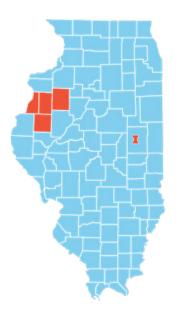




Lisa Torrance County Director



A note from the County Director

We hope you enjoy reading about some of the exciting programming we offered this past year. Of course, the stories in this report are just a small sampling of our efforts and accomplishments. We are always willing to provide more information about any of our programs. Do you know of a project in your community that could use assistance from Extension? Please let us know. We are here to serve our communities and make them better places to live, work, and play.

This past year has been busy. We have moved existing staff to new roles and hired new staff members. Most excitingly, we are looking to hire additional positions to expand our program offerings. We are also aware some staff may be retiring soon, so we are implementing succession plans to ensure we don't lose the information that tenured employees have before the new employee starts.

At the state level, Extension is working on a new strategic plan that will guide Illinois Extension into the future. This process and the networking that has been done to create it will make the next few years in Extension very exciting indeed. Now, as I always invite you to do, find a cozy, quiet spot and maybe a glass of lemonade, sit back, and spend a few minutes learning about your local University of Illinois Extension.

Lisa Torrance County Extension Director



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 five grand challenge themes:



Community:

Support Strong and Resilient Residents



Economy:

Grow a Prosperous Economy



Environment:

Sustain Natural Resources at Home and in Public Spaces



Food:

Maintain a Safe and Accessible Food Supply



Health:

Maximize Physical, Mental, and Emotional Health

2023 Engagement

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

657 Communities Served	745K+ Program Attendees	12.7M+ Webpage Views	58.5M+ Social Media Impressions	1.8M+ YouTube Views
555 Educational Sessions/Week (28K+ Annually)	90 Online Courses Accessed by 12K+ People	10,158 Local Government Education Webinar Reach	1,799 4-H Clubs	199,400 4-H Experiences

Partnerships

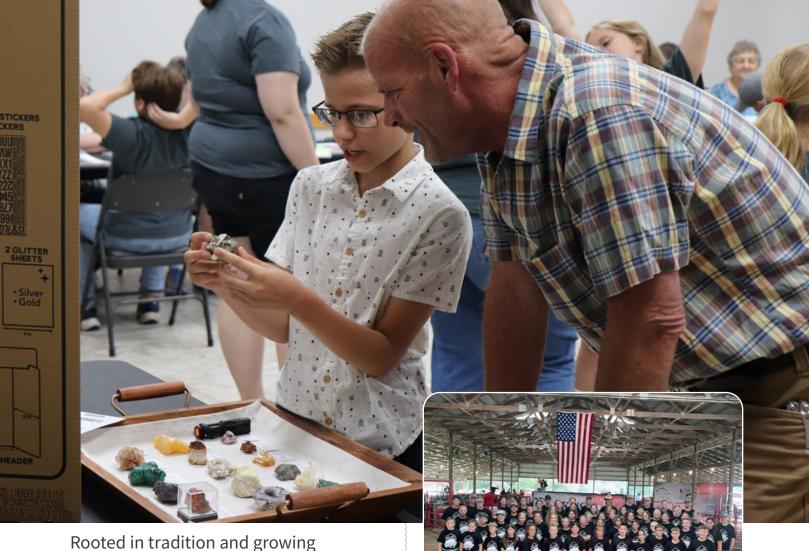
Resource Generation

5,682
Program
Volunteers

274 Community Gardens 2,634
School and
Community
Partners

\$15,259,785 Value of Volunteer Contributions \$463,368
Value of Donated
Produce Grown or
Facilitated

\$4M+ External Funds Secured for SNAP-Ed Partners



Rooted in tradition and growing champions: Celebrating the heart of 4-H fairs

Summer 4-H fairs are more than ribbons for a project well done; they are a celebration of dedication, creativity, and the enduring spirit of "learning by doing." Members have many ways to demonstrate their talents, including general projects and livestock shows.

