



# Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.



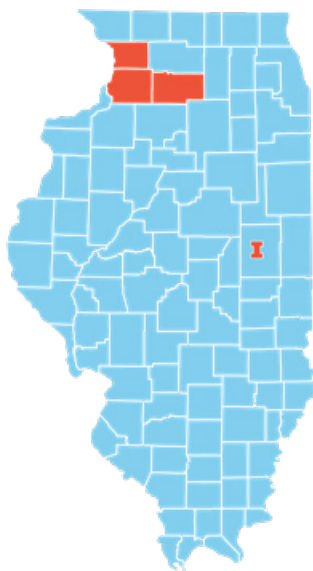
Serving Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside Counties  
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024







Karla Belzer  
County Director



# Planting roots for success

Each year, as I sit down to prepare this report, I take a moment to reflect and review the impact Illinois Extension has made in our local communities — how our programs bring people together and give them skills to improve their lives, businesses, or communities; how youth come to our programs with a spark of interest and gain skills that will benefit them throughout their life; how our efforts connect individuals and families with needed information and services; and how our relationships with community partners forge strong connections for the good of all.

Daily, I am inspired by the work of our dedicated staff and volunteers in serving the residents of Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside counties. Our staff answer the call to help community members and meet local needs with dedication and innovation.

Our annual report provides an opportunity to share with you a few of the highlights of Extension programming in our communities and provides a small glimpse into the difference we are making in the lives of our friends and neighbors each day. It is my greatest honor to serve an organization that is supremely community-focused and dedicated to improving the quality of life for all.

Our success is not ours alone – we owe it to the unending support of countless individuals and organizations. To our county boards, foundations, businesses, community organizations, and individual donors – your contributions, support, and collaboration ensure we can reach all community members with impactful, life-changing information and knowledge. To our 4-H volunteers, Master Gardeners, and Master Naturalists – you play a critical role in expanding our reach and extending our mission. We extend our deepest gratitude to each and every person who supports Illinois Extension.

We are extremely proud of how we ignited knowledge and sparked lifelong learning in our communities in 2024. As we forge future leaders and build stronger communities, we are deeply grateful for the privilege of serving this region and look forward to continuing our work in the year ahead and beyond. Thank you for being a vital part of our story.

Karla Belzer  
County Director

Cover photo: A youth participant tends to his garden at the 4-H Junior Gardeners program in Dixon.

# 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

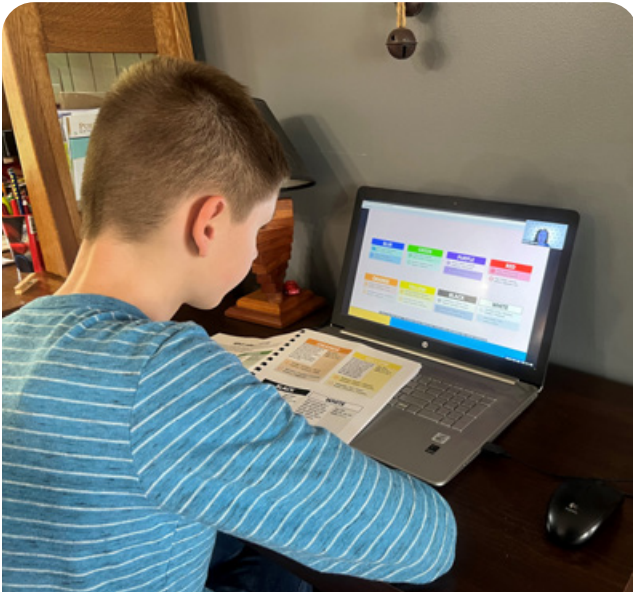




## Beyond ready: equipping youth with creative and emotional intelligence for the future

Programs that develop entrepreneurial, technical, and problem-solving skills are important for helping young people succeed in today's world. As digital skills become essential for jobs, graphic design programs teach students creative and technical skills that are in high demand. At the same time, mindfulness programs teach students emotional intelligence, helping them manage stress, show compassion, and build resilience. Together, these programs provide a well-rounded approach to youth development, preparing them for creative and emotional success.

The Pixel Pioneers Virtual 4-H SPIN Club is a great example of how youth can be empowered through creative and technical education. This online program introduced 90 youths to graphic design, teaching them skills like color theory, typography, brand recognition, logo design, and layout basics. A design challenge for participants to try out their new skills wrapped up the program.



A Pixel Pioneer participant explores color theory, learning how colors can convey both positive and negative connotations.

The program had a big impact; 93% of participants felt they had the tools to continue exploring graphic design beyond the program. Many participants also said the virtual format provided an artistic outlet not available in their communities, with 71% agreeing. A parent shared that the program “opened up my child’s world to other creative outlets” and mentioned how their child had already used the skills learned to create personalized cards. This feedback shows how the Pixel Pioneers program teaches technical skills while nurturing creativity and confidence, allowing youth to pursue creative passions and consider future careers in the field. The program is a great example of how virtual opportunities can bridge gaps and allow youth to access resources that might otherwise be out of reach.



A student at Northside School in Morrison examines their mind jar, a tool to aid in calming.

