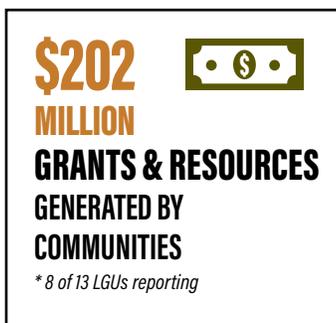


North Central Region Community Development Extension 2024 Executive Summary



North Central Region States
Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas,
Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri,
Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio,
South Dakota, Wisconsin

In 2009, University Extension leaders from the twelve North Central 1862 land-grant universities originally developed common indicators for reporting the impacts of community and economic development educational programs. In 2024, the North Central Region led an effort to revise these impact indicators with the support of the [North Central Cooperative Extension Association](#) (NCCEA), the [Southern Rural Development Center](#) (SRDC), and the [North Central Regional Center for Rural Development](#) (NCRCD). For this report, thirteen North Central program leaders reported on their program's outcomes utilizing both sets of impact indicators.



Produced by the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development

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2024 Impact Briefs

Creating 'Hometown Leaders'

In Summer 2024, an enthusiastic multi-disciplinary [Illinois Extension](#) team serving DeKalb County, IL, kicked off 'Hometown Leaders'—a compact, 3-part program that introduced high school students to how their county government works and the career opportunities available it provides. The underlying notion is that if young people engage with their community and learn about local opportunities, they're more likely to stay or return after exploring elsewhere. At the program's conclusion, county administrators and County Board members appreciated the Extension team providing this opportunity to interact with the young people participating in the program and giving these youth a "real-life" look at the variety of public service careers in DeKalb County. Similarly, the participating youth indicated that they learned much from the experience. ■



Illinois Extension
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Supporting Rural Grocers

In 2024, The Rural Grocery Initiative hired two new staff members to support [K-State Research and Extension's](#) role in the [Heartland Regional Food Business Center](#) and provide technical assistance to rural grocers. The [2024 National Rural Grocery Summit](#) was hosted in partnership with Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute in Montgomery, AL in June. We published findings from our 2021 Kansas Rural Grocery Survey in the [Journal of Extension](#), launched [Rural Grocery Peer Groups](#) open to rural grocery operators interested in an monthly opportunity to connect, learn and share with other rural grocers, and graduated two cohorts of the [Rural Grocery Transition Specialist microcredential](#). ■



Growing Together Project

[Purdue Extension's](#) Growing Together project addresses food access challenges through coordinated efforts between Master Gardeners and Nutrition Education Program Coordinators. In 20 Indiana counties, 868 volunteers (including 79 Master Gardeners) contributed over 6,500 hours maintaining 25 community gardens that produced nearly 20,000 pounds of fresh produce — equivalent to 59,850 servings. This bounty was distributed to 43 organizations, serving approximately 18,600 low-income clients. The program also provided nutrition education to 5,761 individuals and gardening skills training. This Indiana initiative is part of an eight-state effort that collectively produced 225,283 pounds of donated produce. ■



Driving Agritourism Development in Michigan through Statewide Strategic Initiatives

The inaugural [Michigan Agricultural Tourism Summit](#), hosted by [Michigan State University \(MSU\) Extension](#) in May 2024, brought together growers, municipal leaders, and industry experts to strengthen agritourism in Michigan. Held in Traverse City, the event included site tours and a full day of panels addressing the economic, regulatory, and community aspects of agritourism. Participants gained cross-disciplinary insights from local farmers, policymakers, and MSU experts. Survey results showed strong impact: 85% better understood agritourism needs, 88% felt more effective in their roles, and 91% planned to apply their learnings. The Summit fostered collaboration to grow rural entrepreneurship and preserve Michigan's agricultural heritage. ■



Empowering Iowa's Local Government

For 50 years, Iowa's [Municipal Professionals Institute and Academy](#) have empowered local government. Offered by [Iowa State University Extension and Outreach](#), these programs equip municipal professionals, especially clerks, with vital skills including budgeting, record-keeping, and policy implementation. Serving nearly 400 participants annually across 98 counties, the Institute provides foundational knowledge, while the Academy offers advanced training.

