer Contributions

\$514,316

Value of Donated Produce Grown or Facilitated

\$4.7M+

External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners



4-H is meeting youth where they are



At home, at school, on a farm, in the city, or at church, 4-H youth are everywhere. No matter where youth are at or if they do or do not have the ability to travel, 4-H can meet youth where they are at. 4-H staff serving Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties take pride in expanding their 4-H program and truly providing opportunities for all through traditional experiences, school experiences, community club experiences, and 4-H projects. Volunteers come in all shapes, sizes, and occupations: homemakers, teachers, farmers, and parents or grandparents. Together, they are all partners in providing youth with opportunities to become lifelong learners through a variety of 4-H projects. In the southernmost part of the state, 4-H staff are trendsetters and engage youth in a variety of ways by tearing down the barriers of poverty, transportation, education, and population.

4-H empowers youth to lead for a lifetime, providing positive youth development opportunities and embracing their unique backgrounds, interests, and needs. By offering a diverse range of programs, from hands-on agriculture and science projects to leadership and life skills training, 4-H ensures that every youth can find their passion and grow at their own pace. This inclusive approach fosters a supportive environment where young individuals feel valued and empowered to express themselves.

With mentorship from caring adults and collaboration with peers, youth gain confidence and resilience as they navigate challenges and pursue their goals. 4-H's commitment cultivates a sense of belonging and encourages lifelong learning, helping



Learn more about 4-H
4h.extension.illinois.edu

shape well-rounded, engaged citizens ready to contribute to their communities. Locally, 4-H programs lead the state in club growth, aiming to sustain youth development experiences by executing partnerships that highlight and complement positive youth development goals.

Equality and diversity are fundamental values in 4-H, fostering a safe and inclusive environment where all youth can thrive regardless of their backgrounds. The organization is committed to ensuring that every young person has access to opportunities that promote personal growth, leadership, and community engagement. By embracing diverse perspectives and experiences, 4-H enriches its programs, encouraging collaboration and understanding among members from various cultures and identities. This emphasis on inclusivity not only enhances the learning experience but also prepares youth to navigate and contribute positively to a diverse world. 4-H empowers all members to become confident leaders who respect and appreciate the value of every individual, creating a stronger, more united community.

4-H Youth Development



97
4-H Clubs



5,025
4-H Experiences



1,341
Club Memberships



17.01%
Minority Youth
Engagement



640
Fair Exhibits

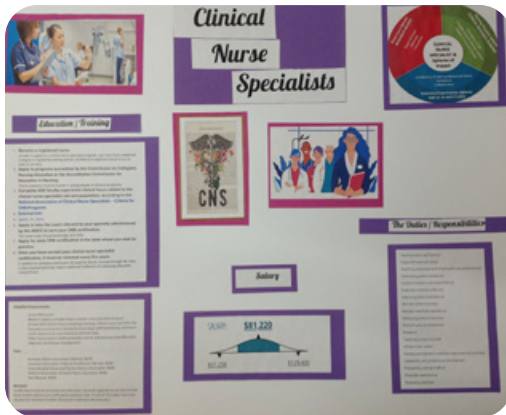


3.69%
Hispanic Youth
Engagement



YOUTH STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES AT GUNN FARM FLOWERS

Gardening promotes physical health and mental well-being, providing a creative outlet that reduces stress. 4-H youth partnered with Gunn Farm Flowers for an educational adventure in their local flower garden in Villa Ridge. Floriculture and horticulture are vital for youth as they offer a unique blend of environmental stewardship, practical skill development, and economic opportunity. Engaging in these fields fosters a deeper understanding of ecosystems and sustainable practices, encouraging young people to take responsibility for the planet. As they cultivate plants and learn about landscaping, they gain valuable skills that can lead to careers in agriculture, design, and entrepreneurship. Ultimately, involvement in floriculture and horticulture equips young individuals with the knowledge and skills to innovate and advocate for a greener, more sustainable future.



4-H PROGRAM FOSTERS CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND FINANCES

Early exposure to financial literacy helps youth make informed decisions, paving the way for future stability and success. This past year, over 300 local youth participated in a financial literacy simulation. This curriculum, updated by a local youth development educator, is used in 4-H programs nationwide. Understanding concepts such as budgeting, saving, investing, thoughtful spending, and managing debt empowers young people to navigate the complexities of personal finance, reducing the likelihood of financial pitfalls in adulthood. Being financially literate encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, as young individuals feel more confident in pursuing business opportunities and managing their finances effectively. Financial literacy not only enhances personal well-being but also contributes to the overall economic health of communities and society.



4-H ALUM SERVES AS LIVESTOCK AMBASSADOR

Animal science projects help youth become informed, engaged leaders. Livestock and leadership are two passions that Abagayle Britton has excelled in during her 10-year 4-H career. Through her current role as vice president of the Illinois State 4-H Livestock Ambassador Team, she is busy planning the Junior Livestock Conference. Her passion will continue as an alum as she serves her ambassador term through the age of 21. Britton acknowledges that animal science plays a pivotal role in leadership development through 4-H, with hands-on experiences that foster responsibility, teamwork, and critical thinking. Through animal care, nutrition, and management, youth gain valuable knowledge about livestock as they develop essential life skills. Through setting goals, participating in competitions, and working collaboratively with peers, 4-H members enhance their leadership abilities and build confidence.



