

EXPANDING FOOD ACCESS FOR UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

One in every five Illinois residents has poor access to food, and about 1.6 million people in Illinois suffer with food insecurity. Individuals faced with food insecurity suffer a greater risk for chronic health conditions, poor quality of life, and poor academic and behavioral performance in children.

Connecting underserved populations—including low income, urban, and Latino communities—to healthy food and educational resources is a key part of solving food insecurity and its related concerns in Illinois. The University of Illinois Extension at the College of ACES is a recognized leader in providing community-based projects that improve food security and family health.

With programs in all 102 Illinois counties, reaching 1.5 million residents annually, Extension is uniquely positioned to deliver life-changing educational programming to combat food insecurity.

OPPORTUNITIES:

With additional support from donors, Extension's successful programs and experts are positioned to expand their reach into at-risk communities throughout Illinois. Extension employs a two-pronged approach to improve food security.

1. Expanding programs that are successfully increasing the production and delivery of healthy, locally grown produce in areas with low food access.

Extension's local foods and small farms educators, and horticulture educators are experienced in helping launch successful farms and community gardens. Currently, there are 27 food donation gardens in Illinois associated with these educators and Extension's trained Master Gardener volunteers.

One example is Prosperity Gardens, Inc., which uses city-owned lots to provide hands-on education and green business employment opportunities to Champaign-Urbana's low-income residents, as well as affordable, locally grown produce. The operation of these gardens are informed by Extension's research staff and partners like the College of ACES Urban Food Systems faculty team, which is providing ongoing research and development on stations that minimize postharvest loss, extend crop availability, and improve sanitation and packing for urban agriculture. Extension is also committed to funding operations through our new Growing Illinois Food Access grants.

Many communities in Illinois are suffering from food insecurity that could benefit from food donation gardens. Additional funding would allow Extension to hire an educator in a high priority area to assist the launch of new food donation gardens and expand the operations and distribution of existing ones.

2. Increase outreach to underserved low income and urban communities, especially Latino populations, who may be unaware of services or have culturally unique food needs.

Extension educators are working across several programs to connect underserved communities to healthy food. SNAP educators teach low-income residents about where they can access fresh produce, nutrition, budgeting, and physical activity. Extension's USDA-funded program, called Hispanic Health Ambassadors with Abriendo Caminos, provides culturally sensitive lifestyle interventions and educational programs to reduce obesity risk in Hispanic families. Additionally, more than 14,000 Hispanic youth participate in Extension's 4-H programs, learning key life skills to be empowered and prepared for success, including nutrition and food preparation.



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Running these programs successfully requires a significant expertise in language and cultural translation. To better support our staff, Extension is seeking additional resources to form an Office of Latino Programs and hire a coordinator who can assist in providing high-quality translation and cultural services Extension-wide.

RESOURCES REQUIRED:

An endowment divided between the two focus areas would improve food security and health outcomes for urban, low income, and Latino communities. Extension would dedicate funds towards hiring a new educator focused on developing food donation gardens and farms, and hiring a coordinator, creating an Office of Latino Programs.



Contact
ANGIE BARNARD
Executive Director
Illinois 4-H Foundation
abarnard@illinois.edu
217-333-9295

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