At the general project fairs, you'll find everything from intricate artwork to gardening, photography, and robotics. The exhibits showcase the passion and perseverance of the young mind behind it. Each 4-H member explains their work to a judge, including what they learned and the challenges they faced in their yearlong project study. Local experts and community leaders serve as judges, offering constructive feedback and inspiring young people to continue their work.

At the livestock shows, members exhibit cattle, swine, sheep, goats, and horses. Members have spent months training animals to excel in the show ring, and they take time to groom the animals to highlight their assets. In addition to the selection of the highest quality animal, 4-H members are rewarded for their excellence in showmanship, knowledge of the species, conduct in the ring, presentation of the animal, and cooperation with others in the ring.

While 4-H fairs are a celebration of individual achievements, they are also fun community gatherings for families, friends, and neighbors. Proud parents offer encouragement and support and enjoy a sense of connection to this shared legacy.

The 4-H fairs are lifelong learning opportunities. The public speaking skills honed during project presentations equip young people to navigate the workplace confidently. The responsibility of caring for animals instills empathy, discipline, and a deep appreciation for the natural world. The collaborative spirit fosters leadership skills and a sense of belonging within the community.

Long after the ribbons are awarded, the legacy of growth, connection, curiosity, and community found at 4-H fairs continues. They leave behind a legacy of growth, connection, and a renewed sense of commitment to the values that lie at the heart of our communities. Each fair is a reminder that the future rests on the shoulders of these young people, who, when empowered by the 4-H spirit, are ready to work toward a brighter tomorrow.



From seedlings to scientists: Macomb second graders become backyard explorers

Imagine a classroom buzzing with excitement, not over worksheets or tests, but over a wriggling Madagascan hissing cockroach. This was the thrilling reality for a group of second graders thanks to a unique partnership with Illinois Extension Master Gardeners and Lincoln Elementary in Macomb.

"Adopt a Classroom" is built around the concept of nurturing a love for the natural world, fostering scientific curiosity, and empowering young minds to become explorers of their own backyard ecosystems. Once a month, Master Gardeners transformed the classroom into a miniature nature laboratory, with tables filled with soil, seeds, and the promise of new discoveries. Students become explorers, learning about the diversity of life on Earth.

Master Gardeners delved into the secrets of plant life, teaching the students about soil health, photosynthesis, and the importance of pollinators. Hands-on activities like planting seeds, creating a food web, and nurturing microgreens gave the students a tangible understanding of how nature works.





The Extension volunteers taught the young scientists how to record their findings in nature journals, sketch what they saw, jot down questions, and document their experiments. This practice fostered critical thinking, curiosity, and a deeper connection to the natural world.

Students carried their newfound knowledge beyond the schoolyard, sharing their experiences with parents, siblings, and friends. In the spring, Master Gardeners helped students build a vegetable garden and put in pollinator-friendly plants. The teacher reported how excited the students were to taste the vegetables, even if they didn't particularly like to eat vegetables. Parents saw increased interest in family gardening projects, trips to local parks and nature centers, and a growing awareness of the natural world in their communities.



For the volunteers, the rewards were equally profound. They are not just teaching; they are making a difference in the hearts and minds of the next generation of environmental stewards. After all, a love for the natural world starts with a seed, carefully planted and nurtured by the hands of dedicated volunteers, and blossoms into a future where curiosity thrives and the wonders of nature are celebrated by all.



A day in nature fosters life-long environmental stewardship for youth

Nature is a place where curious young minds can grow and thrive. That is the idea behind a series of environmental programs in Knox and McDonough counties.

In Knox County, first graders explored trees, soil, and pollinators at the Janet Russell Outdoor Education Day. Fourth graders also had a chance to become eco-champions at an Extension Environmental Day.

Every year, McDonough County Extension gives youth the opportunity to connect with nature at the Conservation Day at Argyle State Park. Under the guidance of Extension staff and volunteers, 300 enthusiastic fifth graders participated in handson learning, fostering a love for nature and encouraging them to become responsible environmental stewards.