In a world where emotional regulation is as important as technical skills, the Mindful Me program, designed for children ages 5 to 8, offers an important opportunity for youth to develop emotional intelligence. Participants learned about emotional regulation, goal-setting, time management, and mindful eating. The program helped 472 youths across Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside counties develop skills to focus, stay calm under pressure, and show kindness to others. Mindful Me provides youth with tools to manage emotions and navigate social interactions with compassion and gratitude. This approach fosters emotional resilience, a crucial skill for youth to thrive in academic and personal spheres.

An evaluation exercise where participants drew their favorite memories from the program showed overwhelmingly positive responses, with many students reporting improvements in kindness and emotional expression. The impact of the Mindful Me program extends beyond just the children—it influences families and communities, helping create a more compassionate and connected environment.

Both Pixel Pioneers and Mindful Me are examples of how Illinois Extension provides youth with tools to succeed in their personal and professional lives. Together, these programs foster well-rounded development, empowering youth to face the future with confidence, creativity, and emotional strength. Continued support for these initiatives will help prepare young people to become future innovators, educators, and leaders who can shape a rapidly evolving society.



## EMPOWERING GROWTH THROUGH 4-H CAMP

Sending children to overnight camp for the first time can be nerve-wracking for both parents and caregivers. Trusting 4-H camp staff and counselors with your child for an entire week requires courage, but it also opens the door to incredible opportunities for growth. Northern Illinois 4-H Camp is the last remaining weeklong 4-H camp in the state outside of 4-H Memorial Camp in Monticello. Youth from nine counties throughout northern Illinois attend, regardless of 4-H membership. Camp challenges kids to step out of their comfort zones and gain independence, from solving problems to managing tasks on their own. One camper shared, “I didn’t realize all I could do without you around,” a sentiment her mom echoed with gratitude. Parents pick up their children and hear stories of adventure and growth, showing the impact of camp. 4-H camp creates lifelong memories, strengthening kids’ confidence and family bonds.



4-H youth engage in a lively game of tug-of-war at 4-H camp



4-H youth and volunteers at the State 4-H Archery Shoot

## MAKING HISTORY: ARCHERY TEAM SHINES AT STATE SHOOT

Three young women made history this fall as the first Whiteside County team to participate in the 4-H State Archery Shoot. Alyssa Galloway, Delaney Kuehl, and Hailey Yaun marked the occasion with a 5th-place finish, highlighting their hard work and dedication to the sport. Their achievement is a milestone not only for the county but also for girls in archery. Three dedicated archery volunteers attended the event, offering support, sharing tips, and cheering the girls on. Their time and commitment to the program and its youth are truly inspiring. This historic participation has sparked pride and motivation within the 4-H Archery Club, encouraging other members to pursue their goals. The 4-H club has since grown, adding new members and partnering with a virtual archery facility to enhance practices. These young 4-H athletes have embraced the sport and continue to put in the effort to excel.



## LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING: 4-H TEENS AS TEACHERS

Picking a future career can be daunting for high school students. According to the Build Your Future 4-H curriculum, most people will spend over 80,000 hours working. Why not spend that time doing something enjoyable? The 4-H Teen Teachers program offers students a direct opportunity to explore education as a career. They learn leadership, teaching, and communication skills, how to adapt to different learners’ needs, and practice decision-making. After training, participants plan and implement a learning experience for younger youth. This year, eight Teen Teachers engaged in interactive activities that built teamwork skills. Participants shared that they learned the value of clear communication and gained a better understanding of working with various student ages. 4-H Teen Teachers is a partnership between Illinois Extension and the Sauk Valley Community College IMPACT program.



Teens as teachers work together to build communication and leadership skills



4-H youth and volunteers lead the charge in restoring an oak savanna at Old Mill Park

## 4-H YOUTH RESTORE THE FOREST FOR THE FUTURE

On the edge of Savanna, a transformative project has begun to take root – literally. 4-H youth, volunteers, and residents came together to plant 25 oak trees in Old Mill Park. This simple initiative is making a lasting impact on the environment, wildlife, and our planet’s future. Oaks, symbols of strength and resilience, play a crucial role in ecosystems. Their deep roots and towering canopies improve soil and air quality while supporting diverse wildlife. Each tree provides food and shelter to birds, mammals, insects, and fungi, creating habitats for species displaced by urbanization and climate change. This oak savanna will benefit generations of parkgoers and community members, offering a lasting reminder of community action. With plans for a pollinator garden and educational workshops, Illinois Extension, the City of Savanna, and the Savanna Park District are growing a legacy.







## 4-H workshops inspire culinary careers

4-H programs equip youth with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in personal and professional endeavors. Culinary workshops nurture the next generation of food scientists and culinary artists while empowering them to innovate for the future.

Young food science detectives engaged in a hands-on workshop: “The Case of the Missing Milk.” The task was to figure out how to turn milk into something far more exciting. This workshop was designed to teach the youth about food science by turning whole milk into butter and ice cream. At first glance, milk might seem like a simple ingredient, but transforming it into other products requires a solid understanding of food science principles. Youth learned that milk is made up of water, fat, proteins, and sugar. Each of these reacts differently when exposed to mechanical manipulation like shaking.

