



2025 Annual Report

johnson.k-state.edu

KANSAS STATE
UNIVERSITY

Extension
Johnson County

Contents

2

Letter From the Director

-Connecting Kansas State University to Community

4

By the Numbers & Key Stakeholders

6

Volunteer Leadership and Development

-Meeting Neighbors Where They Are

8

Family and Community Wellness

-Healthy Aging-Medicare Education Initiative

10

4-H Youth Development

-Strengthening Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement

12

Horticulture, Ornamentals and Turf

-Youth Development and Lifelong Learning

14

Nutrition, Food Safety and Health

-Building Healthier Communities by Partnerships

16

Local Food Systems

-Growing Skills Where People Live

18

Horticulture, Small Farms

-Layer by Layer: Building a Stronger Local Food System

20

Natural Resources

-Tackling Invasive Species & More Through Collaboration

22

Our Partnerships

Letter From the Director

Three years after federal legislation established the Cooperative Extension Service, Johnson County hired its first Extension Agent in 1917 which created a 100+ year tradition of providing trusted, research-based education to improve lives, families, and communities. As part of Kansas State University Extension, our local office connects residents with university expertise, delivering programs that address real community needs.

Today, **nine Extension Agents and eleven support staff serve adults and youth across Johnson County through classes, workshops, outreach events, publications, and partnerships.** Our work provides unbiased, research-based information that helps residents make informed decisions for their families, businesses, and communities.

Johnson County presents a unique environment, simultaneously urban, suburban, and rural, located on a state line, and part of a dynamic metro area. These factors require Extension to remain adaptable, responsive, and forward-thinking.

In 2025, our efforts were guided by the **JoCo Unite initiative**, which strengthens how Extension connects with residents, partners, and local organizations. **By aligning outreach, communications, and partnerships, JoCo Unite improves access to programs and increases visibility.** Expanded digital engagement, stronger collaborations, and more intentional storytelling are helping us reach more residents and deepen community connections.

Volunteers play a critical role in extending our impact. From mentoring youth to leading programs and supporting community services, their **contributions in 2025 equaled more than 48 full-time staff positions** which demonstrates their essential role in our success.

For over a century, addressing critical community issues has been at the heart of Extension's mission. Through **JoCo Unite** and the continued dedication of our staff, volunteers, and partners, we remain committed to strengthening families, supporting youth, and building a vibrant Johnson County now and into the future as part of **One K-State.**

Tara Markley
Johnson County Director,
Community Vitality Agent



Connecting Kansas State University to Community

Kansas State University Extension has identified five critical issues facing communities across the state, guiding programs to address what matters most to residents. In Johnson County, Extension agents connect university research to local needs by translating complex information into practical, unbiased education that supports healthier families, stronger communities, and a more sustainable future. The JoCo Unite initiative strengthens this work by improving connections with community members, organizations, and local leaders.



Johnson County Unite

Across the State: Statewide Priorities

Global Food Systems

As the state's largest industry, agriculture drives the Kansas economy. We are improving food and agricultural systems to feed the world's growing population, which will economically benefit Kansas.

Health

Thirty-two percent of Kansas adults are obese, and 21 percent of Kansas children live in poverty. Targeting the variety of Kansans, our programs address quality of life, healthy development, and health behaviors across life stages for all socioeconomic groups.

Developing Tomorrow's Leaders

The complex global society of the future will require leaders with effective teamwork and communication skills. We need to prepare leaders of all ages, so they may contribute to a vibrant Kansas economy for years to come.

Community Vitality

When citizens are encouraged to combine their experiences and skills to work together, everyone in the community benefits.

Water and Natural Resources

Water quality in central and eastern Kansas and water quantity in western Kansas are important issues. Current irrigation trends could deplete 69 percent of the groundwater in the Ogallala Aquifer within 50 years, drastically affecting the Kansas economy. Sediment and silt are washing into large reservoirs that supply drinking water and recreation to many Kansans.

Across Johnson County: Local Actions

Global Food Systems

This work takes shape through community garden education, partnerships with food pantries, and new initiatives like JoCo EATS that strengthen connections between local food production and community nutrition.

Health

Through partnerships, nutrition education, and community wellness programs, Johnson County Extension helps residents build lifelong habits that support physical and mental well-being.

