



Lifelong Learning. Lifelong Impact.



Serving Lake and McHenry Counties
Illinois Extension Impact Report 2024





Dr. Michele Cox
County Director



Building bridges, strengthening communities: a year of impact and partnership

Reflecting on this past year, I am grateful for the incredible work we've accomplished together and the partnerships that make it all possible. The trust and collaboration we've shared with community stakeholders, especially the Lake and McHenry Counties residents, have been a source of inspiration and hope.

In our area, we have embraced the mission of the University of Illinois Extension with passion and dedication, embodying a commitment to serve and uplift. Extension touches lives, strengthens communities, and reminds us that there is power in partnership.

To our community partners and residents, thank you for believing in what we can achieve together. Your support, willingness to collaborate, and shared vision have made it possible for us to work toward creating communities that are not only thriving and innovative but also truly inclusive and healthy.

With a focused intention to serve under and unserved populations, we have begun to build a foundation of equity and opportunity for all.

Looking ahead to 2025, I am filled with hope and excitement. We can accomplish so much more together. We have more lives to touch, dreams to nurture, and challenges to face. I'm eager to continue this journey alongside you, working together to create a brighter, stronger future for all.

Thank you for an extraordinary 2024. It has been an honor to stand alongside you in this work, and I look forward to all we will achieve together in the coming year.

Dr. Michele Cox
County Extension Director

Cover photo: Young
boy participating in
SummerClovers

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

Resource Generation



4-H Ag Day at MCC



4-H Day at the Center for Agrarian Learning

The 4-H Ag Day at the Center for Agrarian Learning connects youth with the agricultural sector, helping them understand food systems and explore career opportunities. Agriculture is crucial in McHenry County, with over 1,500 farms covering 234,211 acres. This program prepares middle school students for future roles in agriculture while promoting sustainable practices.

Many students have limited exposure to agriculture, which is vital for the local economy. This initiative addresses that gap by engaging students in hands-on learning experiences. It helps youth explore agriculture, understand local food systems, and discover potential career paths.

During the event, students toured MCC's student-run farm, learning about sustainable practices and food production. One participant shared, "I never knew how much work goes into growing food. I want to learn more about how to help my community grow!" They also participated in interactive workshops on floral design, soil testing, and culinary demonstrations. Another student remarked, "The floral design workshop was my favorite! I didn't realize I could create something beautiful from plants."



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Career discussions provided insights into various agricultural careers, with about 80% of students learning about new opportunities in the field. Many students also expressed interest in considering McHenry County College for their future education.

The impact was significant: 100% of participants reported learning something new. Many students were enthusiastic about starting community gardening projects, showing the program's influence beyond the classroom.

The 4-H Ag Day has proven to be a valuable initiative, supporting the goals of both the 4-H program and the Center for Agrarian Learning at McHenry County College. By connecting students with agriculture, the program prepares them for future careers and promotes community engagement. Continued collaboration promises to enrich educational experiences for youth and expand outreach efforts, benefiting both participants and the broader community.



853

Club Memberships



8,772

4-H Affiliations (4-H experiences)



Growing together: McHenry County 4-H's commitment to conservation

Environmental conservation is a critical issue that requires immediate attention. In McHenry County, community involvement in conservation efforts is essential to maintaining healthy and diverse ecosystems. Engaging young people in these efforts helps them develop a sense of responsibility and care for the environment, benefiting the community for years to come.

To address this, McHenry County 4-H teen leaders organized a county-wide volunteer day as part of the National 4-H Day of Service. Members of the 4-H Ambassadors, Legendary Pioneers, and Just Wing It Pollinators Clubs participated in hands-on conservation activities, including planting native seeds, cleaning up trash along park trails, and installing beehives to support pollination. These activities aimed to educate youth about local ecology and the importance of environmental stewardship.