These young detectives were fascinated to see the liquid transform into a solid when the fats in the milk were manipulated by shaking vigorously. They got to enjoy their newly churned butter on crackers. Many were surprised to see how much it tasted just like store-bought. To make ice cream, they prepared their recipe in a reusable zip-top bag and enclosed it in another bag of ice. They took turns, once again shaking vigorously, and enjoyed watching the milk turn into a refreshing treat. Once it was the perfect consistency, they poured the ice cream out of the bags and topped their new concoctions with sprinkles and hot fudge. The detectives were thrilled to see how simple ingredients created such a tasty treat.

This introduction to food science is just one 4-H program that sparks the desire to learn more about the culinary industry and inspire future career pathways.



4-H food science detectives ready to eat their homemade ice cream



4-H youth perfect their cake decorating skills at the Project Pool food decorating workshop

## Food decorating workshop expands learning

Lee County 4-H hosted Project Pool, an initiative designed to introduce 4-H members and the broader community to a variety of hands-on projects. One workshop that stood out was a food decorating workshop led by Emilie Davies, a baker and parent from the Maytown Comets 4-H Club. The workshop quickly filled with youth eager to learn about cake decorating and the culinary arts. This growing interest led to two things: the Frosting Fun 4-H SPIN Club was founded, and the Federation Club and the Lee County Fair Association were prompted to address the need for a new cake cooler at the fairgrounds.

Emilie tapped into the enthusiasm from her first workshop and now leads Frosting Fun. She is a shining example of the lasting impact 4-H can have on individuals and families. Thanks to the support of a volunteer who provided decorating supplies, Emilie displayed her first cake as a young 4-Her. That early experience led her to earn an associate degree in pastry arts and become the assistant manager at a local bakery, applying the skills she learned through 4-H. Emilie helps members of Frosting Fun continue to develop their skills and explore ways to express themselves creatively. She also passed her passion for cake decorating on to her daughter, who exhibited in the Food Decorating category for the first time this year, showing the intergenerational impact the program has on families.

Cake decorating exhibitors were grateful for the support that led to an upgraded cake cooler. The previous cooler malfunctioned and damaged exhibits, discouraging participants. This improvement will impact the Food Decorating project experience and ensure exhibits are preserved.

These efforts have already led to a significant increase in participation in the cake decorating category. Entries at the 2024 fair saw a 50% increase compared to previous years, with 10 projects and 19 individual entries, up from just six projects and 12 entries in 2022. This growth reflects not only the impact of the improved equipment and workshops but also the broader influence of 4-H in cultivating creativity, community involvement, and youth development.





## 4-H Food Challenge finds innovative ways to use ingredients

Students at Chadwick-Milledgeville High School embraced the challenge to create a healthy, tasty, and attractive dish in twenty minutes — without a recipe. During the six sessions of the 4-H Food Challenge program, students learned to think creatively and work as a team to prepare unique dishes using only the ingredients provided.



Food Challenge participants add toppings to a pizza.

The program focused on more than just cooking. Weekly lessons covered topics like MyPlate nutrition guidelines, safe protein preparation, and kitchen hygiene. These concepts were put into practice as students planned their meals, emphasizing the importance of making healthy, informed choices. Without recipes to follow, they relied on their growing knowledge of cooking methods and ingredients to create balanced and flavorful dishes.

Cooking also became a fun, shared experience. Collaborative activities like this build essential life skills such as communication and cooperation that are valuable in all areas of life. Students also developed public speaking skills as each team presented their creations to a guest judge, sharing insights about their nutritional choices, cooking techniques, and the creative process.

Reflecting on the experience, one student shared, “You have to think about what [nutritional] value your dish has and what benefits it has to your body.” Students enjoyed the process of improvisation, commenting on their ability to “figure out how to use what you have for ingredients.” This resourcefulness is a vital life skill, fostering adaptability and creativity.

The 4-H Food Challenge introduced students to new cooking techniques, nutrition knowledge, and essential life skills like problem-solving and teamwork. By stepping outside their culinary comfort zones, students developed healthier habits and gained valuable collaboration skills.



## Youth make a difference in 4-H Federation

4-H Federation is a group of motivated and service-oriented youth who go beyond their community clubs to make the most of their 4-H experience. These young leaders organize impactful county-wide events, lead community service projects, and make a meaningful difference in Lee County. Federation

members take on key responsibilities like planning events, assisting with the setup and coordination of the 4-H Show, and arranging fun field trips for all members to enjoy. Along the way, they build leadership skills, develop confidence in public speaking, and often advance to become 4-H Ambassadors, continuing to inspire others to actively participate in their communities. Federation is where today’s youth grow into tomorrow’s leaders.

Bethany Odle, current 4-H Federation president, exemplifies this leadership. Now in her second year leading the club, she also serves as the president of the Wyoming Indians 4-H Club and is a dedicated 4-H Ambassador. As a longtime 4-H member, Bethany encourages new members to actively participate in meetings, share ideas for programs and community service, and collaborate on decisions shaping the year’s activities.