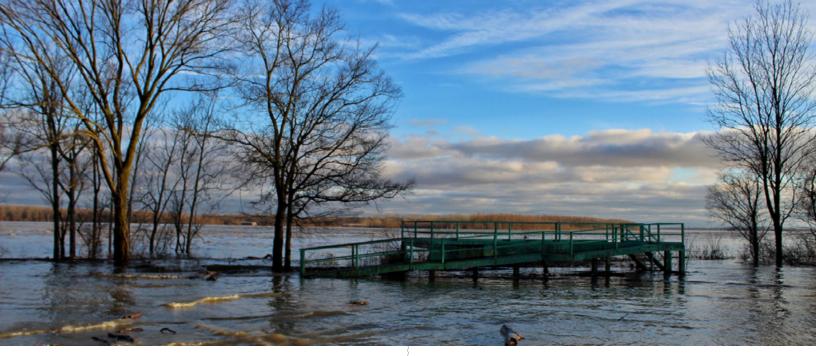


Master Gardeners nourish community from seed to supper

Food pantries are often stocked with cans and boxed food, but fresh produce can be hard to find. In 2023, Illinois Extension Master Gardeners grew and donated more than 1,700 pounds of food at the GIFT Garden in Macomb and the Carl Sandburg Community Garden in Galesburg.

Each growing season, area Master Gardeners devote their time and expertise to tending to community donation gardens. Volunteers harvest fresh, nutritious produce and provide it to local food banks to help feed the community.





Extension brings disaster preparedness expertise to the 2023 State of Illinois Mitigation Plan

In the last four decades, 116 weather and climate disasters cost Illinois \$1 billion. Illinois Extension community and economic development educator Carrie McKillip joined a team of experts to help state officials develop the 2023 State of Illinois Mitigation Plan to reduce the risks from natural hazards. Other partners included the Illinois State Water Survey and the Prairie Research Institute. As a result, the plan will have a major impact on communities, infrastructure, and the environment for years to come.



Review the 2023 State of Illinois Mitigation Plan iemaohs.illinois.gov/recovery/planning.html

Everyone can take steps to mitigate their own risk of natural hazards, and by working together, we can build a more robust Illinois for everyone.

Extension's Role

- Community Engagement: Extension educators facilitated stakeholder meetings and workshops across the state, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives were included in the planning process. This approach helped identify priority areas and develop strategies that are tailored to the needs of each community.
- Technical Expertise: Extension educators provided insights on natural hazards, risk assessment, and mitigation strategies, including topics such as flood plain management, drought preparedness, and wildfire prevention.
- Education and Outreach: Extension educators are skilled communicators who translate complex scientific information into easily understandable language for the public. Their educational outreach raises awareness about natural hazards and promotes mitigation actions among residents.

Extension's participation in developing the 2023 State of Illinois Mitigation Plan will lead to several positive outcomes, including:

- Reduced Risk of Natural Hazards: By employing the strategies outlined in the plan, communities will be better prepared to withstand the impacts of natural hazards. This will help to save lives, protect property, and reduce economic losses.
- Increased Resilience: Communities will be able to recover more quickly and effectively from disasters, bounce back from setbacks, and thrive in the face of adversity.
- Improved Public Awareness: Extension's efforts to raise awareness about natural hazards help to increase resident preparedness which leads to better decision-making during disasters and ultimately saves lives.



Sharing native seeds helps build resilient ecosystems

Native plants took center stage this fall at the third annual Master Naturalist Native Seed Share. This free event is a celebration of local biodiversity and ecosystems. Two dozen participants brought 50 different species of native seeds to share with each other, along with growing tips. Since growing native plants from seed can be difficult, local conservationists provided advice on how to prepare the soil for planting and the process of cold stratification to improve germination rates.