YOUTH HIT THE BULLSEYE WITH SHOOTING SPORTS

4-H shooting sports promote discipline, focus, and teamwork in a safe and structured environment. Participants learn valuable skills in marksmanship, safety, and responsibility while fostering a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence through practice and competition locally and at the state level. The emphasis on respect for firearms leads to personal accountability and ethics. The collaborative nature of shooting sports encourages peer support and camaraderie, helping youth build lasting friendships and leadership skills. Through these experiences, 4-H shooting sports teach technical proficiency as youth develop resilience, goal-setting abilities, and a commitment to lifelong learning, contributing to their growth as responsible, engaged citizens. The local shooting sports program continues to blossom and grow, offering archery, air rifle, air pistol, .22 pistol, and shotgun.





The James Hogendobler family



Five-generation 4-H family named Illinois Family Spirit Award Winners

The Illinois 4-H Family Spirit Award annually recognizes one Illinois family that has substantially benefited from and who has been an advocate for the Illinois 4-H program over multiple generations. For a Pulaski County family, 4-H is a way of life. The James Hogendobler Family was named the 2024 Illinois 4-H Family Spirit Award Winners, as they were honored with the award at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield.

For the Hogendoblers, 4-H has spanned five generations, including 41 family members, and 19 members have contributed a combined 134 years of 4-H club membership. The Hogendobler family's involvement with 4-H began in 1933 when James Arthur Hogendobler organized a club in Villa Ridge, initially called the Young Hog Raisers. With club charter signatures from notable leaders such as Henry A. Wallace, secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture, and H.W. Mumford, director of Extension, the club soon became Villa Ridge Ag to include both boys and girls. James' wife, Dorothea, played a crucial role in founding the girls' section, leading to the club's unified name and continued family leadership.

James and Dorothea led the club until 1968, when the leadership passed to their son, James Michael Hogendobler, and his wife, Judy. Under their leadership, the club thrived, reaching over 60 members and gaining statewide recognition through events like the State Fair's Share the Fun. James Michael, known as "Doctor 4-H," received significant honors, including the 4-H Alumni Recognition Award and induction into the 4-H Hall of Fame. Their dedication extended beyond organizing activities, with many former members achieving notable careers in various fields, demonstrating the lasting impact of their mentorship.

In 2003, James Michael and Judy's son, Jay, and his wife, Christine, assumed leadership, ensuring the club's continued success and growth. Despite their initial inexperience, Jay and Christine revitalized the club, maintaining the strong traditions and values established by previous generations. Today, Villa Ridge Ag remains a vital part of the community, reflecting the enduring influence of the family's commitment to 4-H and its positive impact on the lives of its members. Many 4-H members from the Hogendobler Family have volunteered with the organization, serving a combined 62 years of volunteerism, including a combined 182 years of club leadership.



Learn more about the Hogendobler Family
go.illinois.edu/4HFamilySpirit2024



4-H MEMBERS HONORED AT RECOGNITION DINNER

Experience Awards recognize the dedication and achievements of youth who actively engage in their 4-H projects and programs. Over 50 award winners were honored at a dinner as they received bronze, silver, gold, diamond, and emerald awards. These honors celebrate the hard work, creativity, and personal growth that 4-H members demonstrate through their participation in various activities, such as community service, leadership roles, and skill development. By earning these awards, youth gain a sense of accomplishment and motivation to continue pursuing their interests and passions. The recognition also enhances their resumes and college applications, showcasing their commitment to learning and community involvement. 4-H Experience Awards honor individual achievements and encourage youth to set goals, embrace new challenges, and cultivate a lifelong passion for learning and leadership.



YOUTH COMPETE IN FIRST-ANNUAL LIVESTOCK EXHIBITION

Ninety-six entries were tallied in the inaugural Livestock Exhibition in Massac County in early August. Volunteers worked together to create an amazing event for the youth of Alexander, Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union counties. Showing livestock instills responsibility, commitment, and teamwork. As participants care for their animals and prepare them for competitions, they learn the value of hard work and perseverance. The process encourages youth to set goals and develop problem-solving abilities as they navigate challenges in animal care and presentation. The collaborative environment of 4-H fosters friendships and mentorship, promoting effective communication and leadership skills. These experiences enhance their knowledge of agriculture and animal science as they become confident, engaged citizens prepared to take on leadership roles in their communities and beyond.



STAFF MEMBER RECOGNIZED FOR SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP

With over 30 years of dedication to Extension, many focused on 4-H youth development, Vickie Taylor was named the 2024 Lois Lane Award winner. This prestigious award recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to their communities, embodying the spirit of service and leadership. 4-H community service is a cornerstone of the organization's mission, encouraging youth to give back and make a positive impact. Taylor's dedication and impact on her community highlight her commitment to fostering positive change and supporting others. Her achievements serve as an inspiration to many, showcasing the values of resilience, hard work, and community engagement that the Lois Lane Award celebrates. 4-H is proud to have Vickie as a dedicated team member who is always striving to "make the best better" through community service efforts.