Developing Tomorrow's Leaders

Empowering adult learners and youth through 4-H and leadership development programs that build confidence, skills, and civic engagement.

Community Vitality

Strong communities are built through education, collaboration, and civic participation. Extension programs supporting financial resilience, volunteer leadership, and community partnerships help strengthen the social and economic vitality of Johnson County.

Water and Natural Resources

Through horticulture education, water conservation programs, and sustainable landscape practices, Extension helps residents care for the natural resources that sustain Johnson County.

Our Volunteers

The Power of Extension Volunteers

The Johnson County Extension office provides our high level of service thanks to the assistance and dedication from our volunteers. A passionate and hardworking group, our volunteers are pillars that continue to improve the lives of Johnson County citizens through research-based, accurate, and unbiased Extension educational programming.

K-State Master Programs:

Extension Master Food

Volunteers

96 volunteers

7,273 total hours

Extension Master Gardeners

492 volunteers

51,775 total hours

Extension Master Naturalists

222 Volunteers

12,862 total hours

Additional Programs:

4-H Youth Development

171 volunteers

19,319 total hours

Sunset Community Garden

122 volunteers

1,366 total hours

Family and Community Education (FCE)

10 volunteers

194 total hours

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)

41 volunteers

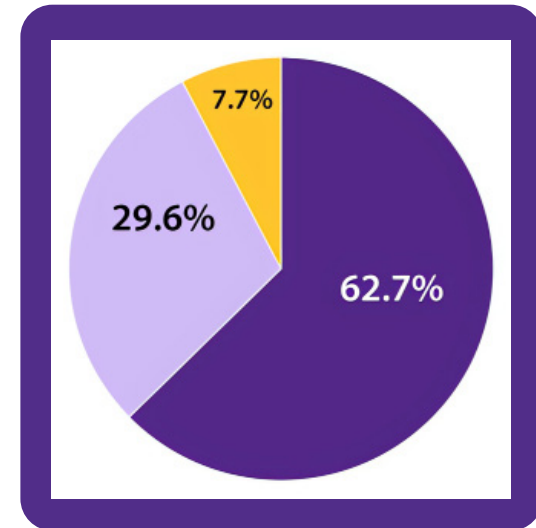
3,416 total hours



**Source: Independent Sector 2024 for Kansas Wages*

Funding

Johnson County K-State Extension is funded by annual appropriations from county, state and federal governments. Grants, program participation fees, product sales and private contributions augment our core government funding. This funding partnership provides an educational outreach system that links our residents, businesses and communities with research and education from Kansas State University and the nation's land-grant university system. Our Johnson County Funding is essential to maintaining this unique Cooperative Extension partnership between the county, the state and federal governments, and Kansas State University, which is Kansas' land grant university.



■ Johnson County Government	\$1,018,692.00 (62.7%)
■ Kansas State University and Federal Government	\$481,936.00 (29.6%)
■ Johnson County Extension Revenue	\$125,076.95 (7.7%)

Key Stakeholders

Kansas State University Extension

Dr. Richard H. Linton
Kansas State University President

Dr. Marshall Stewart
Executive Vice President
for External Engagement
and Chief of Staff

Dr. Gregg Hadley
Assistant Vice President
and Director for Extension

Headquarters
K-State Extension
1612 Claflin Road
Manhattan, Kansas 66506
785-532-5820
ksre.k-state.edu

Johnson County
K-State Extension
11811 South Sunset Drive, Suite 1500
Olathe, Kansas 66061
913-715-7000 johnson.k-state.edu

Johnson County Board of County Commissioners

Mike Kelly
Chairman

Becky Fast
First District Commissioner

Jeff Meyers
Second District Commissioner

Julie Brewer
Third District Commissioner

Janeé Hanzlick
Fourth District Commissioner

Michael Ashcraft
Fifth District Commissioner

Shirley Allenbrand
Sixth District Commissioner

Johnson County Managers

Penny Postoak Ferguson
County Manager

Julie Karins
Deputy County Manager

Aaron Otto
Assistant County Manager

Adam Norris
Assistant County Manager

Darron Leiker
Assistant County Manager

Johnson County Extension Council

Terry Ecklund
Chair

Michael McDermott
Vice-Chair

Michele Ross
Secretary

Don Coleman
Treasurer

Luke Garrison
Jennifer Olberding
Dave Rock
Julie Rounds
Jerry Wickersham

Extension Program Development Committees

4-H Youth Development
Jennifer Anderson
Sara Eccles
Luke Garrison
Emalie Murdoch
Jennifer Olberding
Rehn Schmitt