Good Growing series gives the gardening community room to take root

With help from Extension's Good Growing podcast and blog, anyone can transform their green spaces. The podcast and blog are hosted by a team of Extension horticulture educators from across the state, including Chris Enroth, Ken Johnson, and Emily Swihart who dig deep into everything from composting secrets to battling garden pests, all with humor and relatability. The weekly episode and blog taps into the pulse of the gardening community and tackles timely topics such as adapting to changing climates, maximizing space, and the latest technology and research-based recommendations for gardeners.

2023 Impact



50 new podcasts



new videocasts



30,000+ listeners



54 new blogs with 59,000 views



663,000 total blog views



Listen to the Podcast

extension.illinois.edu/podcasts/good-growing



Read the Blog

extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing

McDonough County Master Gardeners celebrate the return of Gardeners Day

While gardens never stop growing, some events had to take a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, growers in McDonough County were able to reconnect once again at the sold-out 25th Annual Gardeners Day. New and seasoned gardeners alike gathered at the Spoon River College in Macomb in April to share knowledge and build stronger communities.

The McDonough County Master Gardeners recruited a variety of experts to share their knowledge on pruning fruit trees, attracting pollinators, improving soil health, managing garden pests, and mastering innovative gardening techniques. Participants left energized and ready to dig into their gardens equipped with new knowledge and a renewed commitment to creating a flourishing future, plant by plant.



Youth leadership program cultivates a new generation of community leaders

Rural populations are declining across the U.S. as young people leave their hometowns. But Extension is working with local communities to show a new generation all the reasons there are to stay.

The Macomb Youth Leadership Organization is a partnership between Illinois Extension, the Macomb Area Chamber of Commerce, and Macomb High School that equips students with the knowledge and passion to make a difference in their hometown.

The three-year program fosters a generation of engaged community leaders by equipping them with the tools they need to make a difference in their hometown and encourages young adults to remain or return to their local communities.

- Year 1: Fourteen students embark on a journey of discovery, exploring local businesses, service agencies, government offices, and education institutions. This immersive experience fosters a deep understanding of the community's needs and assets.
- Year 2: Students are paired with local mentors in their fields of interest, gaining valuable job shadowing experience and often landing internships, igniting their career aspirations.
- Year 3: By developing and implementing community service projects, students are empowered to address critical local needs and leave a lasting positive impact by giving back.

Several students who have gone through the program have chosen to stay in Macomb or return after their studies, enriching the community they helped shape.



4-H robotics builds future innovators

In the 4-H robotics program, youth learn to build and program robots to complete tasks. These young engineers are igniting their passion for science and technology, all while fostering transferable skills and a love for learning.

This year, five local 4-H robotics teams gained valuable technical and communication skills. The high school team, 4-H Binary Bullets, competed at Worlds in Houston. While competing is a source of pride, the real impact comes from individual growth. One member, once afraid to speak up, confidently presented designs by the end of the season.

Your Thoughts Matter empowers youth mental wellness

Growing up is hard. Youth everywhere are struggling with increasing mental health challenges. Your Thoughts Matter is an Extension program that aims to help by dismantling stigma and fostering awareness of mental health.

A local junior high health class participated in the course, which resulted in positive discussions and behavior changes.

- 100% of participants gained new knowledge about mental health challenges and healthy coping mechanisms.
- Students reported a shift in perspective and a commitment to open communication. They noted they "will think about mental disorder stereotyping differently" and "will talk more to their parents."

Your Thoughts Matter is just one piece of the puzzle. Extension also provides crisis contact information and mindfulness strategies to kindergarten to second grade students, building a foundation for emotional resilience from a young age. By addressing mental health proactively, Extension is helping teens navigate difficult emotions and build a stronger, healthier future.



The transition from being a teenager to an adult is hard. Welcome to the Real World is a live-action simulation that gives teens a glimpse of the financial and practical demands of adulthood. Students are provided a monthly income based on their selected career path, and then they must figure out how to pay for rent, groceries, transportation, and unexpected expenses.