4-H VOLUNTEER RECEIVES STATE RECOGNITION

A local 4-H volunteer was recognized for her dedication to youth, project learning, and education. Leslie Bradley was inducted into the 2024 4-H Hall of Fame. Bradley has been instrumental in forming a great partnership and becoming a true advocate for 4-H through her passion for education, teaching, and learning. She formed a 4-H Teen Leaders Club for the Teens as Teachers' signature 4-H program and also created a multi-project club that meets after school to promote project discovery and learning. In addition to being a 4-H leader, she is a 4-H parent and Extension volunteer for Johnson County 4-H. Bradley has been instrumental in working and aligning volunteers and promoting 4-H community service efforts with the Food on the Move program. The pride she has poured into the 4-H program in Johnson County is amazing, and she will be honored for years to come.





Extension Educator John Shadowens presents during the Independent Grocer Summit at University Park.



Community and economic development team assists southern Illinois

Community and economic development programming helps community leaders, residents, and businesses build capacity for renewal and growth. There are many challenges facing communities, but Extension's CED team helps to build teams and processes to face the challenges and work more effectively and efficiently for local communities.

Extension facilitated the strategic planning process for the economic development group Johnson County 2000, producing a new mission statement and six strategic goals. The CED team is now working with the Southern Illinois Coalition for the Homeless and Friends of the Shawnee Forest to facilitate the creation of their respective three-year strategic plan.

The group is also working with small, rural communities to help mayors develop their vision for economic revival in communities ravaged by economic and population decline. The team is currently developing a toolkit that rural civic leaders can use to engage their citizens and other stakeholders in developing a thoughtful and realistic plan for re-development. In 2025, the CED Team will launch a weekly podcast featuring innovative changemakers and stakeholders in rural communities and economic development.



Community and Economic Development
go.illinois.edu/CEDImpact



Health Equity Achieved Together project concludes

In food deserts, access to affordable, nutritious food is limited. The lack of grocery stores or farmers' markets makes it difficult for residents to purchase fruits, vegetables, and other wholesome foods. The Health Equity Achieved Together project is a multidisciplinary Extension initiative. Team members



collaborate with community members to improve food access and implement innovative strategies that improve health outcomes in communities facing higher health disparities. In southern Illinois, this project helped to bring fresh food solutions into the long-standing food deserts of Gallatin County and Cairo.

In Cairo, this involved Extension working with community volunteers to form a grocery co-op. Extension staff facilitated planning meetings and helped the group negotiate the lease, draft corporate documents, conduct renovations and business planning, and secure over \$800,000 in financial and equipment donations.

The store celebrated its grand opening in June 2023 with an event attended by the Illinois Lieutenant Governor and other dignitaries. Rise Community Market generated \$513,669.18 in total sales in its first 12 months. Of that total, 31% were SNAP/ EBT sales, 16% of sales were meat and animal proteins, 6% were fresh produce, and 10.7% were dairy items.

The interdisciplinary team worked with a local steering committee and Tri-State Food Bank to design, fund, and launch a client-choice mobile food pantry pilot, Food on the Move, in October 2023. This project leveraged \$250,000 in grants and donations to buy and modify a trailer to carry over 3,000 pounds of food to rural food deserts every month. In the first seven months of the project, the program provided over 40,000 pounds of nutritious food to over 1,500 individuals in 30 rural communities.

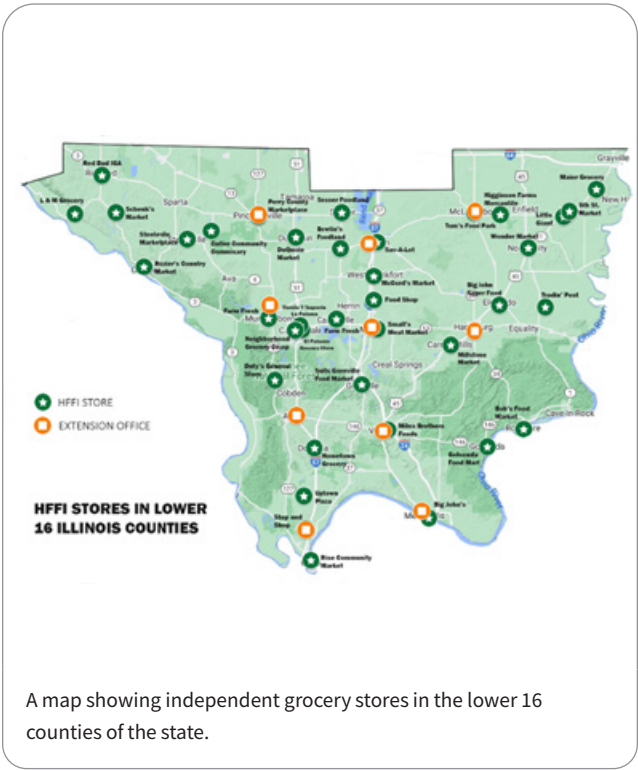


Grant assists grocery stores in lower 16 counties

Shopping at small businesses supports the local economy, creates jobs, and fosters a sense of community. Supporting local businesses fosters innovation and diversity, allowing more entrepreneurs to succeed and bring fresh ideas into the communities they serve. The Extension community and economic development team was awarded a \$1 million grant to provide capacity-building services to independent grocery stores throughout the southernmost 16 counties. The funding is subcontracted over three years through USDA's Healthy Food Financing Initiative program in partnership with the Southern Illinois Community Foundation and Western Illinois University.

