



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

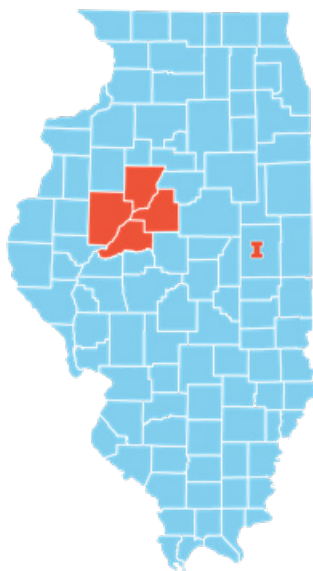


Serving Fulton, Mason, Peoria, and Tazewell Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Earl Allen
County Director



Cover photo: Rayo Boursier described her cover photo as “that’s the look of pure gardening joy.” She took the Horticulture Core Education course in preparation to become an Extension Master Gardener. She is pictured during the group’s educational tour at the Demonstration Garden located at Illinois Central College in East Peoria.

What do dirt, sweat, and lifelong impacts have in common?

Our cover page features the new guiding principle: Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.

Illinois Extension went through a strategic planning process this past year to refine and reinforce the approach to our work. We reiterated the importance of continuing our key priorities, added some new things to emphasize, and committed ourselves to enhancing our efforts in effective partnerships that improve our impact.

So, how are we going to implement this new plan? The same way the 4-H members above accomplished their task: use the right tools, be prepared to work hard, and do it with a smile. They look prepared to break a sweat and get

their hands dirty doing an important job. I really like this picture because it reminds me of the farm work I did as a kid alongside my brothers and friends or in 4-H and FFA.

This image also captures how I want to inspire our staff, volunteers, partners, and supporters to implement our new guiding principle. Basically, I state this principle more completely as “helping local people develop a mindset of being lifelong learners who stimulate lifelong impacts in themselves, their families, and their communities.” Please join us in this effort.

We are grateful for your past, present, and future involvement in our work,

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



Emma I. was one of 12 youth who participated in the Illinois Junior Chefs program held in Manito. Photo by Skye Mibbs



Illinois Junior Chefs returns to Manito

After a five-year hiatus, SNAP-Ed had a great opportunity to partner with Forman Valley Library in Manito for the hands-on cooking series for kids called Illinois Junior Chefs.

Forman Valley Library offers many programs such as storytime, book club, and craft days, and was happy to add IJC to its list of events to bring to the community. Within days of the IJC registration opening, all the seats were full, leading to staff offering a second session. A total of 12 youths participated in the two-week-long series.

The series included 10 recipes, such as oatmeal pancakes, veggie chow mein, eggs ole, and barbecue tuna. Each day builds on skills learned the previous day. Some skills are hygiene, measuring, mixing, and knife handling. By day five, the kids were using all the skills to create fantastic meals and, according to most guardians, continued to cook at home.

Unit-wide Illinois Junior Chefs summary:

248

participants

103

sessions

21

program sites/
series



Residents of Galena Park Retirement Home enjoy the cooking lessons SNAP-Education instructors teach in their common area. Photo by Anita Wilkinson

Create Better Health programs

People can turn on the local news, scroll through social media, or turn on their favorite food-focused television channel to “learn” how to cook. But none of those compare to hands-on, in-person cooking classes.

Galena Park Retirement Home in Peoria and The Hope Chest in Pekin are two examples of host sites for the Create Better Health curriculum for adults. When planning the series, the SNAP-Ed staff consider cultural food traditions, pantry-available items, and a wide variety of cooking techniques. The lessons incorporate food safety knowledge and budget-saving tips.

The series covers essential topics such as reading food labels, understanding portion sizes, and the importance of a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables. These sessions encourage participants to explore new recipes and make healthier choices that align with their dietary restrictions and preferences.

The class includes cooking demonstrations where they practice new skills in a supportive environment. These experiences also foster social connections, creating a sense of community. Physical health is just as important as nutrition; the curriculum incorporates gentle exercise routines specifically designed for older adults and seniors. Activities may include chair exercises, stretching, and balance training to improve mobility and overall fitness.

All participants receive handouts for each lesson, available in English or Spanish. Participants also receive a gift such as a can opener, rubber spatula, or a cutting board to help build their kitchen “toolkit.”





Photo by Anita Wilkinson



Haddad's Market welcomes SNAP-Education to help address community needs

There is something special about small, neighborhood grocery stores. The staff get to know their customers and can better meet their needs. The city of West Peoria is proud of its strong community support, where families have lived for generations, and Haddad's Market shares those same values. It has been serving the community since 1919.

"Haddad's is a notable establishment for many reasons," explained Tara Agama, SNAP-Education instructor. "It is a vital resource for the families who live nearby, especially those who are elderly and those without transportation. It is the only grocery store near the south end of Peoria, which has been characterized as a food desert.

"They offer fresh produce, groceries, and essential household items. Without them, many local families would be relying heavily on convenience stores and fast-food outlets, which is not good for their health."

Haddad's location is just the beginning of their importance in the lives of so many in the community. They also provide online shopping, curbside pickup, and home delivery.

"In our work, we are mindful of communities, both urban and rural, that have issues with food security," noted Rebecca

Crumrine, SNAP-Ed educator. "There are many reasons families may struggle with having enough healthy food options: affordability and distance to healthy food sources are key reasons."