One of the Federation’s projects is its annual donation drive during the 4-H Show. This year, the club collected condiments for local food pantries. Over four days, they gathered 476 items, which were distributed to food pantries in Lee County, directly benefiting families in need. They continued this effort at the Golden Clover Fest in November, collecting canned goods to further support local food pantries.

Through these projects, Federation members demonstrate their dedication to making a positive impact in their community. Their leadership, creativity, and passion ensure that Lee County’s 4-H Federation Club continues to thrive and support those in need.



4-H Federation members held a condiment drive at the 2024 Lee County Fair and 4-H show

## Carroll, Lee, and Whiteside 4-H



**50**  
4-H Clubs



**569**  
4-H Club Memberships



**1,738**  
Fair Exhibits



**14,201**  
4-H Experiences





## Strengthening lives through tai chi

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 25% of people age 65 and older fall each year. Additionally, 65% of older adults have pain, and up to 30% experience chronic pain, according to the National Council on Aging. These statistics reflect a critical concern for the aging population and highlight the importance of addressing these challenges with effective interventions.

People experiencing chronic pain, falls, or the fear of falling often reduce their physical activity or avoid leaving the house, believing they will stay safe and reduce their pain. However, research shows that physical inactivity increases the risk of weakness, pain, and falls. This creates a dangerous cycle where inactivity leads to further health problems, making it harder to regain strength and confidence. One way older adults can reduce their pain and fall risk is by participating in low-impact exercises focused on strength, flexibility, and balance.

To address this need, Kara Schweitzer, Illinois Extension family life educator, became a board-certified Tai Chi for Health instructor. She introduced Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention at the Whiteside County office, offering the community a new low-impact exercise option. This evidence-



Participants progress through a Tai Chi movement.

Tai chi participants demonstrate the traditional tai chi greeting and sign of respect. The position of the hands represents strength, friendship, and humility.

based program, developed by Dr. Paul Lam, is designed to enhance balance and mobility while promoting overall health.

During program sessions, participants moved through slow, graceful movements to build strength and confidence. At the end of the program, participants reported many benefits. Eighty-three percent improved their balance, 75% reduced their fear of falling, and 50% experienced less pain. Ninety-two percent of participants shared they plan to continue practicing tai chi independently after the program. Other benefits experienced were improved concentration, social connections with others, slowing down, being more in control of movements, and having a calm mindset. Many participants also mentioned that Tai Chi helped them become more mindful of their movements, contributing to better posture and a more relaxed approach to activities.

Tai chi has given me a sense of peace I haven't had in a long time.

Exercising with others in a group increases social connections, which has been shown to improve the mental and physical health of older adults. Social engagement is key to maintaining well-being, with studies showing that group activities improve mood, lower anxiety, and enhance cognitive function.

By offering programs that emphasize physical activity, social connection, and personal growth, Illinois Extension contributes to the health and vitality of older adults, helping them lead healthier, more fulfilling lives.

I was starting to be worried about falling. I feel that by continuing tai chi, I will feel more comfortable moving, especially outside.





## Building a healthier Illinois with Mental Health First Aid training

Mental health challenges affect 1 in 5 adults in the U.S., making it a critical issue for families, workplaces, and communities. Every day, an average of 130 people die by suicide, highlighting the urgent need for greater awareness and support. To address this, Illinois Extension partnered with Sinnissippi Centers to bring Mental Health First Aid training to local organizations, including hospitals, first responders, and employers.

MHFA is an evidence-based program designed to help participants identify signs of mental health and substance use concerns, support individuals in crisis, and connect individuals with professional help. The program equips participants with skills and knowledge to support those struggling with mental health challenges, whether at home, in the workplace, or in their communities.

I now know how to approach someone in crisis without fear of saying the wrong thing. This training has changed how I view mental health and how I support others.

These trainings create ripple effects in communities, building a network of informed individuals capable of assisting in a mental health crisis. Mental health training in workplaces is particularly impactful, improving employee productivity, relationships, and morale.

Feedback highlights the program's significance, with participants feeling more confident in recognizing signs of mental health challenges and starting difficult conversations.

The success of MHFA training in 2024 has paved the way for further expansion, fostering a culture where mental health is prioritized, stigma is reduced, and help is accessible. By expanding this initiative, Illinois Extension hopes to create lasting change — building healthier and more resilient communities.



A group of MHFA learners celebrate the completion of the training.



A Wits Fitness participant works on a brain challenge activity.

## Making wits more fit: navigating brain health in Illinois

The Illinois Department of Public Health projects that 260,000 individuals age 65 and above will be navigating life with dementia in 2025, but aging doesn't have to mean an inevitable future with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. Current research reveals lifestyle choices that can be pivotal in maintaining cognitive function and enhancing quality of life.

Illinois Extension features programming efforts that contribute to brain health at any age. The Wits Fitness program is a dynamic initiative to keep minds sharp and engaged. This mental workout is a lively journey of intellectual challenges designed to activate various cognitive processes like memory, attention, and reasoning.

Monthly sessions feature interactive challenges, unveiling strategies and lifestyle choices that champion brain health. But it's not all about the mind; it's also about connection. Sessions are hubs of social engagement, where participants forge connections and build a community of support. Wits Fitness participants shared highlights of their involvement in the sessions. "Keeping my mind active is important," and "the importance of community and fellowship" are just a few benefits identified.