The CED team will assist with marketing, business model development, market analysis, succession planning, linkages to new opportunities, and advisement on equipment and inventory. This also involves working with local lenders and the Community Foundation to create a Community Development Financing Institution to provide creative, lower-interest financing options for local grocers.

The team will also work to explore the feasibility of a food aggregation system of bulk ordering, warehousing, and distribution for local stores to increase their wholesale buying power of hard-to-obtain items while lowering prices to rural consumers. Through the creation of an affordable online ordering and grocery delivery system, increased market access can be made available to the elderly, disabled, and those with limited transportation.



The Illinois Grocery Initiative will assist grocery stores in food deserts within southern Illinois.

Illinois Grocery Initiative addresses food deserts

Ensuring that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food is essential for building stronger, healthier, and more resilient communities. In 2023, Governor Pritzker signed SB 850 into law, creating the Illinois Grocery Initiative. The IGI is a \$20 million investment in understanding the food desert problem in Illinois and creating grant opportunities for independent grocery retailers to upgrade their aging equipment and open new grocery stores in existing food deserts.

Illinois Extension was selected as a technical assistance provider by the Illinois Department of Commerce on a contract through Western Illinois University. Extension helps these stores prepare for and execute these grants. The IGI legislation also commissioned a study on the state of the independent grocery industry and the scope of food desert impacts in the state. Extension was selected to lead a survey project of grocers throughout the state. The CED team hosted seven independent grocer summits in the summer of 2024 in conjunction with Illinois senators with districts containing food deserts.

The team is also compiling and analyzing the results of a grocer survey completed by dozens of Illinois stores. This report highlights independent grocery industry pain points, including utility and labor costs, food inflation, product availability, workforce scarcity, and competition from dollar stores and retail grocery giants. The work through this investment will help address food insecurity within the southernmost part of the state.





New partnership and site lead to food donation garden's best season

The Plant a Row, Watch COPE Grow Food Donation Garden is not new to Metropolis. But this year, the garden was moved to a new location thanks to a partnership with SIU Credit Union. The new 709 E 5th Street location provides a dry, sunny spot.

"When the county sold the property where the garden was, the county commissioners and Mayor Don Canada reached out to help us find a new location," said County Director Jody Johnson. "Fortunately, SIU Credit Union had the sense of community to partner with us to help make this a successful project."

This past spring, FFA students from Massac County and Max Russell assisted Illinois Extension with the garden move and expansion. Raised beds were moved from one location to another, and new raised beds were built and added, doubling the size of the garden. They also assisted with building a new fence around the garden, with help from Robin Mizell and volunteers from Thrive's Green Team.

This garden is a testament to what can happen with support from across a community. The cooperation of so many helps make a heavy load light but yields tremendous results.

County Director Jody Johnson

In the past five years of growing, pest pressure, lack of a fence, and shady conditions have brought challenges to the garden. Still, 1,850 pounds of produce were grown and donated across those years. This year, with the help of existing and new volunteers, a sunny spot, double the growing space, and a fence, the garden produced over 2,300 pounds of food, all of which was donated to COPE Food Pantry.

Plant a Row, Watch COPE Grow Food Donation Garden Highlights



2,330

Pounds of produce grown



\$13,060

Value of volunteer time



390

Volunteer hours recorded



Massac County FFA students assist Extension staff with the garden move and expansion.

These changes allowed this garden to grow more this year than in the past five years combined. COPE Food Pantry and pantry clients expressed appreciation for the produce. It was not uncommon for there to be 100 pounds of produce delivered at one time during July and August, and most of the produce moved quickly off the pantry shelves.

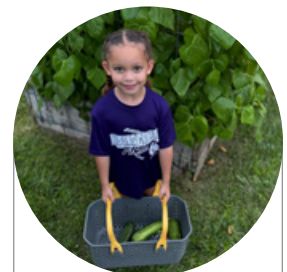
"We were amazed at the capacity of food the garden was able to produce this year. Each harvest means more food for our community members, and we are proud to be able to offer a source of fresh produce to the food pantry," says Erin Garrett, Extension educator and manager of the garden.

The garden operates on an adopt-a-day approach, with different volunteers and community organizations adopting a different day of the week to check on the garden. Extension is thankful for dedicated volunteers, including the Massac County Drug Awareness Coalition, the Reineking family, the Cruz family, and Kara Sullivan and family. From watering, harvesting, and delivering produce, these volunteers gave hundreds of hours to the garden this year.

"I am especially proud of Erin and Anne Townsend for their dedication and coordination of the garden. They are the ones who bring all the pieces together," said Johnson.



Follow the progress of the garden on Facebook
facebook.com/PlantaRowWatchCOPEGrow



Even the youngest of helpers get involved with the garden.

Donation garden has fourth year of growing food for local communities

Donation gardens make a lasting impact by nourishing communities, fostering sustainability, and bringing people together for a meaningful cause. The Pilot Garden, Cairo's food donation garden, entered its fourth year of growing through a partnership between Daystar, Southern 7 Health Department, and Illinois Extension. This past year, 18 new raised beds were added to the garden thanks to funding from Meridian Healthcare. Ten of the raised beds are now used as learning and growing spaces during Garden Tales. This allows for more hands-on gardening for youth in Cairo to better connect them to where fruits and vegetables come from.