Welcome to the Real World serves as a launchpad for young adults by equipping them with the necessary tools and confidence to navigate challenges, make informed decisions, and chart their own course toward a successful and fulfilling future. This experience sheds light on the intricacies of budgeting for utilities and living expenses. Participants may be surprised by a car repair or insurance claim turning life's headaches into valuable lessons, equipping them with essential knowledge for navigating the adult world. Students also attend a job fair, coordinated by Carl Sandburg College, as a complement to the program.

Students who go through Welcome to the Real World possess the confidence to rent their first apartment, manage their finances responsibly, and make informed decisions about their future. The program fosters resilience, cultivates resourcefulness, and, most importantly, it instills a sense of personal responsibility, empowering them to take ownership of their choices and navigate the complexities of adult life.

of graduates report feeling more confident about managing their finances

100%

say they developed essential life skills like budgeting, decision-making, and problem-solving

Wits Fitness delivers measurable results from self-efficacy to strong communities

In today's world, we often prioritize physical health, focusing on diet, exercise, and weight management. But what about our mental well-being? The Wits Fitness Brain Exercise program, spearheaded by Illinois Extension family life educator Tessa Hobbs-Curley, is proving that keeping the mind active is just as crucial as staying physically fit.

This innovative program dives into the holistic world of brain health, addressing lifestyle factors that can impact cognitive function. Participants learn about the importance of physical activity, stress management, social engagement, and sleep, discovering how these elements contribute to a sharper, healthier mind.

Participants emerge from the program empowered with practical tools and newfound knowledge. They learn that playing more brain games, trying something new, and spending time with friends are fun activities that are also vital steps toward maintaining cognitive health.

The program also fosters a vibrant community, and these social connections are a core component of the program's success. Sharing laughter over puzzle challenges and engaging in stimulating activities provides a sense of belonging and combats loneliness, a risk factor for cognitive decline. The program also strengthens relationships between Extension and its partner host sites like the YMCA and community centers, creating a network of support for brain health initiatives.

Hobbs-Curley and her team were recognized at the Illinois Extension Annual Conference with a Program Evaluation Excellence award. Participant surveys revealed significant improvements in self-efficacy, which highlights the program's positive impact on social interaction, knowledge acquisition, and the adoption of healthy habits.

As one participant aptly noted, "It's OK to try something new," and this program proves that embracing new challenges and connecting with others can be the key to a healthier, happier future for both our minds and our hearts.





Leaving a legacy in words: Life Story Writing Class unites community

Putting pen to paper to share stories is a time-honored tradition that is slowly losing traction in a digital era. In an age dominated by social media influencers and fleeting online trends, a group of 11 individuals embarked on a unique journey with the Illinois Extension's Life Story Writing Class to capture the richness of their own personal histories, leaving a legacy in heartfelt words.

In a world saturated with instant information, the irony is stark: Many families know precious little about their own histories. This workshop aimed to bridge that gap, empowering participants to share their personal journeys through the written word, be it through genealogy research, detailed journaling, or capturing heartfelt oral histories.

For nine weeks, the storytellers gathered with Extension family life educator Tessa Hobbs-Curley to learn about writing and to connect on a deeper level. Each session began with engaging writing exercises, allowing participants to delve into their memories, triumphs, and challenges. Stories were shared, feedback exchanged, and new writing assignments, fueled by thought-provoking prompts, ignited their creative flames.

The Life Story Writing Class fostered a sense of community and belonging, with one participant sharing that the space "was very therapeutic and reassuring." The workshop became a safe and supportive space for participants to share their vulnerabilities and celebrate their achievements.

Through the program, participants discovered a wealth of untold stories, and as one put it, they realized that "We all have a lot of stories to tell and write about." The workshop instilled a renewed passion for documenting these stories for their own reflection and as gifts for future generations.

My story is more relatable than I thought, and not everyone's story has to fit the mold. It is all of value and can possibly be used at some point in the future.