Agriculture and Natural Resources
Terry Ecklund
Julie Foster
Mary Gillespie
Melissa Hanlin
Michele Ross
Julie Rounds

Community Vitality
Don Coleman
Jenny Doty
Casee Eisele
Michael Lemon
Dave Rock
Deb Settle

Family and Consumer Sciences
Winter Arledge
Sara DiDio
Mary Johannes
Angela Paz
Michael McDermott
Jerry Wickersham

[Visit our YouTube Channel](#)

Extending research-based information to partners, leadership, and the broader community through on-demand video.



JoCo Unite: Impact in Action

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Site

1700 Tax Returns | **\$1.7** million in refunds
Saving taxpayers **\$500,000** in preparation fees

Johnson County Extension Education Foundation

\$20,939 awarded
Supported **14** local Extension Programs

Food Grown by Volunteers and Donated Locally

11,060 pounds of fruit and vegetables
Equates to **3,820** servings to local families

Kitchen Restore Kits

111 were distributed
Saving households **\$8,325**

Our Partnerships

Aberdeen Village
AdventHealth Shawnee
Arcare
Archer-Daniels-Midland
Blue Valley School District
Boys and Girls Club of Greater Kansas City
Burroughs Audubon Society
Catholic Charities
City of Fairway
City of Gardner Parks and Recreation
City of Lenexa
City of Olathe
City of Overland Park
City of Prairie Village
City of Shawnee
Conservation District, Johnson County
Cultivate KC
Deanna Rose Farmstead
Deep Roots KC
Down Syndrome Innovations
East Central Kansas Area Agency on Aging
El Centro, Inc.
Ernie Miller Nature Center
Financial Professionals, Inc.
Friends of the Kaw

Our Partnerships

Garmin
Girl Scouts of NE Kansas & NW Missouri
Giving Grove
Growing Futures
Growing Growers
Haley & Aldrich
Jewish Family Services
Johnson County Aging and Human Services
Johnson County Community College
Johnson County Commission on Aging
Johnson County Department of Corrections
Johnson County Department of Health
and Environment
Johnson County Developmental Supports
Johnson County Extension Education Foundation
Johnson County Fair Association
Johnson County Farm Bureau
Johnson County Food Policy Council
Johnson County Library
Johnson County Mental Health
Johnson County Park & Recreation District
Johnson County Public Works
Johnson County Women, Infants, and
Children (WIC) Program
Kansas Beef Council

Kansas City Metropolitan Tax Coalition
Kansas City Wildlands
Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks
Kansas State University, Olathe
Kissick Construction
K-State Olathe Horticulture Research and
Extension Center
Lenexa Parks and Recreation
Lenexa Farmers Market
MARC, Mid-America Regional Council
Monticello Historical Society
NCircle
New Hope Food Pantry
Olathe Head Start
Olathe Public Library
Olathe Quilters Guild
Olathe School District
Overland Park Arboretum & Botanical Gardens
Parents as Teachers
Produce Safety Alliance
Shawnee Mission School District
Shawnee Wellness Hub
The Olathe Garden and Civic Club
Tyler's House for Teens
USD 232 Mill Valley High School