Community volunteers donated 360 hours of time tending to the garden, with 1,350 pounds of produce grown and donated to the Daystar Community Program. A special thanks to Deb Davis, Derek Eurales, and Retha Eurales, who consistently volunteered their time in the garden. Extension appreciates all of the volunteer groups, including Lion's Club, NAACP, and Delta Sigma Theta. Volunteer groups from Loyola Academy and St. Ann's also helped to build an herb spiral and care for the garden during the summer. Monthly open house events called Open Gates, held June, August, and September, introduced the community to the garden and equipped visitors with tips and tricks for them to try in their own gardens. Each event was sponsored by a different organization, including Lion's Club, Mighty Rivers, and Arrowleaf. Extension reached 40 people through the open house events this year.



Students visit The Pilot Garden during Garden Tales to learn more about how to grow fruits and vegetables.



Follow the progress of the garden on Facebook
facebook.com/ThePilotGarden



Retha Eurales, Lion's Club volunteer, helps to harvest fresh produce.

During Garden Tales, pre-K through sixth grade Cairo Elementary students visited the garden to learn about a different nature-themed topic, listen to a story, complete an activity, and work in the garden. Between 100 and 170 students attended each month. Extension started in February by visiting the students in their classrooms and having them vote on the vegetables they wanted to grow in their new raised beds. Students prepped seed paper to plant, and their first visit to the garden had them planting their seeds.

In May, students were able to harvest and taste-test the vegetables that they grew, including spinach and broccoli. The SNAP-Ed team provided tasty dips for the students to try with their vegetables and had the students vote on their favorite vegetable. In the fall, students taste-tested watermelon grown in their raised beds, along with the help of SNAP-Ed. They also learned about pumpkins and helped harvest over 130 pounds of sweet potatoes for donation to Daystar. The continued work with partners and supporters in The Pilot Garden helps reduce hunger and provides access to fresh, healthy produce year after year.

The Pilot Garden Highlights



1,350
Pounds of produce grown



\$12,050
Value of volunteer time



360
Volunteer hours recorded



Volunteers receive state awards

Master Gardeners enrich communities through horticulture education and the art and science of growing. It's often said that dedication blooms where it's nurtured. This sentiment rings true for Patti Powell and Beckie Wisdom, who were honored with the prestigious State Outstanding Master Gardener Award in 2024 for exceptional service and commitment to the community. This award recognizes individual volunteers who have demonstrated exemplary leadership, innovative programming, and a profound impact on their community. Throughout their tenure, Powell and Wisdom have made significant contributions to their local Master Gardener programs. Their passion for gardening and community education has inspired others to cultivate their own gardens, improve their horticultural skills, and foster a deeper connection with nature.



Master Gardeners Beckie Wisdom and Patti Powell pose with their awards.



Master Gardeners complete training

Illinois Extension Master Gardeners invest their time and talents in local Illinois communities to grow food, support pollinators, sustain resilient home gardens, and share their knowledge with others. New Master Gardener interns will start volunteering out in their communities after completing the hybrid Master Gardener training this fall. Pamela Barker, Peggy Ferguson, Louann Elwell, Jeff Konzal, and Tammy Horn completed 12 weeks of training on a wide range of garden topics, from fruits and vegetables to native plants and trees to insects and diseases. Lisa Lyell completed the online Master Gardener training and started her volunteer work. When people volunteer or advocate for local issues, they become part of the solution. Extension looks forward to seeing the great work these volunteers accomplish in our communities.



The 2024 Master Gardener graduating class and Extension staff.



Trash Blast volunteers at Dutchman Lake.

Trash Blasts protect local forests and land

Trash buildup is not just an individual problem—it requires collective action to create a cleaner, healthier world. Reducing pollution in public spaces is essential for maintaining a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. Extension volunteers, along with members of the public, participated in trash blasts hosted year-round to remove trash and dispose of it properly. During the events, volunteers divided into small teams to collect litter from selected sites. Items as large as mattresses to tiny microtrash were gathered and removed to help restore the area to its natural state. A partnership with USDA Forest Service and Friends of the Shawnee National Forest helped remove 6,795 pounds of trash. Volunteers continue to bring enthusiasm to these opportunities, working to make public lands great places to recreate and explore.



Increasing access to native plants

As the message about planting native plants to support pollinators continues to gain popularity, access to native plants remains limited in our rural communities. Extension staff and volunteers collected seeds from native plants in winter 2023. During January and February, Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteers came together to clean, sort, and package native seeds. Together, the volunteers prepared 1,580 packets of seeds, which were then distributed for free at programs throughout the year. These seeds will bloom into flowers and plants that provide continuous food sources and a welcoming habitat for pollinators. By promoting native plants and protecting pollinators, we contribute to a healthier planet, a stronger food system, and a more beautiful natural world.



Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



21

Active Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists



\$30,121

Value of volunteer time



735

Volunteer hours



Programs connect families with nature

Providing opportunities for families to learn about natural resources together is a priority for the natural resources team at Extension. Connecting with nature benefits individuals' physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Through continued efforts, multiple programs were offered for youth and their families to learn more about the nature of southern Illinois.



