

Unit 18 – Christian, Jersey, Macoupin and Montgomery Counties
Thursday, March 20, 2025
Christian County Office, 1120 North Webster, Taylorville, IL

Meeting Minutes

Attendance: Cyndy Howard, Caiden Freeland, Caleb Grover, Anna Fessler, Mark Dugger, Mike Cross, Sara Marten (staff), Valerie Belusko (staff), Andrew Holsinger (staff)

Call to Order – Sara called the meeting to order at 7:01 P.M.

Sara welcomed the new Unit 18 Extension Council board members.

Approval of Minutes – Minutes from the past two meetings were reviewed for approval. Quorum was not met. Minutes will be approved at the June 12, 2025, meeting in Jersey County.

Fiscal Reports – Fiscal reports were presented. Sara explained that there are state-level and federal-level funding enumerated in the report. Outside donations are also included. Since the December 2024 meeting, nothing out of the ordinary is observable on the report. Since it is early in the year, Unit 18 Extension staff are monitoring travel expenses for precautionary purposes. The new fiscal year will start in July 2025. The Revolving Financial Report was also presented to the Unit 18 Extension Council board. The Revolving Financial Report is slightly over budget, but this is no cause for concern.

Unit Updates

STAFFING UPDATES – Unit 18 currently has 15 full-time staff members. The newest staff member is Anthony Joiner, who is the SNAP-Ed Community Outreach Worker. He officially started on February 10, 2025.

Taylor Pope is currently the 4-H Program Coordinator in Christian County and Montgomery County. A new 4-H Program Coordinator position has been posted which will also offer resources to Christian County and Montgomery County in a dual-role. The new 4-H Program Coordinator will work primarily out of Christian County, but they will be expected to travel to Montgomery County and the rest of Unit 18 whenever necessary.

SUMMER 2025 UPDATES – Dog and Cat shows will be combined into one showing in Macoupin County. Summer staff and extra helpers will be starting in the next few months to help facilitate many of our traditional summer programs.

FEDERAL & STATE FISCAL UPDATES – Campus has assumed more oversight on hiring and grant money usage throughout extension, due to some of the federal changes. At this time, there is no cause for alarm. We are watching things closely and will update with any changes

Old Business

COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARD – REVIEW APPLICATIONS – Christian County – Three, Jersey County – Three, Macoupin County – Five, Montgomery County – One. Last year, the Unit 18 Extension Council board offered award recommendations based on a poll that was emailed by Sara. Anna offered input suggesting that the Unit 18 Extension Council board should consider organizations that have been nominated for consecutive years but have not yet won an award. Sara inquired if the Unit 18 Extension Council board preferred whether every member should look at every application. There was no objection. Community Partner Award winners will be offered a plaque and will be featured in an upcoming press release.

New Business

OPEN MEETINGS ACT TRAINING & COMPLIANCE – The Unit 18 Extension Council board falls under the Open Meetings Act (OMA) guidelines. Board members are highly encouraged to complete the OMA training and submit their respective certificates to Sara Marten. This will ensure the Unit 18 Extension Council board remains in compliance with OMA guidelines.

2025-2028 UNIT PLAN OF WORK & NEEDS ASSESSMENT – Andrew Holsinger and Valerie Belusko were welcomed to the table. Valarie expressed the importance of the Needs Assessment. In 2025, the Unit 18 Needs Assessment has identified five strategic priorities: community, economy, environment, food & agriculture, and health. The strategic planning process will review pre-existing data, reports, and plans to find gaps throughout Unit 18. Potential external partners have been identified. Unit 18 Extension Council board members are encouraged to assess the pre-identified partners, rank the top five in order of importance, and report back to Valarie. Prioritization of greatest identified needs will help to delineate the most salient issues. Over time, the project has diversified to allow for more, tailored input from each partner organization.

FY26 BUDGETS & EXTENSION BOARD MEETINGS – Extension Council members also assist with extension board meetings (reviewing local budgets and levy requests.) Sara hopes to have a more streamlined process for these meetings this year by inviting county board members (fiscal committees, etc.) to a meeting prior to our council meeting. Sara will share more and members were asked to continue to be an advocate for extension support.

STAFF PROGRAM REPORTS – Andrew has been teaching some classes in various schools throughout Unit 18. Curriculum includes how to refine maple syrup from raw sap. A fruit tree grafting workshop will be hosted in the upcoming weeks.

Valarie commends the maple syrup course given recent events including tariffs. Valarie has recently focused efforts on poverty, including access to public healthcare and repercussions that may evolve from changing current existing policies. Valarie and Jessica Jaffry co-facilitated an in-depth business economics course to explain social capital, utilizing tools such as a Lean Canvas model. In addition, Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD) models have been used to stress the importance of disaster preparedness. Finally, in Montgomery County drug users have had a hard time accessing illicit drugs. This causes isolated problems such as sporadic behaviors, brazen criminal acts, synthetic man-made drugs such as “spice.” Although overdoses are not a problem with drugs such as “spice,” permanent psychological effects have been recorded. First responders need to figure out how to better combat this new, unforeseen problem.

Sara presented a report from Lisa Peterson. Lisa has been working with Taylorville Memorial Hospital and Pana Memorial Hospital. A new sourdough class is in the works, along with canning and food preservation. Partnerships have continued with SNAP-Ed. In addition, Lisa has partnered with a new hospital in Brighton, IL. As always, certified food production manager courses are of high demand.

Sara also presented a report from Jessica Jaffry. Jessica has been busy preparing for the county fair. A “food challenge” has been created which teaches children how to prepare food from random ingredients. 4-H members were active in a recent livestock skill-a-thon.

The next council meeting will take place on Thursday, June 12, 2025. The meeting will be hosted at the Jersey County Extension Office. Be mindful that this meeting will be on the second Thursday of the month since the third Thursday of the month is a state-recognized holiday, Juneteenth.

With no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:52 P.M.

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