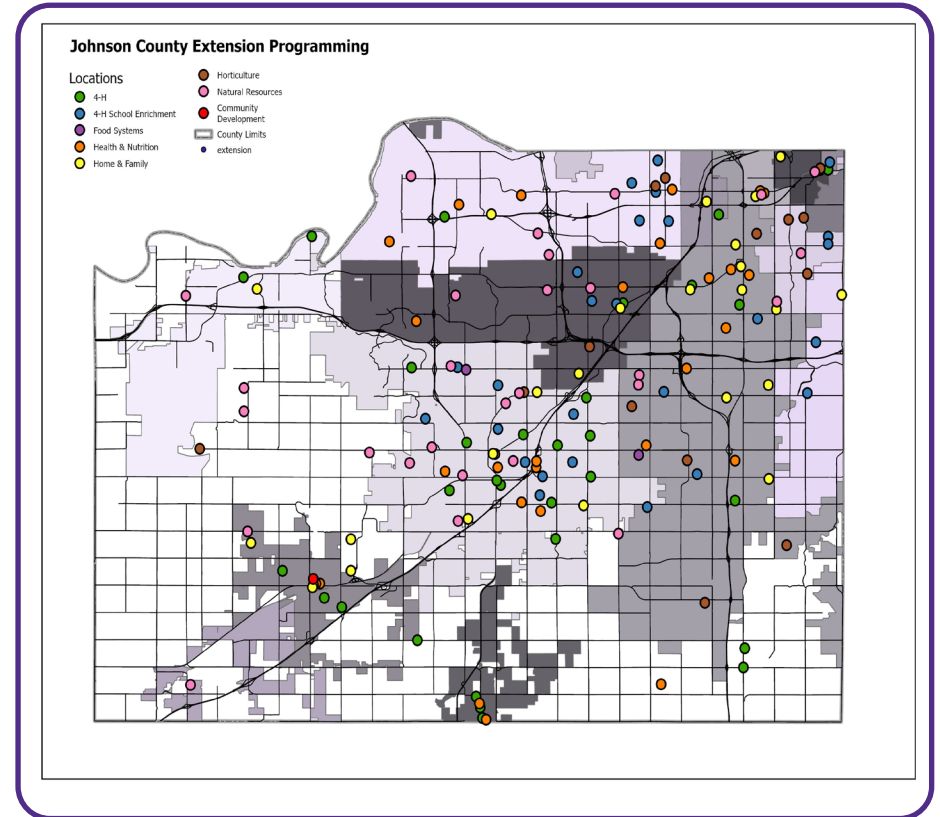
Volunteer Leadership and Development

By Tracy Hemsath, Volunteer Leadership and Development Agent

Johnson County Extension's purpose is rooted in community engagement. We engage with people who live in Johnson County and share locally based information to improve our community. Recognizing that we cannot do this work alone, our volunteer programs are essential in expanding our reach, improving public awareness, and ensuring the delivery of educational services across the county.

This past year, our volunteers logged **1,446 hours** staffing educational tables at public events. These dedicated volunteers shared their enthusiasm and knowledge, giving Johnson County Extension the **ability to reach 160+ unique locations** across our county. The dedication and passion of our volunteers and staff **sharing their expertise in the communities where they live** make these events and programs possible.

By **partnering with local agencies and groups that share our goals, we meet community members where they are already gathered**, including at **farmers markets, city festivals, and community events**. Throughout the evenings and weekends of 2025, our volunteers were busy hosting educational, interactive displays on a variety of topics including pollinators, seasonal use of local produce, native plants, and more.



Map of outreach and program locations across Johnson County

Educational Outreach

- **1,446 hours** engaging with the community at public events
- **160+** locations throughout Johnson County
- **14,210 people reached in the community**

More than just sharing information, these **volunteers take the time to truly listen** to neighbors, **understand their unique challenges**, and **provide direct connections to resources** that help **improve the community where we live**. By being present and approachable, they successfully engaged with the community, which helps us improve awareness and utilization of Extension services.

Meeting Neighbors Where They Are



After meeting a resident at the Lenexa Farmers Market, Extension Master Food Volunteer Terry Sloan was able to connect her with helpful resources for her homebound mother. Moments like this demonstrate how the **personal, face-to-face connections made by volunteers can often accomplish more than digital communication alone.**

“Volunteering lets me meet all kinds of different people and feel connected to my community. I enjoy listening to understand their situation and sharing helpful resources,” says Patti Combs, Extension Master Naturalist.

Johnson County Extension continues our **commitment to enhancing the quality of life** for people who live in the community, and our **volunteers are essential to this mission.** We look forward to expanding engagement and strengthening partnerships that will help everyone who lives in Johnson County.

“I think the tabling that Johnson County Extension does is beneficial to the public. They love interactive pieces, whether it’s our Master Food Volunteers doing tasty demos with seasonal produce, or our Master Gardeners hosting hands-on activities that get kids curious about pollinators and excitedly asking questions.