Master Gardener Lisa Lyell shares information about pumpkins during the Pumpkin Extravaganza.



Extension hosts Pumpkin Extravaganza

Did you know that Illinois is one of the leading states for pumpkin production and processing? Offered for the fourth year, Pumpkin Extravaganza attracted over 130 participants, who learned about pumpkins through educational stations, games, and crafts. This youth pumpkin event encompassed multiple areas of Extension with a collaborative effort between SNAP-Education, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, 4-H, and the natural resource, environment, and energy team. This year, Extension also collaborated with community partners, including Jonesboro Public Library, Stinson Memorial Library, Union County Ag in the Classroom, USDA Forest Service, and SIU Sustainability. Participating groups staffed booths to interact in engaging ways to educate families about pumpkins.



Interactive booths engage community members eager to learn about pumpkins.

Preparing for the total eclipse

With southern Illinois being in a unique position to experience totality for the April 8 solar eclipse, Extension staff and Master Naturalists hosted an Eclipse Roadshow for local libraries and schools in anticipation of the big event. The program helped youth understand how an eclipse happens through stories and immersive activities. Youth were taught how to safely view an eclipse while they each created their own personalized eclipse glasses. The roadshow reached 110 children across five programs.



Program coordinator Anne Townsend and Master Gardener and Naturalist Patti Powell put on an Eclipse Roadshow for local libraries and schools.

Educating youth about the oaks of Illinois

For a third year, Extension's natural resources team continued their summer library tour throughout the southernmost counties of the state. Extension partnered with nine local libraries to deliver The Mighty Oaks of Illinois, an educational program for youth. Participants explored the diversity of oak trees in Illinois as they discovered the important role they play in our ecosystems. They learned about the parts of a tree, listened to a story, explored tree rings, and completed a craft.



Extension Educator Erin Garrett helps youth identify leaves during the Mighty Oaks of Illinois program at a local library.



Adult programs encourage healthy food choices

The Healthy Cents, Create Better Health, and MyPlate for My Family curricula use proven methods to encourage limited-resource families to make healthy food choices. Participants develop skills through learner-centered teaching while reflecting on their own experiences. Topics include:

- Locating community food assistance programs
- Developing a spending plan and setting goals
- Food shopping strategies and unit pricing
- Shopping for fruits and vegetables
- Saving money on food away from home
- Involving kids in family meal preparation
- Preparing easy and healthy meals
- Ways to be physically active

These programs have been conducted at 17 community agencies, including local libraries, shelters, public housing, mental health agencies, and health departments.



Extension meets people where they are during health fair

SNAP-Ed partners with state and local organizations to meet people where they are. Initiatives include nutrition education classes, social marketing campaigns, and efforts to improve policies, systems, and the environment of communities. Extension staff serving the southernmost part of the state participated in the Dongola High School Health Fair, engaging students and staff with interactive activities and resources to promote healthy lifestyles. The team showcased healthy recipes, offered tasting opportunities, shared recipe cards, and presented a digital cooking demonstration featuring easy, healthy dishes students could replicate at home. Extension's work within local communities helps make nutritious foods and physical activity accessible for all.



Community Worker Tiffney Stewart (L) shares nutrition resources during the Dongola High School Health Fair.



Community Worker Sarita Sawyer (left) shares tasty recipes during a partnership event with Rise Community Market.

Recipe booth shares tasty, healthy foods

Rise Community Market in Cairo partnered with the SNAP-Ed team to host a monthly event called Healthy Recipe of the Month. This initiative combines interactive nutrition education through the Eat.Move.Save. booth with PSE efforts, such as strategically placed shelf talkers and nudges on store shelves, to encourage shoppers to make healthier choices. The Eat.Move.Save. booth shared nutrition education with guests as they sampled a featured recipe that was nutritious and budget-friendly. Recipe videos, pre-recorded by Extension staff, were also displayed on digital screens in the market, allowing shoppers to watch the step-by-step process of additional dishes. This initiative makes nutritious cooking accessible and engaging, helping residents incorporate healthy, affordable ingredients into their daily lives.



Shelf talkers and nudges on store shelves encourage shoppers to make healthier choices.

Staff learn and grow at state conference

Extension inspires staff to grow through professional development and networking opportunities. Local staff who attended the Annual Illinois Nutrition Education Programs Conference were inspired by the keynote speaker and went away with new programming ideas and support as they celebrated their successes. Individuals and teams were also recognized for their excellence in programming over the last year, including Community Worker Sarita Sawyer, who was a recipient of the Walking on Sunshine Award.





SNAP-Ed Educator Ife Adesoye and Program Coordinator Jennifer Newbury meet with Arrowleaf staff to drop off venison to share with food pantry guests.



Expanding access to protein-rich venison for families in need

Access to nutritious food remains a critical challenge for many households, and Hunters Feeding Illinois continues to bridge this gap by providing high-quality venison to food-insecure families. This initiative not only enhances food security but also supports local businesses and promotes sustainable hunting practices.

The process is simple yet impactful: during hunting season, hunters donate their harvested deer, which are then processed into ground venison by partnering meat processors. This lean, protein-rich meat is distributed to food pantries across the region, ensuring families have access to a valuable source of nutrition.