Haddad's has taken their service to the community to the next level by partnering with SNAP-Ed staff to offer education for store customers.

"Twice a month, we set up a table inside the store and provide shoppers with free recipes, nutritional handouts, food samples, and access to our SNAP-Ed texting program," Tara explained. "We also invite customers to our free cooking classes and nutrition classes that teach how to stretch their food dollars. We like to point out foods on special and share ideas on how they can enjoy them."

"A partnership like this can make a huge impact on the physical and mental health of the people and even the economic health of the community," noted Rebecca. "Data shows nutrition-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are higher in areas defined as food deserts. We aim to reach people with nutrition education where they eat, learn, live, and shop so healthier choices can become easier."

Haddad's and SNAP-Ed share the same commitment to support the people they serve. This partnership is another valuable asset to the community.



A wide variety of individuals and organizations came together at the Nutrition Security Summit to learn, discuss, and connect about their shared interest in equitable access to healthy food. Pictured from left are Valerie Wolfe from Diverse Metamorphosis, Dr. Amy Christison from U. of I. College of Medicine, Amy Fox from Tazewell County Health Department, Wayne Cannon from Peoria Area Food Bank, and Mike Brooks from OSF Gardens of Hope. Photo by Valerie Wolfe, Diverse Metamorphosis



First regional Central Illinois Nutrition Security Summit held in Peoria

In 2024, Healthy Eating Active Living - Food System Partners hosted the first-ever regional nutrition security summit in Peoria. The Central Illinois Nutrition Security Summit worked to bring together people from many different sectors for the common goal of families having equitable access to three nutritious meals every day. Partners at the summit included healthcare, public health, growers/producers, food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, education, housing, government, community members, social service agencies, food systems, and public policy/advocacy partners. Over 70 individuals registered to attend the summit.

“In 2023, our HEAL-FSP advisory team and collaboration manager worked on future plans for HEAL-FSP,” explained SNAP-Education Educator Rebecca Crumrine. “Before we could cast the vision, we evaluated our accomplishments from the past five-plus years of collaboration and evaluated our gaps and missed opportunities. From that process, the ideas of a community advisory board and large community summit were proposed.”

Over the course of the summit, participants had the opportunity to network, visit community partners, learn about innovative topics related to food security and health, hear from local community members with first-hand experience, and work together towards a mission and vision that will help set the stage moving forward.



SNAP-Ed Educator Rebecca Crumrine (right) and Tazewell County Health Department Community Health Supervisor Shanita Wallace (left) recognized Volunteers of the Year Greg and Gloria Ranney from Grace Café and Pekin Outreach.

Many shared that the most valuable parts of the summit were the opportunity to network, the community tours, and the panel discussion about social determinants of health. The lively conversations and many connections made at the summit continue as HEAL-FSP strategically aligns its efforts with the community’s needs and provides a plan for the next five years of collaborative work.

Hunger and Health Summits held throughout the state

Illinois SNAP-Education hosted Hunger and Health Summits across the state in Springfield, Olgesby, and Chicago. Local educator Rebecca Crumrine played an important role in the conference’s success. The conference’s goal was to explore strategies to catalyze collaboration among local, public, and regional organizations to address food insecurity and health.

Breakout session topics included pantries of the future, creating a community of belonging, the Emergency Food Assistance Program, and food as medicine. Each location took the opportunity to recognize outstanding food pantries, pantry initiatives, innovative food programming, and volunteers. Greg and Gloria Ranney from Grace Café and Pekin Outreach won Volunteers of the Year. Natalie and Faedean from Our Daily Bread Food Pantry, Northwest United Methodist Church in Peoria, won the Outstanding Health Equity Leader award.





SNAP-Education stats

Participants

94% youth
6% adults
7,074 direct education

11,191 contacts
282 educational booths

Race

49% white
49% black
2% other

Ethnicity

13% identified as Hispanic

Policy, Systems, And Environment Impact

20 coalitions
9 led by Extension staff
161 changes adopted
199,000 potential impacts

\$38,000

raised by grants or donations to partners

Partners

28 unique organizations
95 direct education
100 policy, systems, and environment
46 layering direct education and PSE
127 in coalitions



Photo by Rebecca Crumrine

Hand washing protocol

A large group of teens in the YMCA afterschool program in Peoria had a humbling and impactful lesson about proper hand washing techniques when SNAP-Ed instructors used Glow Germ lotion to demonstrate. If the students followed the proper protocol, the lotion would be completely washed off their hands; however, for this particular class, it took many trips back to the sink before their hands did not glow when held under the black light. The teens began the lesson feeling confident that they knew how to wash their hands, but after going through the experience, they told the instructors they would be more careful. One of the boys recently became an uncle and commented that he would wash his hands properly before holding the baby.



Photo by Anita Wilkinson

Food Security Community Advisory Board

To better understand how people view the assets and challenges facing families, HEAL - Food System Partners piloted the Food Security Community Advisory Board. The leadership team received a diverse group of 53 applications and narrowed them down to a 12-person board representing Woodford, Tazewell, and Peoria counties. The small team of partners from Illinois Extension SNAP-Education, Woodford County Health Department, and Diverse Metamorphosis came together as leadership for developing and planning. The CAB focused on identifying and addressing barriers to food access. Members shared personal experiences and community observations, highlighting transportation barriers, affordability, education and awareness, and regulatory challenges.