Around 30 youth and adult volunteers took part, installing three beehives, collecting 18 bags of trash, and planting native seeds across a quarter-acre area. These efforts boosted the area's biodiversity and provided valuable learning experiences. Participants reported increased knowledge of native plants and pollinators, with many expressing a commitment to future conservation activities. The broader community benefits from a cleaner, more diverse natural area that supports local wildlife and provides a healthier environment for residents. These outcomes reflect the meaningful contributions of 4-H programs and the importance of nurturing youth-led conservation efforts supported by our dedicated community.

This project was made possible through collaboration with the McHenry-Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District. Their expertise, resources, and support were key to the event's success, showcasing the strength of our community working together for a common cause.



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Nurturing young minds: the role of gardening in youth development

The 4-H Summer Gardening Program was created to help children develop healthier eating habits by increasing their exposure to vegetables through hands-on gardening activities. Without such programs, children may continue to develop poor dietary habits, leading to long-term health issues.

This summer, the program reached 4-H youth ages 8 to 12 at three sites in Lake County, Illinois. It was a collaborative effort between 4-H and Illinois Extension Master Gardener volunteers, involving gardening activities, educational sessions, and community service projects.

Children gained practical gardening skills, increased their preference for vegetables, and learned life skills like critical thinking and leadership. One parent shared, "It was such a nice experience for my son to attend the gardening program 'Literature in the Garden.' Not only fun but also very educational!" The program demonstrated the profound impact of hands-on gardening education, highlighting the value of experiential learning and the importance of connecting children with nature.



From curiosity to confidence: Summer Cloverbuds 4-H Club

In today's rapidly changing world, many young people lack hands-on learning opportunities that foster essential life skills like leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. The Summer Clovers 4-H program provided these vital experiences through a structured, engaging environment for youth ages 5 to 10 throughout June. Activities included mindfulness, STEM, agriculture, environmental literacy, and the arts. Participants engaged in outdoor exploration, STEM challenges, and creative arts projects. Approximately 30 youth participated, fostering community and independent learning.

The program had a significant impact, with 90% of participants not already enrolled in 4-H expressing increased interest in joining. Children developed new skills, built friendships, and gained confidence. One participant encouraged peers to hold a cicada shell, demonstrating newfound bravery.

The success of the program was supported by 4-H volunteers, Extension Master Gardeners, and the McHenry County Farm Bureau. Their expertise was invaluable.





Collaborating improves health outcomes

When addressing the health and well-being of the residents in Lake and McHenry County, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education works right alongside the various not-for-profits addressing the social determinants of health. Our team uses a multi-layer approach to work with 5.9% in McHenry County and 8.2% in Lake County that live in poverty, according to the US Census Bureau for 2023. In the past year, both health departments have had work groups that are addressing some of the significant concerns related to the overall well-being of the residents. We collaborate not only with the health departments but also with Community Health Partnership Clinic, Northwestern, City of Hope, Rosalind Franklin University, Advocate, and more.

One way to address nutrition is to help people who may not have enough money to buy food. Many people rely on local food pantries to feed themselves and their families. The University of Illinois offers an easy-to-use tool to find nearby food pantries, meal sites, and grocery stores at the Food Finder Tool.

What Can You Do To Help Your Neighbors?

When you go shopping, think about the healthy foods you usually buy. You can pick up an extra item or two and drop them off at a local food pantry. You can also make a cash donation so the pantry can buy what's needed. Many people have food allergies and need special foods. The top eight allergens include milk, eggs, fish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, shellfish, and soybeans. These allergy-friendly products can cost more—sometimes twice as much!

Your local Extension office works with many organizations to provide research-based information on nutrition. We also help residents make the most of their food budgets so they can follow USDA healthy eating guidelines. Plus, we emphasize



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the importance of physical activity for a healthy lifestyle. All of this aligns with the Community Health Improvement Plan, which health agencies use in our area to make our communities healthier.

This year, we have collaborated with various partners to bring more resources directly into the community. One such initiative is the Community Hub at the Zion Benton Library, available on the first Wednesday of every month in the afternoon. Here, individuals can access Workforce Development services, the Rosalind Franklin University Care Coach, City of Hope's cancer prevention information, afterschool activities from the YWCA, Family First, and resources from Zion Township, particularly for seniors. Additionally, more agencies are continually joining this effort. Our initiatives, such as this, have expanded our reach, making healthy choices more accessible in both counties. The following articles highlight a portion of our efforts to address the social determinants of health in our communities.