To expand the program's reach and promote brain health initiatives, many community partners have scheduled sessions through 2025 and beyond. Wits Fitness is challenging cognitive norms and rewriting the story of aging to a tale of vibrant minds, connected hearts, and a future brimming with vitality. People of all ages are invited to join this empowering journey.







## Finding funds to fight food insecurity

In recent years, food insecurity has increased, driven in part by rising food costs. Food pantries like Morrison Food Pantry have felt the impact, as more individuals and families rely on their services. Illinois Extension hosted a workshop to explore ways food pantry volunteers can secure funds to help meet their needs. Volunteers learned about funding opportunities, including the State Farm Neighborhood Community Grant. As a result of this grant, the Morrison Food Pantry purchased a freezer, allowing them to provide more nutritious food options to those in need.

The ability to offer frozen foods, such as meats and vegetables, is vital to the pantry's offerings. These nutritious items were often out of reach due to storage limitations and financial constraints. The pantry has also sought additional funding for shelving and refrigeration units, further expanding its capacity to meet the needs of families in Morrison and surrounding areas. The Morrison Food Pantry now has the capacity to offer a broader variety of foods, ensuring families have access to balanced meals. These improvements have allowed the pantry to serve up to 40% more households, a vital accomplishment as food insecurity rises.

This success story highlights the importance of education and collaboration in the fight against food insecurity. Without the support of programs like the Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed program and funding opportunities from grants, many food pantries would struggle to meet the increased demand for their services.

As the pantry continues to evolve, it hopes to inspire other food pantries to seek out similar resources, collaborate with local organizations, and pursue new avenues for funding. Through these efforts, communities can provide lasting solutions for food insecurity and build stronger, healthier neighborhoods.



Morrison food pantry volunteers are excited to have additional freezer space to better serve the community.

## Total Impact: Food Access, Production, and Safety



**13,255**  
Program  
attendance



**6**  
Active food  
donation gardens



**388**  
Educational  
sessions



**12**  
Partnerships with emergency food  
sites and other organizations

## Supporting nutrition and well-being across the lifespan

Illinois Extension is further addressing the challenge of food insecurity through educational programs aimed at improving food access and nutrition education for all ages. One initiative is the Healthy Cents curriculum, offered in Carroll, Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside counties in collaboration with the Ogle County Health Department and the ACTION grant. This curriculum focuses on skills for managing food budgets, using coupons, understanding unit pricing, preparing healthy meals, and finding community assistance programs. Participants also learn to use tools like the Find Food Illinois map to locate food pantries, meal sites, and grocery stores that accept benefits cards.

Illinois Extension also supports local food pantries through Eat.Move.Save. booths. These booths offer the chance to sample recipes featuring healthy, budget-friendly options. Patrons receive recipes and educational materials on topics such as preparing seasonal produce. By assisting pantries with distributing fresh produce, Illinois Extension helps reduce food waste and educate community members on healthy meals.

In addition to adult education, younger generations were reached through nutrition education. Second-grade students at Jefferson Elementary School participated in the OrganWise Guys program. Students were introduced to major organs and connected nutrition and physical activity to organ health. Students eagerly discussed which foods benefit muscles, bones, the heart, and lungs, showing an understanding of nutrition's impact on their bodies. Many students described all ten characters, showing how much they learned.

Through these efforts, Illinois Extension is making a significant impact on food access and nutrition education, empowering families and individuals to make informed decisions about their health.



Students in Lee County taste test apples in a SNAP-Ed program.







## Impactful initiatives address food access in local communities

Illinois Extension programs are making a tangible difference by addressing hunger and improving food access. Two key initiatives, the Walk for Hunger event and the Homegrown Healthy gardening program, exemplify the power of collective action and education.

### Every Step Matters: The Walk for Hunger

The Walk for Hunger event in Lee County highlighted the power of community collaboration during Hunger Action Month. In Lee County, food insecurity affects 13.3% of the population. This staggering statistic prompted Illinois Extension staff to take action.

Collaborating with key partners, including the Lee County Health Department, Northwestern Illinois Center for Independent Living, Dixon Park District, and Dixon Community Food Pantry, was the first step in organizing the event. The goal was not only to raise awareness about hunger but also to provide direct support to those in need.

Participants engaged in family-friendly activities, including face painting, free blood pressure screenings, a demonstration by the Dixon Police K-9 patrol unit, a visit with the Dixon Police therapy dog Indy, and firetruck and ambulance education. Generosity was on full display as participants donated 107 pounds of food, equivalent to approximately 89 meals, and contributed \$272, which translates to around 2,720 meals for the Dixon Community Food Pantry.

This event not only provided immediate relief to those in need but also fostered a sense of unity and collective purpose. It demonstrated that every step taken—whether through donations or raising awareness—matters in the fight against hunger.

### Homegrown Healthy: Cultivating Skills and Nutrition

The Homegrown Healthy program is a 10-week gardening initiative designed to address food and nutrition insecurity by teaching participants how to grow, maintain, and utilize a garden. Through hands-on activities, weekly recipe samples,

Illinois Extension Walk for Hunger volunteers and community partners celebrate collecting food and funds for 2,800 meals in Lee County.

and make-and-take projects, the program provided practical tools for healthier living.