Mission of Hope Garden, Havana

Thanks to a new community garden project based at Mission of Hope, fresh and locally grown produce is easier to access in the Havana community. The purpose of this garden is to help feed neighbors in the Havana area. A group of SNAP-Education staff, horticulture staff, and Master Gardener volunteer Carol Cihla co-led the effort. The project has developed over the course of a couple of years and has substantial community support through community work days and donations. The garden welcomes all volunteers, regardless of gardening experience, offering a chance to learn about gardening together while contributing to the community's future.



Photo by Carol Cihla, Master Gardener



Maddy Lettow (second row, center) of the Logan Leaders 4-H Club in Fulton County was selected as an Illinois 4-H delegate for the Ignite by 4-H Summit in Washington, D.C. The conference brought together 1,300 youth nationwide to ignite a passion for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Photo by Mark Becker



Local 4-H members chosen to participate in national events

Ignite by 4-H Summit, Washington, D.C.

Maddy Lettow, an eight-year member of the Fulton County Logan Leaders 4-H Club, was selected to attend the Ignite by 4-H Summit in Washington, D.C.

The summit brought together 1,300 young minds nationwide, including 18 Illinois 4-H teens, for an action-packed four days in March. This incredible conference ignited a passion for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics through exploration, connection, and discovery.

Maddy wasn't just along for the ride — she was eager to dive in. With her sights set on becoming a pilot, Maddy was particularly excited to learn from STEM keynote speaker Emily Calandrelli. A NASA aerospace whiz, Calandrelli champions science literacy, space exploration, and empowering women in STEM careers.

"I'm interested in how STEM will impact agriculture and sustainability," Maddy shared. "Learning to fly airplanes directly relates to science and adventure, and meeting 4-H members from across the country was incredible."

"4-H has been instrumental in providing me with leadership opportunities. Serving as an officer in my club and 4-H Federation honed skills that I later utilized in Student Council and FFA. The key takeaway is to simply pick a project, embrace the learning-by-doing approach, and get involved! 4-H offers something for everyone. Being involved on the state and national level has been an incredible experience, and I highly encourage everyone to give it a try."



Mason County 4-H archer Eve Snider competed in the recurve archery 3-D target competition at the 4-H National Shooting Sports Competition held in Grand Island, Nebraska. Photo by Joli Pierson

4-H National Shooting Sports Championship

Mason County 4-H Shooting Sports Club member Eve Snider participated in the National Recurve Archery Competition, held in June in Grand Island, Nebraska. The contest includes three separate events during the week: field targets, FITA targets, and 3-D targets.

Eve earned her position on the Illinois State Archery Team by placing first at the state recurve archery competition. The top four youths make the team.

Eve finished the national contest with an overall rank of 28 out of 66 competitors. One team member, Rebecca Perkins of McHenry County, placed 9th in the 3-D target competition. The team was awarded 4th place in the 3-D target competition, 5th place in the FITA target competition, and the 5th place overall award in the nation.

Coach Ted Snider is an eight-year Mason County 4-H Shooting Sports Club archery instructor. He has coached the Illinois team at Nationals twice, once in 2021 when his son Ben participated and placed second in the nation and this year with his daughter Eve.



Curtis A. had fun making friends and giant bubbles at the 2024 Mason 4-H Show. Bubble making was one of the big attractions, along with other yard games and a tug-of-war contest. Photo by Joli Pierson

4H Youth Development stats

6,227

total youth reached

982

in 4-H Clubs

1,911

in Extended Programs

2,409

in Short Programs

925

in One-day Programs

85

total clubs

39

Multi-project Clubs

20

Special Interest Clubs

26

Cloverbud Clubs

211

total programs

97

Extended Programs

98

Short Programs

16

One-day Programs

527

total adult volunteers

70

Multi-project Club Leaders

38

SPIN Club Leaders

25

Cloverbud Leaders

325

Program Volunteers

118

Fair Superintendents



Photo by Emily Schoenfelder

Canton Career Expo

The Canton High School Career Expo is an engaging and transformative event for students. The Canton Area Chamber of Commerce, Spoon River College, Canton Park District, Graham Health System, Fulton County Farm Bureau, and Illinois Extension coordinate it. Middle and high school students gain insights into various professions, sparking interest and guiding their career aspirations. Career exploration plays a crucial role in helping students navigate their future paths. Research consistently shows that early exposure to career options enhances students' understanding of the job market and aids in making informed decisions about their futures. The 2024 Canton Career Expo was a testament to this, with participants reporting significant benefits.



Photo by Anita Wilkinson

Peoria Park District summer staff training

Throughout the past several years, 4-H has built a strong relationship with Proctor Center Youth Education staff through summer STEM programming and Extension-led training and programs. Because of this relationship, 4-H youth development educators were asked to provide training for 88 Peoria Park District summer staff members on developmental relationships and group management strategies. The training included activities designed to help them build stronger relationships with youth, implement strategies to help with transitions, manage difficult behaviors, and engage young people who aren't participating. Park District staff shared that the training was very helpful because it used hands-on activities that were engaging and identified practical strategies to connect with youth participants.