Find places in your community offering free meals
go.illinois.edu/FindFoodIL



255

Nutrition education classes



630

Nutrition education participants



33

Policy systems and/or environment changes adopted by SNAP-ED partner organizations



\$621,965

Federal SNAP-ED Grant funds



ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES FOR SENIORS

As the at-risk senior population continues to grow, so do the challenges faced by 8,692 individuals living at or below the poverty level in Lake and McHenry counties. University of Illinois Extension partners with local organizations such as Catholic Charities, Community Health Ministries, North Chicago Library, Avon Township, and White Crane to ensure that essential health and nutrition resources are accessible to seniors who might otherwise lack access. Together, we can address these pressing challenges and create a supportive environment where our senior population can thrive, regardless of their financial circumstances. Lake and McHenry Extension offers the Create Better Health program, which encourages seniors to adopt healthier lifestyles. This program focuses on using existing food supplies to create balanced meals. It includes a physical activity component that promotes movement, balance, and fitness suitable for all physical abilities. Extension and their partners help this population maximize their resources, improve their diets, and enhance their quality of life while addressing the social determinants of health.



BUILDING TRUST IN THE COMMUNITY

Relationship-building is at the core of programming and services offered by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education. Strong partnerships with local organizations and building trust with the individuals we serve are essential to our success. An example of this is evident with the Community Hub at the Zion Benton Public Library in Lake County and at screening events with Christian Health Ministries in McHenry County. These initiatives expanded throughout 2024, where residents can access services such as food, medical care, legal, job readiness, and additional community information to help them and their families live healthier lives. The SNAP-Ed team implements Eat. Move. Save. booths to increase our visibility through our communities and ensure that our message, “Making the healthy choice, the easy choice,” reaches those in need. These booths play a crucial role in fostering our relationships with both partners and residents, helping to cultivate trust.



ADDRESSING CHALLENGES FOR YOUTH

Empowering the next generation to live healthier lives is at the heart of our work in Lake and McHenry Counties. Currently, 20,470 youth in both counties face food insecurity. Our SNAP-Ed team is dedicated to supporting these families by implementing evidence-based programs that promote healthy habits and overall wellness for youth. These programs include Eat Play Grow, OrganWise Guys, Illinois Junior Chef, and CATCH, all of which engage children in learning about nutrition, physical activity, and overall health in fun, interactive ways. Our SNAP-Ed team also conducts workshops with local Head Start programs, teaching the staff about healthy eating and active lifestyles. The SNAP-Ed team is providing youth programming and connects parents through our Eat. Move. Save. booths, which provide resources on healthy tips, affordable nutrition, and how to incorporate physical activity into regular family routines. Through these programs and resources, we are building a strong foundation for health and wellness among the youth and families in our communities.





Improving food access and health



From seeds to sustenance

Food access is a critical issue affecting many communities across Illinois. University of Illinois Extension staff, in collaboration with various partners, have been working tirelessly to address food insecurity and increase knowledge around the production of locally grown food.

In response to the need for local food production, University of Illinois Extension staff and volunteers provided resources and education to expand food production at home, in community gardens, and on farms. In 2024, seed resources were distributed to the public at two seed expo events, reaching 2,700 residents. Ongoing access to seeds is available at 10 Extension-supported seed libraries. New seed libraries in Zion and Waukegan hosted “Ask a Master Gardener” events, monthly seed library workdays, and training for library staff and patrons to raise awareness and extend information. Additionally, 21 Master Gardener-led programs on seed starting and food-related topics were offered to 889 residents. These efforts support the sustainability of seed libraries and the best utilization of seed resources throughout the growing season.