SNAP-Ed played a key role in this initiative by enrolling food pantries to receive venison donations and setting up Eat. Move. Save. booths at distribution sites. These booths provided food pantry guests with recipe tastings, cooking demonstrations, and storage guidance to help them confidently prepare venison-based meals. Additionally, SNAP-Ed provided cookbooks, recipe cards, and potholders as incentives, ensuring families had practical resources to make the most of their venison donations. By equipping individuals with the knowledge and tools to incorporate venison into their diets, SNAP-Ed is helping to make nutritious food more accessible and enjoyable.

The response from the community has been overwhelmingly positive. One pantry guest, Brianna, shared her excitement at an Eat. Move. Save. tasting booth stating: "Wow! I had never tried venison meat before. I actually like it in this casserole and would definitely try it again!"

Programs like Hunters Feeding Illinois demonstrate the power of community-driven solutions to address food insecurity.



Empowering educators: Professional development on building healthy habits for academic success

Recognizing the vital connection between nutrition, well-being, and student performance, Extension provided professional development training for staff of the Illinois Migrant Educational Service after-school program. Building Healthy Habits for Academic Success focused on equipping educators with practical strategies to help students adopt healthier lifestyles that support their learning and overall well-being. The training covered key areas, including:

- The impact of nutrition on cognitive function and concentration
- Incorporating healthy snacks and meals into after-school programs
- The role of physical activity in enhancing student engagement and academic success
- Simple ways to create a health-conscious learning environment

Participants engaged in interactive discussions and received valuable resources, including nutrition guides, activity ideas, and practical strategies to implement with their students. The training emphasized how small, sustainable changes can significantly improve students' focus, energy levels, and overall academic outcomes.

This session opened my eyes to the importance of nutrition and movement in student learning. I now feel more confident in making small changes that can have a big impact on their success!

Building Healthy Habits for Academic Success
participant

SNAP-Education



780

Nutrition Education Classes



2,623

Nutrition Education Participants



75

SNAP-Ed Partnerships (K-12 Schools, Early Childhood Centers, Emergency Food Sites, and Other Organizations)



Hands-on experiences coupled with nutrition education engage local youth and make learning fun.



Nutrition programs engage local youth

Illinois Nutrition Education Programs provide healthy eating and physical activities for youth through research and evidence-based curricula such as Eat Play Grow, OrganWise Guys, Serving Up MyPlate, CATCH Kids Club, Healthy Kids Out of School, Eat Fit, and Teen Cuisine. One example, Great Garden Detective, combines hands-on gardening experiences with nutrition education to help kids make healthier food choices and gain an understanding of how fruits and vegetables are grown. Through engaging, exploratory lessons, students harvest vegetables and taste simple, nutritious recipes. Students were able to take what they learned home to share with their families. The garden this year included a variety of vegetables, such as carrots, radishes, spinach, lettuce, cabbage, and Swiss chard, giving students a broad introduction to growing and enjoying fresh produce.



SNAP-Ed programming like OrganWise Guys empowers kids to be healthy and smart from the inside out.

Mobile teaching kitchen brings healthy recipes to the community

More than half of Illinois adults have a known chronic health condition, with many facing inequities that make improving their health more challenging. Extension and community partners are meeting community members where they are through our mobile teaching kitchen. Extension partnered with SIH, the Region 5 Regional Hospital Coordination Center, and local health departments to bring a full-service teaching kitchen to our communities to support nutrition education efforts. Staff share cooking skills and Eat. Move. Save. recipe demonstrations that are affordable and healthy. The kitchen makes visits to SNAP-eligible sites like food pantries, schools, and farmer's markets in the lower 16 counties of Illinois. Community members are encouraged to enjoy locally-grown produce, and they can taste the final product, with some clients trying new foods for the first time.



The mobile teaching kitchen makes visits to SNAP-eligible sites throughout the lower 16 counties of the state.

Cooking schools build kitchen confidence

Illinois Junior Chef is a fun, engaging program that allows youth to learn about nutrition, try new healthy recipes, and gain kitchen skills. This year, the SNAP-Ed team partnered with Shawnee Worship Center, Meridian School District, Metropolis First Missionary Baptist Church, Massac County Housing Authority, and Cairo Episcopal Church of The Redeemer to deliver the cooking schools. Staff also partnered with Arrowleaf to provide etiquette lessons over lunch at the Clyffe Café in Vienna. IJC remains a flagship program for the SNAP-Ed team, offering valuable skills on kitchen safety as youth learn to use cooking utensils and properly measure ingredients. Recipes used during the program introduce participants to healthy food options, and each student received kitchen tools and utensils to use at home, along with an Illinois Junior Chef cookbook.





Through Illinois Junior Chef, youth try healthy recipes as they gain kitchen skills.





MyPI shapes future generation of leaders in emergency management

Empowering the next generation to take charge during emergencies is at the heart of the My Preparedness Initiative, an award-winning youth preparedness and educational outreach program for teens supported by Illinois Extension. The program trains youth in Illinois for emergencies and disasters by equipping teens with life-saving skills, fostering leadership, and inspiring civic responsibility. This initiative provides essential training to Illinois school students on disaster readiness, preparing them to respond effectively in times of crisis.