Discovery Day

4-H Discovery Day brought 169 third-grade students and their teachers to Rockwell Mound Park in Havana for an immersive experience in conservation and environmental education. This unique field trip allowed young learners to engage in hands-on activities and gain exposure to Illinois' natural resources. The day featured stations with expert guest speakers who shared their knowledge about wildlife conservation, ecology, and environmental stewardship. Discovery Day had been a long-standing tradition for Mason County schools but was paused in 2020. This year, Mason County 4-H staff worked hard to revitalize the program and bring this amazing field trip back to the community.



Photo by Joli Pierson



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson



Livestock workshops educate, inspire, and boost confidence

Livestock Day

The annual Livestock Day was held in Peoria County at Raber Packing on President's Day. Fifty 4-H members took their Youth for the Quality Care of Animals class and learned from seven industry professionals. Dr. Derek McFarland, DVM, taught the importance of good animal stewardship, Black Hawk East livestock students and Dairy Superintendent Jenny Schweigert gave hands-on showmanship lessons, and Dave Guyer spoke about proper feed. Raber's provided lunch and a tour of the facility. Attendees commented that this day helped them get excited about their animal projects and connected them with other livestock enthusiasts in the county. It has really enhanced the learning experience YQCA has provided.

Showmanship Adventure

Thirteen youths participated in the inaugural Peoria County 4-H Showmanship Adventure at the fair. This idea was developed by 4-H Federation members Jacob Gilles and Derrek Martin. The event goal was to allow younger kids to participate in an event similar to Master Showmanship. Participants showed a chicken, a rabbit, and a goat. The winner received a belt buckle. This event gave the participants the opportunity to show new species, gain confidence, and have fun.

YQCA Workshop

The Fulton County 4-H YQCA workshop featured three livestock industry presenters and twenty-six 4-H members. Robyn Hendel talked about feed nutrition and how important it is to feed your livestock properly before taking them to market. Dr. Standard from Spoon River Animal Clinic talked about how it's important to have a good relationship with a veterinarian and to use appropriate vaccines and antibiotics in livestock. Jake Williams from Harvester Meats spoke about how he can tell if the animal was properly taken care of when he harvests the animal. Rachel Van Cleve, 4-H coordinator, taught the YQCA course.

Horse Clinic

Tazewell County 4-H hosted five Horse Clinics led by CIRT Director and 4-H Horse Superintendent Jenna Walker. Jenna covered various topics, including proper showmanship techniques and horsemanship. Participants worked on their skills in and out of the saddle. Getting the exhibitors and their horses comfortable in the arena before show day reduces stress on the member and horse. Working with Jenna in the arena gives the members a boost of confidence. Calm, confident riders make for calmer horses and successful show experiences.



Photo by Nicole
Flowers-Kimmerle



New Illinois Green Connections educational events expand reach and build community

Continuing education programs have been foundational to the Extension Master Gardener and Master Naturalist volunteer programs. The local Extension horticulture and natural resources team has expanded these programs to bring together Master Volunteers, invite new Conservation@Home members, and promote the events to the community more intentionally.

The staff named the events Illinois Green Connections in honor of the shared interest of all three groups and to highlight the value of networking. These free events, held in March, May, July, September, and December, rotate through various locations in the four counties and are taught by expert instructors.

Since their inception in 2022, these area-wide meetings have covered a diverse range of topics, including native pollinators, native plants, soil health, sustainable landscaping, climate change, and native trees and shrubs. “Combining expert-led learning with networking opportunities has been a fantastic way to connect with our local communities,” says Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle, Extension horticulture educator.

In March, Illinois Master Naturalist Coordinator and Climate Specialist Duane Friend discussed climate change and introduced the new Climate Steward program. Corinne Brown, Illinois Central College associate dean, provided insights into native trees and shrubs during a guided tour of the ICC Arboretum.

The July event at the Fulton County Farm Bureau featured Dr. Mike Wiant, who presented “Native American Use of Plants.” Attendees visited the native plant demonstration garden.

In September, Wildlife Prairie Park hosted a session on “Invasive Species and Wild Spotter,” presented by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle. She discussed the impact of invasive species on ecosystems and introduced the Wild Spotter program.

To end the year, the December meeting was designed for guests to enjoy each other’s company and celebrate all of their accomplishments and experiences.

Additionally, this year marked the launch of the IGC digital newsletter. “The digital newsletter is designed to keep readers up to date on information, events, and volunteer opportunities,” commented Nicole.

Extension staff utilize the ILRiverHort Facebook page, the Extension website, marketing emails, and personal invites to share the IGC events with the public.



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson

247

total volunteers

150

Master Gardeners

97

Master Naturalists

16,272

total volunteer hours reported

8,516

Master Gardeners

7,756

Master Naturalists

4,095

total continuing education hours reported

2,535

Master Gardeners

1,560

Master Naturalists

\$549,000

total value to communities

\$287,000

Master Gardeners

\$262,000

Master Naturalists

Lynn Seitzman and Lisa Arnett were part of the Natural Resources Core Education course. The class enjoyed a hands-on session at Emiquon for the wetlands and aquatics chapter. Photo by Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle





INVASIVE PLANT REMOVAL

When certain plants get established in an ecosystem, they can choke out the more beneficial native plants. Left unchecked, the invasive species can destroy the native ecosystem and natural beauty. Master Naturalists have a passion for eradicating invasive plants, and thanks to their expertise, time, and hard work, local natural areas are being restored. They have reported over 2,400 hours of volunteer restoration work since the winter of 2023. Master Naturalists work with partners such as Prairie Land Conservancy, Peoria Wild Ones, and Elwood Wildlife Preserve to clear non-native plants in their natural areas to help support healthy ecosystems and promote the growth of native plants.