Master Gardener volunteers supported nine community garden projects, resulting in 20,461 pounds of food donated to local pantries. Since 2023, project expansion has included building and planting eight raised garden beds. Produce from a new garden at Zion Benton Township Library was used for youth cooking classes, providing hands-on learning experiences. Commercial fruit and vegetable growers also benefited from the latest research-based information at the Stateline Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference. The highest percentage of attendees (22%) were growers from McHenry County, and eight farm businesses from Lake and McHenry Counties participated

for the first time. Additionally, Extension partnered to relaunch the Grow Lake County coalition, bringing together stakeholders to cultivate a thriving and sustainable food system in Lake County. This coalition envisions a vibrant, healthy food system where every community member is empowered to access and utilize locally sourced food.

Beyond the farm and garden level, Extension staff worked to get locally grown, fresh produce to pantries and into the hands of food-insecure households at risk of chronic diseases like diabetes. Various resources, environmental changes in food pantries, and nutrition classes helped achieve this goal. Through partnerships with food pantries, 35 changes were adopted, including layout, visual improvements, and system changes. Additionally, 984 adults and youth participated in nutrition education classes, making healthy choices easier. Staff also participated in community events, including a countywide food drop with the Northern Illinois Food Bank, Zion Community Hub, and Mobile Rx events. These efforts strengthened partnerships and improved food access.

Through these comprehensive efforts, Extension and its partners have made significant strides in addressing food insecurity and promoting healthier lifestyles in Lake and McHenry Counties. By empowering residents with the knowledge and resources to grow and access nutritious food, they are building a stronger, healthier community. The ongoing commitment to education and collaboration ensures that these positive impacts will continue to grow.



984

Adults and Youth participated in nutrition education classes



Nourishing Waukegan: collaborative efforts to combat food insecurity

Waukegan, with a population of 88,013, faces significant challenges, as 35% of its residents live at or below the poverty level. Among them, 13,270 individuals struggle with food insecurity daily. Organizations like the United Muslim Minority Alliance are crucial in addressing this issue through their Harvest Market food pantry, which aims to ensure that everyone has food on their table. UMMA's broader goal is to guide clients toward self-sufficiency through educational classes, job readiness programs, and other support services.

Initially, the food pantry operated by distributing pre-packed boxes handed out at the UMMA Center's door. The University of Illinois Extension SNAP-Ed program supported this effort by providing recipe cards and informational flyers for the boxes. However, clients had to wait outside in all kinds of weather to receive their boxes, prompting UMMA to seek a better solution.

During the planning phase for a new pantry site and concept, Extension provided invaluable assistance on best practices for food pantries. Guiding the pantry staff on layout and shelving practices, using MyPlate food groups to organize the pantry. Healthier options were placed on middle shelves for easy access, while less healthy options were positioned on top and bottom shelves and at the back to encourage healthier choices.



Lee and Gabby from Lake County SNAP-Ed.



An Extension program coordinator also worked with the staff on food safety, reviewing product dates and safe storage practices. Several shipments of recovered food were sorted and stocked to demonstrate these principles. Extension was invited to the grand opening ribbon-cutting event, where an Extension community outreach worker set up an Eat. Move. Save. booth focused on limiting added sugar and provided a food tasting using pantry items.

UMMA's impact extends beyond its center through partnerships with other organizations. One such partnership is with Youth Build Lake County. The Extension program coordinator learned from Youth Build Lake County Director James Humphries about students facing food insecurity. This led to a collaboration where Youth Build students visit the pantry twice a month for food and assist with stocking shipments. There is also a plan to find a partner to prepare meals for Youth Build students using food donated by UMMA Harvest Market.

The Illinois Extension Lake County SNAP-Ed program is proud to partner with UMMA, supporting the Harvest Market and fostering connections that strengthen the community. The contributions from Extension have been instrumental in helping UMMA move closer to its goal of making people more self-sufficient.



Addressing health disparities through strategic partners

The risk of diabetes is significantly higher among those facing food insecurity. Feeding America reports that 33% of the households it serves have at least one member diagnosed with diabetes. To address this, the Supplemental Nutrition Education Program of McHenry County is dedicated to helping residents develop healthy eating habits that promote overall wellness and aid in managing diabetes.