Each session began with a review of participants' gardening challenges, such as dealing with drought, pests, or heat stress. For instance, some participants mitigated the heat generated by their garden's location near a parking lot by creating self-watering containers. These discussions fostered problem-solving skills and confidence in gardening.

Weekly nutrition lessons complemented the gardening activities. Participants learned about seasonal produce, its nutritional benefits, and ways to prepare it. Recipe samples encouraged exploration of new foods. Several participants planted radish seeds for a second fall harvest, and others shared that they recreated the recipes at home for their families.

Surveys conducted at the start and end of the program showed significant increases in participants' knowledge of growing, preparing, and storing produce. Feedback from participants highlighted the program's impact, with one participant stating, "this was a great program. I really enjoyed new recipes and all the things to start an indoor and outdoor garden." Each participant received a hydroponics kit to grow fresh produce at home during colder months and a "Five Ingredients or Less" cookbook. The program's success spurred requests for advanced gardening classes and farm visits.

### Building a Future Beyond Hunger

Both the Walk for Hunger event and the Homegrown Healthy program illustrate how education, community collaboration, and targeted action can make a profound impact on food access and security. These initiatives not only address immediate needs but also equip individuals with the knowledge and resources to sustain healthier lives. Through these efforts, Illinois Extension continues to lead the way in building stronger, healthier, and more food-secure communities.





## Partnership grows educational opportunities

As interest in formal and informal agriculture education has increased in the area, Illinois Extension and Sauk Valley Community College joined forces to offer more horticulture and workforce development education to the Sauk Valley. Offerings consisted of community education classes as well as a traditional, for-credit college course, ensuring opportunities for all ages and interests.

In the for-credit Introduction to Horticulture course, students learned to grow food crops in innovative ways, including hydroponics. Their in-class efforts yielded 75 pounds of lettuce, tomatoes, and peppers for both students and staff to enjoy. In the course, students developed a plan to grow food in 2025 for the Sauk Valley Community College food pantry, allowing users to have access to fresh produce.



College for Kids participants show off their greenhouse-grown tomato plants

To further expand local agriculture education, Illinois Extension staff put on numerous non-credit community education classes. Many programs were targeted to families, giving children the opportunity to be exposed to horticulture and allowing caregivers to attend. During the programs, all types of families attended: moms and kids, grandparents and grandkids, and adult children bringing their elderly parents. These programs nurtured both plants and relationships, with participants sharing that programs allowed for family bonding to “learn a new skill.”

Community education classes combined beginning horticulture techniques and make-and-take projects. Topics utilized trending plants and season-appropriate materials. Succulents were the base of three of the workshops. Succulents are a group of plants that people are familiar with but often have questions about their care and common problems. They are also a great

houseplant for beginners due to their tolerating dry conditions. The terrarium, succulent wreath, and pumpkin centerpiece programs used different kinds of succulents to expand the exploration of the succulent family and give participants a chance to learn more about a variety of succulent types. The terrarium and succulent wreath classes also introduced design principles, including colors, textures, and balance.

Fall was focused on pumpkins. In addition to the pumpkin centerpiece workshop, community members also had the opportunity to make fall pumpkin planters. Both classes offered sustainable options for fall décor. Pumpkins are prone to powdery mildew, which softens stems. However, the stems were removed for both these projects, giving new life to damaged pumpkins.

Mom has dementia, and she is enjoying the class. She is reminiscing and sharing her memories about working in the greenhouse while crafting her pumpkin.

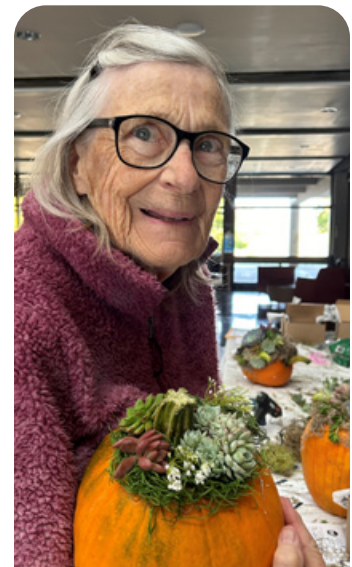
Attendee

Participants in community education classes all reported learning at least one new fact or skill and expressed interest in future classes. They were also inspired to create products to sell for extra income and plan to apply what they learned about upcycling to other areas around their homes.

Budding gardeners benefited from the College for Kids Growing in the Greenhouse program. This experience allowed younger kids to learn in a commercial-sized greenhouse. The students learned about hydroponics while planting tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, and flowers. They turned soda bottles into a hydroponic version of a seedhead buddy to take home.

Students acted as horticulturists, imbibing seeds with water and tracking their growth over four days. On the last day, they planted the sprouted seeds to grow in a container at home.

Whether a student exploring a career in agriculture, a seasoned gardener seeking additional knowledge, or a child learning about plant life, Illinois Extension agriculture education fosters lifelong learning and growth for all.