Photo by John Meyers,
Master Naturalist



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: JACKIE TROTTER

Jackie Trotter embodies the spirit of the Master Gardener program. Her dedication to her community and her passion for learning have made her a valuable asset to her fellow gardeners and countless residents who have benefited from her expertise. Those who know Jackie rave about her willingness to help and insatiable curiosity. She has volunteered at gardens and plantings throughout the region, sharing her expertise in projects such as Jones Park and the Veterans' Memorial at Lakeland Park. She's a gifted educator and planner, having served as an organizer of Gardeners' BIG Day. Jackie has dedicated over 3,000 hours of volunteer service and pursued nearly 1,000 hours of continuing education in horticulture.



FRIENDSHIP HOUSE GARDEN

The Friendship House garden was created in 2024 with Master Gardeners Jaime Dooley and Kendra Belk as co-leaders and assisted by Sister Anna Flanagan. At the beginning of the summer, they planted vegetables along with some annuals for visual interest. The garden audience was children attending the Friendship House summer school program. The program theme was international studies; the children learned about a different country each week. The youth planted vegetables that are commonly grown in the countries they studied, such as eggplant and okra. Kendra hosted an educational session and helped kids identify different plants and growing practices.



Photo by
Friendship House



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson

MORTON PUBLIC LIBRARY TREE WALK

Master Gardeners Janine Donahue, Sarah Smith, and Sister Anna Flanagan have created a tree walk at the Morton Public Library. The project is an extension of the advanced training in Mastering Urban Tree Health and Identification, which requires Master Gardener participants to complete a minimum of 20 hours of training and includes online modules, hands-on workshops, and putting knowledge to work with tree inventory assistance and development of tree walks. The Tree Walk identifies 23 trees on the property by their common and scientific names and identifying characteristics. A brochure with additional information on each tree, along with a map to guide visitors through the tree walk, can be found online at go.illinois.edu/MortonTreeWalk.





Photo by Anita Wilkinson, 2015



Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists have taught at Clean Water Celebration since 2013

Master Naturalists and Master Gardeners teach about our local watershed at the Clean Water Celebration each spring. The focus of CWC, sponsored by the Sun Foundation, is education to help protect our most valuable natural resource, water. Master Volunteers teach about the importance of clean water in our daily lives and demonstrate the watershed using the EnviroScape model. Students from all over central Illinois experience hands-on learning about how their actions can affect the cleanliness of the water they will consume.

There are teams of three Master Volunteers at the three watershed stations. During the 2024 CWC event, volunteers presented to over 1,000 students ages 8 to 13. In the past years, the annual participation could be as high as 3,000 youth and adults. According to Sun Foundation, since its inception in 1994, it has reached an estimated 60,000 or more youth and adults.

Amazed youth learned that out of all the water on earth, less than 1% is available for our use, and the water we consume today is the same water dinosaurs drank millions of years ago. Discussions continued about how students use water daily and what measures they can take to conserve water use and



Mike McGraw is one of five Extension Master Naturalists who received specialized training from The Nature Conservancy — Emiquon to locate and access trees that were planted as part of a project restoring Illinois' natural landscape. Photo by Ed Coleman, Master Naturalist

reduce water pollution. Using EnviroScape models, volunteers demonstrate how a watershed works. Watersheds are important because the river's flow and water quality are affected by things humans introduce to the land area. When it rains, contaminants may flow into the watershed.

Educational programs like CWC are one example of how Master Volunteers serve the community.



Photo by Janice McCoy,
Illinois Extension



Extension seminars featured at the Greater Peoria Farm Show

For the past 43 years, the Greater Peoria Farm Show has been a favorite event for people throughout the state. This year, Illinois Extension had a larger presence with educational seminars and additional booth space. Extension was represented in three booths by Farm Safety, Agribility, Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy, Farm Robotics and Drones, DAWN (farm water management), Agronomy, Farm Management, and Horticulture. An estimated 600 attendees visited the booths and engaged with staff and volunteers.

“It’s been wonderful to have the increased involvement from Illinois Extension over the past two years. We’ve received a lot of positive feedback on the seminar schedule, particularly regarding the diverse range of topics and expert presenters,” stated John Riles, Midwest Shows Inc.

Extension’s scheduled speakers and topics included:

- Joe Janzen, Grain Market Outlook and Challenges
- Nicholas Paulson, Farm Income Expectations
- Gary Schnitkey, Managing Farm Financial Risk
- Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle, Conservation@Home
- Josie Rudolphi, Farming with Disabilities
- Kevin Brooks, Farm Succession & Estate Planning
- Talon Becker, Dashboard for Agricultural Water Use and Nutrient Management Project
- Zhongjie Yu, Investigation of Nitrogen Use Efficiency and Long-Term Effects
- Aaron Hager, Weed Science Challenges in 2025
- Duane Friend, Weather Changes; Farm Compost
- Travis Meteer, Farm Pasture Rental
- Talon Becker & Reagen Tibbs, USDA Farm Bill
- Travis Meteer, Beef/Calf Feed Costs
- Salah Issa, Safe Farming in Illinois

Extension demonstrates the usefulness of drones in farm operations

Drone technology is increasing being used to improve farm operations. Farm Management Educator Kevin Brooks uses them to assist local farmers with issues and provides advice on efficiently and effectively using a drone on the farm.