A partnership between the Community Health Partnership of Harvard, the McHenry County Health Department, and Northwestern Medicine is making a tangible impact on individuals living with diabetes and other diet-related health issues. More than 100 community members gather each month to receive fresh produce, meat, milk, and eggs, ensuring access to essential nutrition.

With an increasing number of migrants in the Harvard community, many residents have encountered unfamiliar foods, such as ground turkey, venison, and Bok choy. In response, Illinois Extension has stepped in to provide education and support, helping residents incorporate these new foods into their diets.

This initiative is meeting a vital community need through the distribution of free, healthy food alongside nutrition education. Over 1,722 households have already benefited by receiving nutritious food, educational resources, and recipes to inspire healthier meal choices. This collaborative effort provides essential nourishment and empowers residents to make informed, healthier decisions. Supporting individuals in managing diet-related health conditions helps reduce chronic diseases and improves overall well-being.



Introducing new foods like bok choy to community.



Fresh produce given to community members each month, ensuring access to essential nutrition.

Connecting communities to nature

A Year of Growth in the Outdoors

For the University of Illinois Extension Lake and McHenry Counties, 2023 and 2024 have been a time of expansion and focus on Environmental Education, Natural Resources, and connecting youth and adults to nature in their communities through place-based programming, native gardening, landscape management, and the Master Naturalist and Master Gardener volunteer programs. We are excited for this new chapter and through collaborations with local municipalities, schools, and community organizations, we are starting to see a significant impact. In 2025, we will continue expanding with new events, the creation and implementation of the Lake County Master Naturalist program, native seed libraries and more.



4-H Program Expansion

In 2024, the 4-H program, along with partners, developed new programming for youth in areas including Beach Park, Waukegan, North Chicago and throughout Lake and McHenry counties. These programs were designed to connect youth to nature in their own communities through place-based investigative learning and hands-on environmental and wildlife education programs. The aim was to spark an interest and sense of wonder in the natural world and connect youth to new forest preserves, parks, and nature areas in their own communities. Program topics included Herpetology, Mammalogy, Ornithology, insect, bee, butterfly and other pollinator programs, as well as aquatic macro-invertebrate studies, hiking, and STEM opportunities. These programs were very successful, with many students participating in several events and signing up for future classes.



27.51%

Hispanic Youth engaged in 4-H



42.16%

Minority Youth engaged in 4-H



Master Naturalist programs



McHenry County Master Naturalist Program

McHenry County has multiple organizations involved in the preservation and protection of our natural areas. The McHenry County Conservation District owns or manages 25,800 acres, while The Land Conservancy holds easements or outright owns over 3,000 acres. There are 17 dedicated State Nature Preserves, and portions of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge lie within our borders. Other organizations that partner to support, manage, and maintain these areas include The Environmental Defenders, The Wildflower Preservation and Propagation Committee, Small Waters Education NFP, and multiple “Friends of” and “Foundation” groups.

All of these organizations are primarily run by a small number of staff and a large number of volunteers. While each utilizes their volunteers in different ways, the combining factor is a love for and a basic knowledge of nature. The University of Illinois Master Naturalist program educates and trains adult volunteers, so they are better equipped to share natural resource information with others in their communities and to assist with environmental conservation and restoration activities.

By bringing this training to McHenry County, persons who wish to be more involved in supporting our local natural resources, but are unsure about how, where, and in what capacity, are provided with 12 weeks of lecture and hands-on training over topics such as Geology, Soils, Prairies, Wetlands, Ornithology, Herpetology, Entomology, and Weather. They are also introduced to citizen science projects like Project Wingspan, I-Tick, CoCoRaHS, and Chloride Watchers. In the past, residents either went outside of the county for Master Naturalist training in Wisconsin or bordering counties.

Since 2023, we have trained 28 people and graduated 7, with a combined total of 1,070 hours of volunteer time. Some of the projects involve restoration, while others are maintaining an educational rain garden, taking school groups on bog walks, and bird hikes. As a board member of one of our partnering agencies stated, “I’m so glad to see so many new people ready to go out and do some good!”