This past year, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency's Office of Homeland Security welcomed students from Vienna High School to their home offices as part of MyPI, giving them a unique opportunity to explore the world of emergency management and homeland security. Students had the chance to tour the State Emergency Operations Center, where they saw firsthand how agencies collaborate during a disaster. They also visited the Radiochemistry Lab and the Radiological Emergency Assessment Center, gaining insights into the science and technology behind emergency response. Programs like MyPI go beyond teaching technical skills. They inspire young people to take an active role in building resilient communities. The visit to IEMA-OHS gave students a glimpse into how their training connects to real-world emergency management, sparking curiosity and a sense of responsibility.

Since its launch in 2018, MyPI Illinois has empowered over 110 youth with valuable emergency preparedness skills, equipping them to play an active role in their communities. Through hands-on training and service projects, these young leaders have helped prepare more than 770 homes across five southern Illinois counties for potential disasters. Participants gain life-saving knowledge and strengthen community resilience, ensuring families are better equipped to face emergencies.



During their tour, the Vienna High School students gained significant knowledge of the critical work emergency professionals do to manage and respond to disasters.

I would say my perspective on this has really changed because I had no idea how important it is. You never know when something might happen.

Caroline Wright, MyPI participant



Local students had the chance to tour the State Emergency Operations Center, where they saw firsthand how agencies collaborate during a disaster.



Pantry program makes impact on local communities

Throughout the year, Extension partnered with the Tri-State Food Bank's Food on the Move mobile pantry pilot program to make a meaningful impact on the health and well-being of local communities. The mobile pantry stops monthly in Ullin at the First Baptist Church, with November marking one year since its launch in 2023. During this year, an average of 60 households attended each event, serving over 1,300 individuals to date. Guests received fresh fruits and vegetables, milk, eggs, bread, grains, canned goods, and frozen proteins such as beef, pork, and chicken.

The SNAP-Ed team implements strategic healthy nudges within the pantry, guiding clients toward more nutritious food choices. In addition, recipe bundles that highlight easy-to-make, budget-friendly meals using ingredients were available in the pantry. Their monthly Eat.Move.Save. booth demonstrates how to turn fresh produce, proteins, and other items into delicious, nutritious recipes. Clients are invited to taste-test the dishes, allowing them to experience firsthand how simple and tasty healthy meals can be. Valuable handouts are distributed with step-by-step instructions on how to recreate the recipes at home. Alongside Tri-State Food Bank, Extension also provides training and support to the pantry volunteers from Ullin First Baptist Church, who help make this program a success.

The Food on the Move Mobile Food Pantry is a collaborative approach to creating lasting improvements in community health and access to nutritious food. The initiative is part of the Southern Illinois Food Access Project, which addresses food insecurity for vulnerable populations in a 16-county downstate region. The project was recognized statewide when it garnered the Interdisciplinary State Team Excellence Award. The project team accepted the award at the Illinois Extension Annual Conference along with a local 4-H team that received an honorable mention in this category for integrating 4-H programming into 84 classrooms, engaging with more than 1,200 youth in 2024.



Staff from the Southern Illinois Food Access Project earned the Interdisciplinary State Team Excellence award for their work addressing food insecurity.



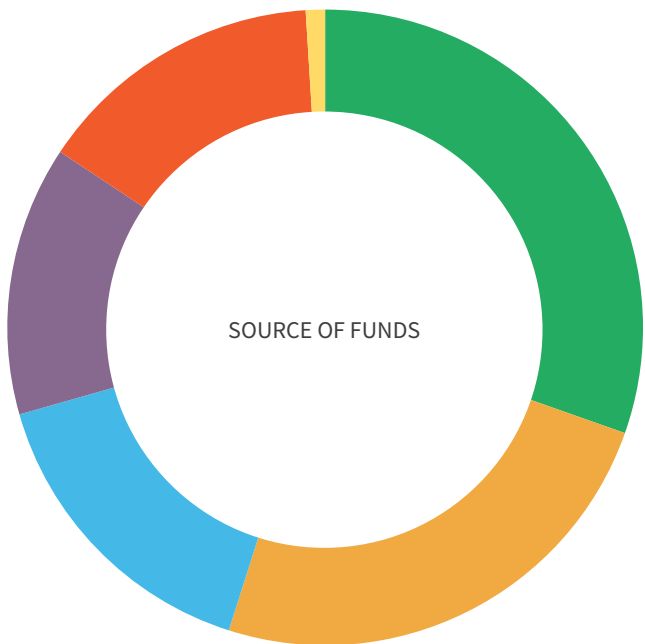
Local Extension staff and campus leadership cut the ribbon to a new office space in Union County.







New Extension office serves as a collaborative learning hub

Extension celebrated a new office in Union County with a ribbon-cutting ceremony alongside campus leadership, local leaders, community members, and partners. Dean Germán Bollero, Extension Director Shelly Nickols-Richardson, and Union County Commissioner and Board Chairman Max Miller shared remarks at the event. Community members were also invited in for a tour of the expanded office space, which will be a hub for Extension and 4-H events, learning, and community engagement.

Source of Funds

Funding for Illinois Extension comes from a combination of local, county, state, and federal dollars returned to the community through educational programming.



	Amount	Source
	31%	Federal (SNAP-Ed)
	25%	Grants
	16%	Local
	14%	Federal (Smith-Lever)
	15%	State
	1%	Donations



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Illinois Extension

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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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