Creativity was on display at the Pumpkin Centerpiece workshop



## Planting seeds of knowledge at Ready Set Grow

Growing plants might seem easy: dig a hole, place the seed or plant, and water it. But then come the challenges: incorrect lighting, too wet or dry, soil issues, weeds, or pests. Illinois Extension Master Gardeners host the annual Ready Set Grow Gardening Conference each spring to help gardeners tackle these challenges.

This annual event is a collaborative effort led by dedicated Master Gardener volunteers from Carroll, Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside counties, ensuring that the conference reflects the unique needs and interests of local gardeners. Presenters include Illinois Extension staff, local business owners, landscapers, nursery operators, and passionate gardeners. Their combined expertise provides participants with innovative solutions to common gardening challenges.

Participants select from a variety of workshops tailored to their interests, ranging from hands-on sessions to lecture-style classes. Ready Set Grow offers diverse topics that address both fundamental and advanced gardening techniques. Participants explore how to conserve water, build community gardens, enrich garden soil with cover crops, and incorporate native plants to support pollinators and the environment.

This conference also fosters a sense of community. Gardeners build lasting connections with others who share their passion. The event creates a vibrant space for sharing successes and finding inspiration for future projects. Participants leave with valuable resources and an even greater enthusiasm for gardening.

Ready Set Grow is a celebration of the gardening community and its commitment to sustainability, local food production, and environmental stewardship. As it enters its 14th year, the conference continues to grow — just like the seeds it inspires participants to plant—nurturing both individual gardeners and the community.



A Ready Set Grow participant displays a flower arrangement created during a conference workshop.



Pumpkin Smashers launch their pumpkins into the field with the pumpkin slingshot.

## Smashing instead of trashing enriches the Sauk Valley

Each fall, carved pumpkins bring festive joy to Illinois neighborhoods. But after Halloween, these jack-o'-lanterns often end up in landfills. That's where the Pumpkin Smash initiative steps in, offering a sustainable solution that's both fun and impactful.

Many assume pumpkins naturally decompose in landfills. Unfortunately, as pumpkins decay in these oxygen-deprived environments, they release methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Disposing of whole pumpkins in agriculture fields, roadways, or in the woods is considered littering in Illinois and can smother native plants and provide minimal nutritional value for wildlife. Composting, however, transforms pumpkins into nutrient-rich material that improves soil health.

This year, community members brought over 775 pounds of pumpkins to Sauk Valley Community College to pulverize using interactive methods at the first local Illinois Extension Pumpkin Smash. From baseball bats to slingshots and catapults, participants had a smashing good time while making a difference. The pulverized pumpkins were added to a field where agriculture faculty tilled the remains into the soil. Microbes and worms will break them down into nutrients for future crops, including next year's pumpkins.

The smash was a collaborative effort between Illinois Extension, SVCC, Master Gardeners, and SVCC Impact students. Since hosting the first Pumpkin Smash in the state in 2019, over 50 tons of pumpkins have been diverted from landfills, reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 926 tons of carbon dioxide, and saving more than 269,000 gallons of water from waste systems.

The Pumpkin Smash shows that seasonal traditions can spark sustainable solutions. By smashing pumpkins, participants not only keep organic waste out of landfills but also contribute to healthier soils and a cleaner environment.



32

Master Gardener and Naturalist Volunteers



2,813

Total Volunteer Hours



\$94,982

Value of Volunteer Labor





## BREAKTHROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVES RURAL BROADBAND

As Illinois Country Living magazine noted over a decade ago, “ultra high-speed Internet access is key to success for rural Illinois.” This is truer than ever, which is why Illinois Extension’s Community and Economic Development team works hard to help counties in northwestern Illinois leverage broadband funding initiatives. Illinois Extension’s team, including County Director Karla Belzer and CED Educator Mike Delany, assisted Lee County leadership in connecting to the Broadband Breakthrough program’s third cohort. This 16-week workshop, funded by the Illinois Soybean Association and facilitated by Illinois Extension, the Illinois Broadband Lab, and the Benton Institute, aimed to support counties in planning high-speed internet expansion. The workshop included a survey of Lee County residents about current internet access and their need for faster, more reliable service.



Early childhood educators attend sessions and share knowledge at Child Care University.

## ELEVATING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

Quality childcare and early childhood education are vital for a child’s development and provide parents with the opportunity to work or pursue education, benefiting the local workforce. A key factor is having qualified, experienced, and dedicated childcare providers. Child Care University is a long-standing collaboration between Illinois Extension and 4-C: Community Coordinated Child Care. CCU supports local providers with informative sessions, networking, and resource sharing. The 2024 CCU Conference welcomed 60 early childhood educators from 10 counties. Sessions covered a range of topics, including trauma and the brain, as well as mindfulness. The keynote speaker, Jim Gill, presented “A Joyous Way to Learn,” promoting literacy, math, and inclusion through music. Attendees left inspired, gaining practical information and innovative ideas to incorporate into their classrooms.