Master Naturalists

Launch of Lake County Master Naturalist Program

Lake County will be launching the Master Naturalist program in 2025, with its first cohort of trainees officially starting the program in August of that year. Interest in the program has been building in Lake County for some time, and the contributions that Master Naturalist volunteers will bring to local communities will go a long way to restoring habitat, protecting native plants and animals, preventing urban flooding through green infrastructure projects, and educating the public on the amazing natural resources that exist right in our own backyard.

In preparation for the launch of the program, the process of relationship building with potential Master Naturalist partner organizations has already begun. In 2024, Lake County Extension continued to co-host its monthly Garden Learning Series webinars with the Lake County Forest Preserve District. With the Forest Preserves anticipated to be a lead partner for the Master Naturalist program, and recipient of many volunteer hours, continuing to strengthen this relationship has been a key priority.

Current Master Gardener projects are also setting the stage for Lake County's future naturalists. The launch of the Native Seed Library in 2024 by a team of Master Gardeners has obvious synergy with the Master Naturalist program and will provide immediate opportunities for the two programs to collaborate on a project that will benefit the people, and local ecosystems, of Lake County in many different ways.



Naval Station Great Lakes Youth Center



Empowering military youth through nature

Youth in military families often face unique challenges, including frequent relocations and limited access to consistent educational and outdoor activities. Research indicates that outdoor activities are crucial for children's physical and mental health. However, military youth often have less access to these opportunities due to the transient nature of military life. According to the National Military Family Association, frequent relocations can disrupt children's education and limit their access to outdoor activities. Additionally, a study by the RAND Corporation found that military children are at a higher risk of experiencing anxiety and depression due to the unique stresses of military life. The diversity within the Navy is reflected in the youth participating in the program.

According to the United States Defense Department the Naval Station Great Lakes is home to over 4,000 active-duty staff personnel and families, 14,000 recruits and students, 3,000 government civilian employees, and over 2,000 contractors. The base supports a diverse population with nearly 45 % of the population belonging to minority groups. This diversity enriches the program, providing a broad range of perspectives and experiences.

Over the past 11 months, the 4-H program at the Naval Station Great Lakes Youth Center conducted 14 sessions that served several hundred youth, covering a variety of topics, including Horticulture, Butterflies, Insects, Aquatic Macro-Invertebrates,

Mammals, and Ornithology. These sessions provided hands-on investigative learning experiences, featuring live animals, nature play, real specimens and pelts, crafts, physical activities, and more. The program served a diverse group of military youth, providing them with valuable opportunities to connect with nature and each other. The sessions were designed to be inclusive and engaging for all participants, regardless of their prior experience with outdoor activities.

The 4-H program at the Naval Station Great Lakes Youth Center has had a significant positive impact on the participants. Youth have had more opportunities to explore and enjoy nature, leading to a stronger connection to the environment. The program has fostered strong relationships between the youth and their peers, as well as with the program instructors. Follow-up questions revealed that participants are retaining the information learned and are eager to engage in more outdoor activities. Youth have shown a decrease in fear of animals and the outdoors, becoming more comfortable and confident in natural settings. Specific testimonials from participants include: "I cannot wait for you to come back! Can you come more?" and "When will you be bringing snakes again?" One parent shared, "My daughter loves when 4-H visits, she brings it up all the time." By increasing access to the outdoors and fostering a connection to nature, the program has helped participants develop important life skills and build lasting relationships. We look forward to continuing and expanding this program to benefit more military families in the future.



From screen time to green time

Youth in Illinois, particularly in Lake County, face significant barriers to accessing the outdoors. Research indicates that outdoor activities are crucial for children's physical and mental health. However, many youths are not spending enough time outside. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the average eight to eighteen-year-old spends only 4 to 7 minutes of unstructured time outdoors daily, while engaging in over 7 hours of screen time. In Lake County, the situation is exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, with 17.2% of residents living in poverty. The obesity rate in Lake County is 22.5%, but it rises to nearly 36% in some areas. Research by The Nature Gap from the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the Hispanic Access Foundation (HAF) indicates nature benefits are not accessed equitably by low-income communities and people of color.