Crop plant health varies throughout the growing season depending on conditions in the field. Driving or walking along a field edge gives a limited view, but it is not as helpful in monitoring what is happening further in a field. Drones, on the other hand, can help farm producers monitor an entire field.

In a particular field, many different soil types can cause a crop variety to act differently. Weed, pest, and disease pressures also vary across a field.

“The key to efficiently using a drone in the farm operation is to quickly identify problem areas in the field and then do a more in-depth look at the situation,” Brooks explained. “In a 160-acre field area, doing a quick look at 200 feet in the air shows a lot about conditions. The pilot can fly the drone lower and examine the crop more closely.”

In many instances, a closer look provides a good view of the conditions. For example, suppose a small area of an invasive weed or disease is noted. In that case, the pilot can mark the location using Real Time Kinematic position technology and go to the exact spot in the field. If using position technology, a general area of the field may be noted for spraying instead.

Brooks further explained, “There are a lot of potential uses on the farm. Wet spots needing drainage or nitrogen deficiencies are just a few examples of what can be seen from the air. The drones can be simple machines for quick looks or more sophisticated for highly detailed maps.”

Brooks also uses Extension farm drones to monitor overall field health. “Using platforms like Drone Deploy or Agremo can give the farmer an overall view of the field for problems and will do valuable crop plant population stand counts. Taking a stand count doesn’t take a lot of time. An in-depth look at an entire field, however, can take considerable time to map for overall conditions. On a 160-acre field, a farmer might only want to detail known problem areas noted in a basic overview flight.”



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson

Farmland Owners Conference held at ICC



Modern agriculture is a complex, highly technical, and competitive business environment. In Central Illinois, a large percentage of farmland is owned by someone who does not farm the land and relies heavily on others to understand the details. Illinois Extension and Illinois Central College worked together to bring 24 agribusiness experts to the Farmland Owners Conference in November 2023. The conference allowed local farmers and landowners to learn how to work together to improve the land's profitability and their working relationship.

Over 190 landowners, farmers, and professionals attended the 2023 event on ICC's East Peoria campus. Participants gained knowledge on how to better manage their farms through stewardship of the land as well as who to contact with questions on preserving their farm assets for future generations.

"The key to success is knowing how to manage your farmland best to stay economically competitive while also operating in an environmentally sound manner," explained Kevin Brooks, farm management educator. "With Extension's expansion of the state-wide agriculture team, our goal is to help farmers and land owners meet these needs."

In addition to the speakers, participants were able to network with conference sponsors COUNTRY Financial, Pioneer, and Illinois Soybean Association, plus 16 additional vendors.

Brooks assisted his colleague from the Bureau-LaSalle-Marshall-Putnam Unit with the 2024 conference at Illinois Valley Community College in Oglesby, which attracted 220 attendees.

With the addition of local agriculture educators like Brooks and new Crops Educator Tara Heath, the farm public has easier access to University of Illinois research and recommendations, making our rural areas stronger and farms more profitable.

Tara Heath promoted to Extension crops educator

The agriculture industry continues to change rapidly, impacting everyone from the producers to the industry professionals to the food consumers. Extension is expanding its team of commercial agriculture educators. Tara Heath was hired to focus on agronomy and crop education. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in agriculture with an emphasis in horticulture from Western Illinois University and Master of Science degree in crop sciences with an emphasis in horticultural food systems from University of Illinois. She works alongside her father, brother, sister-in-law, nephew, and husband on their 3,000-acre farm operation in McDonough County, where she grew up.



Extension helps train community development professionals through national organization

The hallmark of any Extension program is that the information shared is research-based and communicated in a manner that helps to drive change in a community. Richard Proffer, University of Illinois Extension community and economic development educator in the Fulton-Mason-Peoria-Tazewell area, contributed to his profession's future for the last two years by teaching at the nationally accredited Midwest Community Development Institute.

CDI is one of a few training institutes coordinated by the Community Development Council nationwide. The Midwest CDI is sponsored locally by Western Illinois University's Institute for Rural Affairs and serves mostly participants from Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. The program consists of three four-day training sessions. Proffer serves on Midwest CDI's faculty and, in 2024, taught four classes for Year One and Year Three participants.

"During the Year 1 session, I teach the Community and Economic Development Practices class," Proffer explained. "Year 1 focuses on the foundations of community development. In my class, I teach how we work within the community or community groups."

With 18 years of experience in the profession, Proffer has a wide range of real-life examples that add to the class discussion and learning. His second class is Community Assessments, which relates to community needs assessment and how success is measured to aid in community planning.

The Year 2 session focuses on economic development. Then, Proffer jumped back in as an instructor to teach during the Year 3 session.

"The Year 3 session helps students put it all together," Proffer stated. "Not only is it helping them improve their skills to coordinate community and economic development efforts, it is also preparing them for the exam to become a Professional Community and Economic Developer."



Richard is a Certified Professional Community Economic Developer. He is one of 350 certified professionals in the country.