This investment yields significant benefits: enhanced city efficiency, increased public trust, and tangible career growth for clerks, including promotions and raises. Well-trained clerks demonstrate greater job retention, fostering invaluable community continuity and preserving local history. The Institute and Academy are crucial resources for building strong and effective local governments across Iowa. ■



Leading Economic Transformation (LET)

Today's professionals must navigate a complex economic environment. [University of Minnesota Extension's Leading Economic Transformation \(LET\)](#) program enhances growth by equipping leaders in systems thinking and network building. The program uses tools like asset mapping and Ripple Effect Mapping to drive community change. Participants reported that the program strengthened their capacity and provided partnership strategies while improving understanding of systemic issues. By equipping leaders to align economic goals with community initiatives, the LET cohort fosters resilient communities prepared for challenges. One participant noted that complex problems were challenging but not insurmountable, while another emphasized that evaluation can be used to drive meaningful change in their community. ■



2024 Impact Briefs

Neighborhood Leadership Fellows

[University of Missouri Extension's Neighborhood Leadership Fellows](#), an advanced leadership program focused on systems change, hosted 18 sessions over nine months in 2024 and graduated 19 St. Louis Promise Zone resident Fellows. These Fellows learned advocacy skills and strategies needed to gain access to civic leadership tables and decision-making halls. Fellows worked in groups to develop a policy-focused project aimed at addressing stronger regional policies for neighborhoods. Groups were tasked with developing or enhancing a policy model/framework based on lived experiences, strengths and networks in addition to performing data research, advocacy and community engagement in order to work towards systematic change. ■



Conference Fosters Entrepreneurship Among Latino Community

The [2024 Latino Small Business Conference](#), hosted in Grand Island, Omaha, Lincoln, and Scottsbluff, empowered over 500 Latino entrepreneurs across Nebraska. Organized by the [Rural Prosperity Nebraska's Small Business Program](#), the conference addressed language barriers and resource gaps by offering culturally relevant workshops, expert panels, and networking. Attendees gained valuable tools, confidence, and connections to grow their businesses, with many reporting improved business practices and new partnerships. Supported by more than twenty volunteers, twelve sponsors, and forty-six booths, the event fostered statewide economic development and connection, strengthening Nebraska's entrepreneurial ecosystem and driving success within the growing Latino business community. ■



Soil and Water Conservation Leadership Academy

The [North Dakota State University Extension's Soil and Water Conservation Leadership Academy](#) equips conservation leaders at the district level with essential skills to drive impactful change. **Level 1** focuses on governance, strategic planning, and ethical leadership. **Level 2** expands into advocacy, workforce sustainability, and practical conservation applications. **Level 3** deepens expertise in watershed management, hydrology, and data-driven planning. Through interactive sessions on policy, reporting, and leadership, participants strengthen their ability to manage conservation efforts effectively. This program ensures leaders are well-prepared to enhance soil and water quality initiatives, fostering stronger, more resilient conservation districts equipped to address evolving environmental challenges. In 2024, 40 leaders were educated during Level 1 and Level 2 training across the state of North Dakota. ■



Boat Shrink Wrap Recycling

Every winter, boats kept in Ohio are wrapped with a plastic shrink wrap cover which is discarded in the spring in landfills, taking hundreds of years to decompose. In 2024, over 45 marinas and 15 partners participated in the [Shrink Wrap Recycling Program](#) facilitated by [Ohio Sea Grant](#). The outreach and grants leveraged through collaboration have significantly grown accessibility to shrink wrap recycling across Ohio. More than 80,000 pounds of shrink wrap was recycled from Ohio marinas in 2024, with over \$70,000 in leveraged funding obtained to support equipment and outreach costs to improve the availability of recycling to Ohioans. ■



Creating Pathways to Success

The [Central State University Community and Economic Development](#) (CED) program works to create pathways to success by empowering communities, organizations, and individuals through education. In FY 2024, CED provided activities and engagements in 13 counties that included: Financial literacy, entrepreneurship, small business development, farm financial management, and agricultural marketing. Education was provided to meet the needs of the targeted audience including small business owners, agribusiness owners, and local community members. ■



Small Business Basics

In 2024, [South Dakota State University Extension](#) delivered the 18-hour [Small Business Basics](#) program in Volga, Rapid City, Watertown, and Sturgis, SD. Over the course of six sessions, participants engaged with experts across critical areas of business management, gaining insights that are often difficult to obtain independently. The program covered a range of topics, including financial management, marketing strategies, legal compliance, and operational efficiency, giving attendees a well-rounded understanding of what it takes to run a successful business. This combination of expert guidance and practical takeaways enabled them to make more informed decisions, improve their operations, and increase their chances of sustaining and growing their businesses in the competitive market. ■



Wisconsin Rural Entrepreneurial Venture Program

The [Wisconsin Rural Entrepreneurial Venture \(WI REV\) program](#) launched in June 2024. Based on Minnesota REV and the e2 Rural Prosperity model, WI REV helps rural community leaders advance entrepreneur-focused economic development by building community capacity to support startups and existing businesses. The inaugural cohort of six communities will receive three years of coaching from an Extension Community Development Educator or local economic development professional. In 2024, participating communities developed leadership teams, established community economic goals, engaged local stakeholders, and identified entrepreneurs suited to advancing local priorities. Long-term outcomes include business creation and expansion, increased youth entrepreneurship, and community prosperity. ■