According to U.S. News & World Report, Beach Park CCSD 3 contains 5 schools and 1,935 students. The district's minority enrollment is 90%. Additionally, 43.2% of students are economically disadvantaged. These statistics highlight the urgent need for programs that encourage outdoor activities and environmental education.



The University of Illinois Extension 4-H program partnered with the District Parent and Community Relations Coordinator of Beach Park District 3 schools to develop a summer nature program. Sessions were held at Van Patten Woods Forest Preserve, Illinois Beach State Park, and Howe Elementary School. The 4-H summer programming was advertised through the Beach Park School District's physical and emailed newsletters, as well as posted flyers around the community. All communications were bilingual, in Spanish and English, and a Spanish-speaking instructor along with the 4-H instructor was available at all sessions. Over 3 months, eight programs were

conducted, focusing on Ornithology, Herpetology, Aquatic Macro-Invertebrates, and Terrestrial Macro-Invertebrates. These sessions provided hands-on education to 65 students and their parents. Throughout the full session, over 100 unique participants were served.



A total of 43 responses from the individual session surveys were collected, with 100% of respondents indicating that their child enjoyed the class, learned something new, and were excited for the next class. The final comprehensive survey, completed by seven respondents, also showed unanimous positive feedback, with suggestions to increase the number and length of sessions. Participants appreciated the informative and exciting nature of the classes, the engaging and interactive presentations, and the enthusiasm and patience of the instructors. Parents and children alike enjoyed the opportunity to learn together, spend time outdoors, and gain new knowledge. Many expressed gratitude for the program and looked forward to future sessions. Through in-session follow-up questions, many participants shared that this was their first time accessing these forest preserves and state park lands. Many expressed their excitement to come back. All participants were able to share new information they learned during the sessions.

These sessions provided youth with valuable opportunities to connect with nature, build confidence, develop teamwork skills, reduce stress, and explore previously inaccessible areas of their community. Due to the program's success, sessions were extended into the school year, and an additional summer program is being developed for 2025, offering more sessions to engage a greater number of youths and their families. We are excited to continue expanding this program to additional schools and communities throughout Lake County in the future.



Strengthening Lake County: A community forum for collaboration and impact

Extension's Lake County Community Forum, held on December 6, 2024, at the Eleanor Murkey Community Center in Waukegan, was a resounding success. This impactful event brought together 34 dedicated individuals representing 18 diverse organizations, businesses, civic leaders, and community stakeholders, all united by a shared mission: to strengthen the communities within Lake County. With a focus on fostering collaboration, the forum provided a unique platform for leaders and changemakers to engage in meaningful dialogue and develop actionable strategies to address our communities' challenges.

The forum's primary objectives were ambitious yet vital. Participants were encouraged to discuss the community's pressing needs openly, explore existing resources, identify gaps, and uncover innovative collaboration methods. The goal was to cultivate partnerships and leverage collective efforts to create a positive and lasting impact in the areas where we live, work, and play. The atmosphere was charged with excitement as participants embraced the opportunity to connect, share, and learn from one another.



The day was filled with engaging discussions and dynamic breakout sessions that tackled critical topics such as addressing social determinants of health, improving access to essential community resources, and fostering economic development. Participants enthusiastically shared insights and ideas, highlighting the importance of working together to create meaningful change. Many attendees expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to network with like-minded individuals and explore new possibilities for collaboration. The forum was a powerful reminder of the strength that comes from unity and the collective desire to make a difference.

The event's outcomes were equally inspiring. Participants identified underutilized assets we could mobilize through resource sharing to serve the community better. Connections were forged between organizations that had not previously collaborated, paving the way for innovative initiatives and partnerships. By the end of the forum, there was a strong commitment to turning ideas into action.