CDI participants include local economic developers, mayors and local officials, state economic development agency staff, federal and regional agency staff, concerned community leaders, and entrepreneurs. The trainings are interactive and practical. Proffer says, "It is the examples that often teach the most because it is real life, and the students can relate to the impacts on the community."



Grant writing workshop presented at Illinois Association of County Officials

The Illinois Association of County Officials fall conference was held in Bloomington in 2024. Community Economic Development Educator Richard Proffer was one of nine professionals who presented educational sessions throughout the three-day conference.

Proffer's session on grant writing focused on streamlining the grant application process. He focused on better preparation for the search process, how to pick grants with a higher success rate, tips on writing the grant application, and resources that can help tell the applicant's story.

The IACO's mission is to improve the quality of public service through education. It is a statewide organization of affiliate county official groups that enhances public confidence in county government by maintaining and improving the quality of public service through education. IACO promotes responsible public policy, ethical service, and high standards of performance in single and multi-county units of government.

It was an honor for Proffer to be invited to present at this impactful conference.



Extension facilitates talks to address unhoused issues in Pekin



Homelessness is an increasing societal issue in every community in America today. Pekin is no exception. The Pekin Downtown Main Street Merchants Association reached out to University of Illinois Extension for help addressing issues caused by the unhoused in the downtown business district.

Terri Gambetti, president of the Merchants Association, worked with Richard Proffer, Illinois Extension community and economic development educator, to plan a series of “facilitated conversations” between the merchants, City of Pekin officials, concerned social organizations, and Pekin Outreach Initiative.

“Since the issue was contentious and people felt upset and unheard,” explained Proffer, “I decided it was important to review the rules of civility at the initial meeting so everyone knew how to behave. I wanted to avoid a session where nothing was accomplished due to everyone trying to talk over each other. Plus, having a set agenda for each meeting helped keep everyone on track.”

Over the following months, the group was able to agree on issues and create an environment where all points of view were respected and heard. For some attendees, this format would be the first time they had heard opposing views and had someone to help encourage discussion and civility. Detailed notes were recorded and shared each month.

Proffer used many facilitative techniques to help keep the conversation focused and moving toward a potential solution.

In addition to the behavior ground rules and meeting agenda, Proffer also used active listening, expressions of non-verbal communication, and observation of the room’s reaction to the statements. Using flip charts to record the flow aided in the group’s understanding of each others’ comments and making connections. In an effort for all to be heard, Proffer often called on people who had not been active in the discussions to ensure all were heard and represented in the work.

Proffer’s role as the facilitator was very involved, and many people said they felt progress. One person said, “I never expected us to be so civil in the meeting after all the talk that had gone on before it.” He kept the meetings to one hour.

“I remained neutral and tried to ensure all sides were discussed fairly,” Proffer stated. “When needed, I would interrupt people trying to talk over others and then allow the current speaker to finish.” His ability to read the room, recognize people who wanted to say something, let them know he knew that, and then call on them helped the group realize they were going to be heard.

The group was instrumental in creating results in the community. The Pekin Police Department hired a social worker to work with the unhoused and started a dedicated downtown patrol. The fire department started more frequent outreach efforts. The Pekin Outreach Initiative found a new space outside of downtown. The merchants realized it was appropriate to call the police when confronted by an unhoused individual.



Photo by
Kristi Smith



Wildlife Prairie Park

Wildlife Prairie Park has been a valued partner for many years. Their vision and mission focus on nature-oriented education, stewardship of the environment, and connecting youth and adults to nature — which aligns well with Extension’s Master Gardener, Master Naturalist, and 4-H programs.

Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists have played integral roles in the creation and upkeep of the Kim St John Butterfly Habitat, the 4-H Learning Garden, and the native flower beds surrounding the visitor center, and also assist in various park activities.

Extension Horticulture Core Education and Naturalist Core Education programs include a day of training at the park. WPP staff share their expertise and network with the Core Education participants.

The collaboration with Wildlife Prairie Park has been instrumental in enhancing the learning experience for attendees, offering them unique opportunities to observe local flora and fauna in their natural habitats. In September, 50 participants attended the Illinois Green Connections event held at WPP, which focused on invasive species in Illinois.

WPP has graciously hosted many special Extension events and meetings, welcoming staff and volunteers to tour the MG and MN projects throughout the park.



Photo by Anita
Wilkinson

Canton Park District

With eight parks and five facilities in the heart of Fulton County, Canton Park District has a lot to offer to the community and collaborates with Extension staff and volunteers in several programs.



Big Creek Park and Lakeland Park have been home to the Junior Master Naturalist 4-H Club since its inception in January 2022. Amanda Atchley, Canton Park District superintendent of recreation, is one of the club leaders, along with Master Naturalist Jenny Beal. They have implemented fun and informative activities in this highly successful 4-H club. The Junior Master Naturalist 4-H Club has been recognized at regional and state 4-H levels.

MN Jenny Beal also works with the Park District staff to plan and host the annual Science Adventure Day for fourth-graders in Canton schools. This event is held at Lakeland Park, allowing them to engage youth in a variety of hands-on, outdoor activities.

Over at Wallace Park, visitors can enjoy a tree walk thanks to a partnership with Extension Master Gardener Terry Meade. She identified 66 trees in the park, created a map and brochures with details about 20 different species, and has led guided tree walks for park visitors.