Program Participant



Squash the waste with Pumpkin Smash composting rally

In addition to piles of candy, Halloween also generates piles of pumpkins. To keep pumpkins out of landfills, parks, and natural areas Illinois Extension partnered with the Macomb Park District to give McDonough County residents a fun alternative for pumpkin disposal. At the Macomb Pumpkin Smash families catapulted, hurled, or smashed pumpkins into bits which were then sent to a composting facility. Thanks to this event, over 1,500 pounds of pumpkins were kept out of landfills.

In landfills, organic food waste, like pumpkins, produces the potent greenhouse gas methane as it decomposes without oxygen. The smash event allows people to drop off pumpkins so they can be turned into nutrient-rich compost for local gardens. Composting took a fun twist for the 150 families who picked up mallets and catapults to smash their festive pumpkins.

It's fantastic to see kids having fun while being environmentally conscious. This event shows that sustainability can be messy, loud, and most importantly, fun!

Chris Enroth, Extension horticulture educator



What do I want to be when I grow up?

It's a question high school students are frequently asked. The Henderson County Career Exploration was an opportunity for students and 20 local businesses and organizations to connect and network and maybe find an answer to that question. The event empowered students to explore interests, make informed decisions about their educational pathways, and build connections with local professionals. This initiative has the goal of nurturing a generation of engaged and motivated individuals and contributing to the future workforce of Henderson County.

- Representation: Over 20 businesses and organizations participated, showcasing the breadth of career opportunities available in the county.
- Collaboration: A dedicated planning committee made up of representatives from seven partner organizations ensured a well-rounded event.
- Preparation: Students came prepared, having reviewed career exploration videos featuring local professionals and Extension resources in advance.
- Connection: A "passport" system encouraged active exploration of different booths, fostering meaningful interactions.
- **Experiential Learning:** Hands-on activities provided students with a practical understanding of various professions.



Partners build stronger connections with the Strong Couples project

Every relationship has its ups and downs. Illinois Extension is here to help couples navigate tough times through the Strong Couples project.

Strong Couples provides free, personalized coaching and effective tools to rekindle communication and rebuild intimacy from the comfort of home. In 2023, Extension Family Life Educator Tessa Hobbs-Curley helped couples seeking to strengthen their relationships. Participants work through six online sessions at their own pace, followed by five personalized coaching calls with Hobbs-Curley. This approach empowers couples to practice communication techniques together while also receiving tailored guidance from an experienced coach.

Feedback from program participants showed couples had a significant reduction in communication conflict and individual stress, as well as a substantial increase in relationship satisfaction. Participants said the program taught them techniques that became their go-to tools for navigating challenges. Others expressed gratitude for the guidance that helped them get their relationship back on track.

By helping couples, the program's benefits also extend to strengthening families and communities.

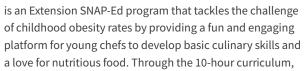
Factors that contribute to program success:

- Accessibility: The program is free and online, removing barriers for couples who might not otherwise seek help.
- Tailored support: Personalized coaching ensures couples receive guidance relevant to their unique needs.
- Proven methods: The program is based on evidence-based strategies, ensuring effectiveness.

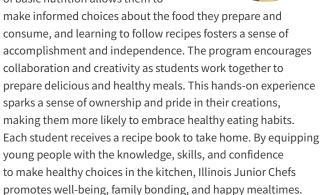


Junior Chefs empowers young people to make healthy choices in the kitchen one bite at a time

Learning how to fuel your body with healthy food starts early. Junior Chefs



staff equip youth with the knowledge and confidence to navigate the kitchen. Instructors cover food safety and the proper use of equipment to ensure a safe learning environment. Giving participants an understanding of basic nutrition allows them to