Feedback from attendees underscored the event's impact. Many praised the forum as an invaluable opportunity to build relationships and address shared challenges. The discussions sparked a renewed sense of purpose and optimism about what could be achieved by working together.

A common sentiment was the importance of continuing these conversations and convening similar forums in the future to maintain progress and amplify impact.



We are deeply grateful to all the participants who contributed their time, energy, and expertise to the Extension's Lake County Community Forum. Special thanks go to Eliza Fournier for providing the College of Lake County's Eleanor Murkey Community Center as a welcoming space for these critical discussions and the planning team for their hard work organizing the event. The forum demonstrated the power of collective action.

Thank you to all of our
partners and collaborators
that make our work impactful!

PARTNERSHIPS/COLLABORATORS

Abiding Love Food Pantry	EPA & Illinois Food Scrap & Composting	Lake County Forest Preserves	Pioneer Center for Human Services
Adelante Center for Entrepreneurship	Extension Master Gardener	Lake County Health Department	Rector, St. Ann's
Advocate Health Care	First Baptist Church	Lake County Home and Garden Show	Richmond-Burton HS
Ahmadiyya Muslim Community	Fish of McHenry Food Pantry	Lake County Nature Network	Rosecrans Youth and Family Center
Assisi Homes	Foss Park District	Lake County Permit Facility Rain Garden	Rosland Franklin University
Avon Cares Food Pantry	Fox Lake Farmers Market	Lambs Farm	St. Ann's Episcopal Church
Avon Township	Freemont Township Community	Learn & Charter School	St. Paul Guiding Light Pre-School
Beach Park District 3	Giving Point Food Pantry Director	Liberty Prairie Foundation	SWALCO
Beach Park Middle School	Good Shepherd Hospital	Library Plant Clinics	UMMA Food Pantry
Bethany Lutheran	Grayslake Farmers Market	Lyons School	Vernon Area Public Library
Blacks Academy of Excellence	Grow Lake County Coalition	McHenry County 4-H Youth Foundation	Vernon Hills Park District
Boys and Girls Club of Lake County	Gurnee Mills	McHenry County Club Town Int.	VFW Post 4600
Brown Bear DayCare and Learning Ctr	Habitat for Humanity	McHenry County College	Village of Bull Valley
Cary Park District	Harvard Community Food Pantry	McHenry County Fair Association	Waukegan Township
Chapel CARE Garden	Hearthstone Early Learning Center	McHenry County Farm Bureau	Woodstock Farmers Market
City of Hope Cancer Treatment Center - Zion	Hermon park Helping Hands Garden	McHenry County Historical Society	Woodstock Food Pantry
Coalition for Healthy	Holy Family Garden	McHenry-Lake County Soil and Water	Woodstock North HS
Community Health Partnership	Home of the Sparrow	Naval Great Lakes Youth Center	Youth Build North Chicago
College of Lake County	Home, Community, and Education, HCE	North Chicago Community Partners	Zion Benton Public Library
Conservation District	IL Welcoming Center	Nunda Township	Zion Benton Township HS Dist #126
Cool Learning Experience	Lake Bluff Farmers Market	One Hope United	Zion Park District
CUSD50 - Harvard	Lake County Community Foundation		Zion Township
Del Webb	Lake County Fair Association		
Dorr Township Senior Services	Lake County Farm Bureau		
East Elementary School			
Environmental Education Association of Illinois			

LAKE AND MCHENRY COUNTY STAFF

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LAKE AND MCHENRY COUNTY BOARD EXTENSION COUNCIL APPOINTMENTS

Commissioner Gloria Van Hof, McHenry

Commissioner Brian Sager, McHenry

Commission John Wasik, Lake

LAKE AND MCHENRY EXTENSION COUNCIL APPOINTMENTS 2024-2025

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Nora Barquin

Oscar Bonilla

Darnell Clay

Molly Dittmer

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College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Sciences

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If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate, please contact the event coordinator. Early requests are strongly encouraged to allow sufficient time to meet your needs.

The Illinois Nutrition Education Programs are funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture by the Director, Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Illinois.