## LEE COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS MAKE A LASTING IMPACT

Lee County has a strong community of gardening enthusiasts, from youth to adults. The Illinois Extension Master Gardener volunteers in Lee County dedicate their time to supporting local groups. Twenty volunteers serve the community, and two were recognized at the State Master Gardener Conference. Darla Emmert and Karen Stenzel received the Outstanding Master Gardener award. Darla has volunteered for six years and enjoys garden design and growing tomatoes. Karen, a Master Gardener for five years, teaches at locations like libraries and senior centers as well as to 4-H youth. Darla and Karen have worked together on projects such as refurbishing a native pollinator garden at Sauk Valley Community College and helping the city of Amboy start a memorial garden. Their work continues to make a lasting impact in Lee County as they plan future projects, including improving the Amboy memorial garden.



Lee County Master Gardeners Darla Emmert and Karen Stenzel received the Outstanding Master Gardener award at the State Master Gardener Conference.



Illinois Extension 4-H Program Coordinator Allie Johnston shares a moment with 4-H volunteer Gordon Kelm after Gordon was honored with the 2024 Outstanding Lifetime Volunteer award.

## GORDON KELM: A LIFETIME OF SERVICE TO 4-H

Devoting 51 years to an organization you believe in is a rare accomplishment. Gordon Kelm, a 4-H volunteer from Whiteside County, has spent over five decades making a profound impact on youth. His unwavering passion for 4-H earned him the prestigious Outstanding Lifetime Volunteer Award, a recognition given annually to one exceptional 4-H volunteer in Illinois. Gordon’s 4-H journey began in his youth, and he has continued his involvement in numerous roles, including leader of the Hume Happy Hustlers and camp coordinator. His leadership fostered positive, growth-focused environments where youth developed leadership skills. Gordon has mentored over 2,300 youth, encouraging them to try new projects, set goals, and serve their communities. Many of the youth he mentored have gone on to become 4-H and community leaders themselves, ensuring his legacy will continue for generations.



EXTENSION COUNCIL MEMBERS

Thank you to the individuals who serve on our CLW Extension Council. The Extension Council guides Extension staff when determining programming and outreach efforts.

Carroll County	Lee County	Whiteside County
Lee Reese, Lanark	Karen Stenzel, Amboy	Daniel Swihart, Sterling
Marcia Zell, Mt. Carroll	Melissa Feit, Dixon	Gordon Kelm, Tampico
Deeann Kramer, Thomson	Jennifer Lang, Dixon	Teresa Galloway, Galt
	Emily Zimmerman, Amboy	AJ Segneri, Sterling
	Eileen Piper, Amboy	Mark Ward, Prophetstown
		Abbey DeShane, Erie

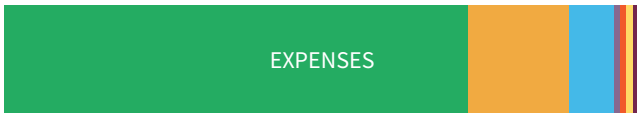
DONOR LISTING

Thank you to the individuals and businesses who locally supported our funding efforts in 2024.

A.C. McCartney	Dwayne Harridge Family	In Memory of Lorraine Hand	Peterson Farm
Ackland Family	Elkhorn Grove Township	Jensen Family	Sauk Valley Area Chamber
Adolph Red Angus	Farmers National Bank -Hand Memorial	Keim Family	Sawyer Family
Allan Esgar Memorial	Flowers Etc.	Kenney Family	Schaeffer Memorial
Alternative Ag Services and Consultants	Franklin Grove Public Library	Kiwanis Club	Sterling Federal Bank-Hand Memorial
Block Family	Franklin Grove Township	Klahn Family	Sub-Let Indians 4-H Club
Boehle Family	Gentry Family	Lake Carroll Women’s Club	Treter Family
Bradford Victor Adams Mutual Ins	Hahnaman Township	Lee County Extension Foundation	United Hairlines
CGH Medical Center	Hall Family	Lee County Pork Producers	Warner Family
Clark Carroll Insurance Agency	HBB Foundation(Babson Farms)	Leffelman & Associates, Inc.	West Point Tree Farm
Culvers	Henson Family	McCormick Nursery & Landscaping	Willow Creek Township
Dickson Family	In Memory of Cheryl Christianson	Milledgeville State Bank	Woodland Township
Dixon City Market		Palmyra Township	Wyoming Indians 4-H Club



- 36% County Government
- 34% Federal Funds
- 27% State Match and Ag Premium
- 2% Gifts and Donations
- 1% Program Income



- 73% Salaries
- 16% Program Expenses
- 7% Leases
- 1% Benefits
- 1% Equipment
- 1% Utilities
- 1% Administrative Costs



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## CARROLL, LEE, AND WHITESIDE COUNTY EXTENSION STAFF

Karla Belzer,  
County Director

Mike Swedberg,  
SNAP-Ed Educator

Kathy Book,  
4-H Youth Educator

Emma Stull,  
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Bruce Black,  
Horticulture Educator

Allie Johnston,  
4-H Program Coordinator –  
Whiteside

Marilyn Kemmerer,  
Ag/Natural Resources  
Coordinator – Lee

Andrea Wheeler,  
SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Mike Delany,  
CED Educator

Katie Baker,  
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Program Coordinator

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Jane Shaw,  
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Kara Schweitzer,  
Family Life Educator

Jean Eggemeyer,  
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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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