Now I can help make dinner for my family! Program Participant

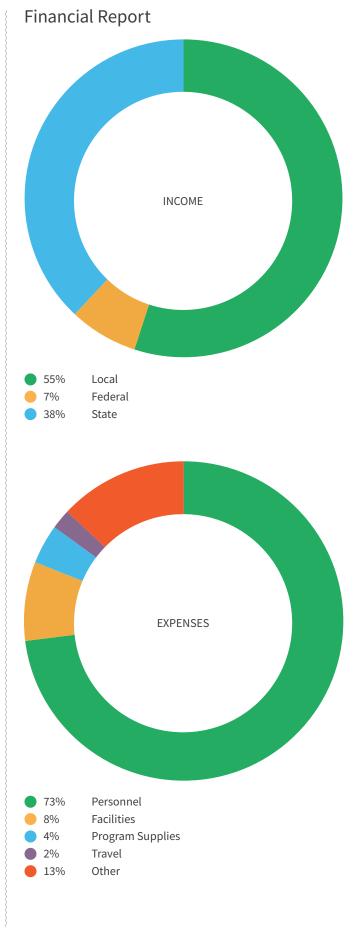


Webinars bridge the gap in Illinois emergency preparedness

When a disaster happens, knowing what to do is a matter of life and death. Extension community and economic development educators partnered with the Illinois Emergency Management Agency and Office of Homeland Security to help strengthen the state's preparedness and response to emergencies through a webinar series for emergency managers, Community Organizations Active in Disasters members, and other stakeholders. This partnership leveraged the expertise of both groups to create a complete and accessible learning opportunity called COAD Learning Sessions

Results

- Enhanced Knowledge and Skills: The webinars provided information on emergency preparedness, response, and recovery, including risk assessment, mitigation strategies, communication protocols, volunteer coordination, and mental health support during disasters, which allows participants to make informed decisions and effectively manage emergencies within their communities.
- Improved Collaboration and Coordination: The series
 fosters collaboration between emergency management
 officials, community organizations, and the public.
 Bringing stakeholders together on a common platform
 helps break down communication barriers and builds trust,
 leading to a more united and efficient response during
 emergencies.
- Broader Outreach and Education: The webinar format
 allows for a wider distribution of critical information
 compared to in-person workshops. This accessibility makes
 the series especially beneficial for rural communities and
 individuals with limited resources, ensuring that everyone
 can learn and prepare for emergencies.
- Strengthened Community Resilience: Ultimately, the
 multi-agency collaboration builds stronger, more resilient
 communities across Illinois. By empowering individuals
 and organizations, the series helps communities better
 prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies,
 minimizing damage and ensuring the safety of residents.



STAFF

Lisa Torrance County Director

Wendy Ferguson Marketing Coordinator

Angel Wright Henderson and Warren County 4-H Program Coordinator

Shelby Carlson 4-H Youth Development Educator

Beth Chatterton McDonough County 4-H Program Coordinator Christopher Enroth Horticulture Educator

Emma Eathington Knox County 4-H Program Coordinator

Kate Budde Horticulture Program Coordinator

Amy Finley SNAP-Ed Community Worker

Diann Sugden <u>SNAP</u>-Ed Community Worker Tessa Hobbs-Curley Family Life Educator

Julian Inniss 4-H SPIN Program Coordinator

Carrie McKillip Community and Economic Development Educator

Michelle Kim Community and Economic Development Educator

Sharon Blair Knox County Office Support Assistant Tara Chenoweth
Fiscal Office Support Assistant

Diana Dugan Henderson and Warren County Office Support Assistant

Lorie Schwerer McDonough County Office Support Assistant

OFFICE INFORMATION

Henderson County Extension

410 E Main Stronghurst, IL 61480 (309) 924-1163 Fax: (309) 924-1164 Monday and Friday, 8 AM – 4 PM

Knox County Extension

108 S Soangetaha Rd, Ste 108 Galesburg, IL 61401 (309) 342-5108 Fax: (309) 342-1768 Monday – Friday, 8 AM – 4:30 PM

McDonough County Extension

3022 W Jackson Macomb, IL 61455 (309) 837-3939 Fax: (309) 833-3019 Monday – Friday, 8 AM – 4 PM

Warren County Extension

1000 N Main St Monmouth, IL 61462 (309) 734-5161 Fax: (309) 734-5532 Tuesday – Thursday, 8 AM – 4 PM

ONLINE



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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.

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.

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