The Donaldson Center has been utilized many times for Extension programs and special events. 4-H clubs enjoy hosting club parties at the pool.



Photo by
Julie Dantone



Pekin First Church of God

Pekin First Church of God became an Extension partner through the SNAP-Education program and has now joined forces with Extension Master Gardeners to serve the community even more.

The church's food pantry ministry works with Extension SNAP-Ed Educator Rebecca Crumrine through the Food Pantry Network. SNAP-Education instructors also partner with the church for nutrition and wellness programs such as PJs and Pancakes.

The Pekin Giving Garden is a community garden located adjacent to the church. The garden is planned, planted, cultivated, and harvested by a committee of core volunteers from the church and MG Megan Steier. The committee also receives occasional assistance from volunteers from Teen Challenge. All produce harvested from the garden is distributed to families in need in the community via the church's food pantry. In the 2023 season, 1,400 pounds of food were donated.

The garden has experienced slow and steady growth over the last two seasons as commitment from church members and the surrounding community has increased. Currently, the church supports the garden with a line item in the annual budget. Honeybees were added to the property in 2023 to support pollination in the community and provide a source of revenue (honey) to finance the garden on an ongoing basis. Pekin Giving Garden used grant money received in 2023 to double the size of the garden and upgrade the fencing.

The garden was awarded an additional \$500 grant in 2024 from the State Master Gardener Know More Grow More program, which is funded through proceeds raised during the State MG Conference Silent Auction.



Photo by
Joli Pierson

Farm and Home Supply Store, Havana

The Havana Farm and Home Supply Store has generously contributed to the Mason County 4-H program for many years. They have provided 4-H youth discounts on the purchase of supplies for their 4-H projects. They have also been generous with contributions to 4-H through 4-H Show awards, donations to the 4-H Shooting Sports Club, and hosting 4-H community outreach events.

Recent examples of their generosity include special gifts for Jr. and Sr. Showmanship winners at the 2023 and 2024 4-H Shows. In October 2024, Farm and Home partnered with Mason County 4-H to host two days of fun events. Working with store manager Natasha Ogden, 4-H Federation planned a community blood drive for the store's annual Ladies Night event. ImpactLife Blood Center brought their mobile blood collection unit to the store parking lot where donors could give. 4-H Federation members and store staff recruited blood donors.

The second day of events at the store included a 4-H Petting Zoo and porkchop cookout. 4-H Federation members brought 4-H projects and animals for store patrons to see, touch, and learn about. The store generously donated the gas barbecue grill and LP gas tank used at the store cookout to the Mason County 4-H program to be used for future 4-H cookouts and events.



4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Krista Gray
Fulton Coordinator



Abbie Phillips
Tazewell Coordinator



Joli Pierson
Mason Coordinator



Judy Schmidt
Metro Educator



Lynda Sharp-Lower
Tazewell Coordinator



Kristi Smith
Peoria Coordinator



Dina Pettit
Special Projects Asst.



Anna Soupos
STEM Project Assistant

AGRICULTURE



Kevin Brooks
Farm Business
Management Educator



Tara Heath
Commercial Ag
Crops Educator



Jill Meints
Special Projects Asst.



Richard Proffer
CED Educator



Abi Amstutz-Spencer
AmeriCorps Digital
Navigator

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT



Christine Belless
Ag & Natural Resources
Coordinator



Nicole
Flowers-Kimmerle
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Karen Weigelt
Special Projects Asst.



Audrey Hill
Master Volunteer Asst.

HORTICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

NUTRITION & HEALTH



Tara Agama
SNAP-Ed Instructor



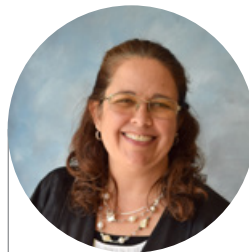
Nate Anton
SNAP-Ed Instructor



Brittany Chambers
SNAP-Ed Instructor



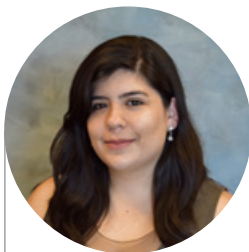
Rebecca Crumrine
SNAP-Ed Educator



Julie Dantone
SNAP-Ed Instructor



Katherine Ellis
SNAP-Ed Instructor



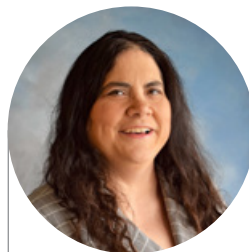
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Jo Elyn Smith
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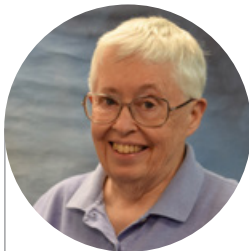
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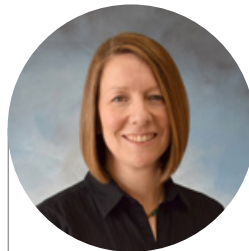
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Jane Frazier
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Nancy Hebb
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Anita Wilkinson
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UNIT STAFF



4-H members of the Dunlap Dynamites Club in Peoria County loved participating in the Barnyard Games during the 4-H Fair. This is a fun tradition that builds a sense of belonging and teamwork among the members. Photo by Anita Wilkinson, Extension communications program coordinator

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Illinois Extension

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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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