My personal favorite, though, is at our Native Plant Sales - there are always so many great questions from people in the community who want to bring natives into their own gardens, and with the Naturalists onsite it’s incredibly helpful.”
- Hailey Tassone, Nature Recreation Supervisor at the City of Lenexa



Family and Community Wellness

By Joy Miller, Family and Community Wellness Agent

In 2025, our Medicare education initiative **delivered 11 comprehensive Medicare classes, reaching 327 community members and conducting 263 one-on-one Medicare counseling sessions across Johnson County.** These sessions provided guidance to Medicare beneficiaries navigating complex Medicare decisions, empowering participants with the knowledge needed to make informed choices about their health coverage. Medicare enrollment decisions are complicated with the potential for costly errors that affect both financial stability and access to health care. By partnering with [Johnson County Aging and Human Services](#) Johnson County K-State Extension expanded capacity in Medicare education and counseling to ensure Medicare beneficiaries, caregivers, and families could have access to unbiased, accurate, and

compassionate guidance when navigating Medicare options. This investment reduces confusion and stress, supports informed decision-making, and protects beneficiaries from preventable financial and health risks.

This year's success was made possible through strong collaborations with key community partners who share our commitment to supporting beneficiaries. [KU Turning Point](#), [JCPRD 50+ Program](#), [Blue Valley School District](#), [Central Resource Library](#) and [Olathe Public Library](#) provided welcoming spaces, promoted the classes, and ensured that participants could access unbiased, quality Medicare education close to home or work.

Johnson County K-State Extension and AHS Partnership Spotlight

Johnson County K-State Extension serves as a vital in kind partner through the **Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansans (SHICK)** grant administered by [Johnson County Aging and Human Services](#). This partnership strengthened our collective ability to connect Medicare beneficiaries, their families, and caregivers with trusted education, resources, and individualized support.

As an education partner, K-State Extension played a key role in expanding community access to Medicare information by:

- Supporting SHICK volunteers during presentations
- Assisting with participant questions during and after classes
- Mentoring new SHICK volunteers as they entered the program
- Providing ongoing guidance to volunteers as they navigate complex Medicare scenarios.



New to Medicare Class at Olathe Public Library

Johnson county residents saved
\$137,911 by
adjusting Medicare plans

Healthy Aging-Medicare Education Initiative

In partnership with [Johnson County Aging and Human Services](#) K-State Extension supported the [Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansans \(SHICK\) program](#) through education, volunteer mentoring, and direct participant assistance. A cornerstone of this initiative was the dedication of our Aging and Human Services and Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansas volunteers. Their expertise and generosity significantly enhanced the participants' experience. In 2025, 327 community members were reached in 11 Medicare education classes. **Twenty nine trained Johnson County Aging and Human Services SHICK-certified volunteers contributed a combined 64 hours** and a critical role in answering participant questions, clarifying complex Medicare topics, and providing individualized guidance during and after presentations. Their presence ensured that every participant received individualized attention and support.



30% of SHICK counseling in Johnson County was delivered by Johnson County Extension

Community Benefit and Looking Ahead

Participants **increased their understanding of Medicare options, enrollment timelines, and available resources**, as demonstrated by high engagement during classes, informed questions, and increased use of one-on-one counseling services. As a result, **participants took action** by comparing plan options, scheduling counseling appointments, and making informed Medicare enrollment decisions, reporting greater confidence and reduced stress during enrollment periods. By helping individuals avoid enrollment errors **the program supported financial protection and continuity of care** while ensuring access to **trusted, unbiased Medicare guidance**. Through expert instruction, strong community partnerships, and dedicated volunteers, this initiative addressed a **critical community need** and **strengthened local capacity** to support current and soon to be beneficiaries and caregivers. As demand continues to grow, Johnson County K-State Extension remains **committed to expanding access and partnerships**—laying the groundwork for broader education efforts that support residents at every stage of life.



4-H Youth Development

By Cyla Gardner and Lexi Ray, 4-H Youth Development Agents

In 2025, Johnson County 4-H continued to help youth build confidence, leadership skills, and **gain real-world experiences** while **bringing the community together**.

From school enrichment programs, partnerships with [Johnson County Park and Recreation District \(JCPRD\)](#), the [Stilwell Farmers Market](#), led by the [Blue River Wranglers 4-H Club](#). These programs create **opportunities for youth to learn, lead, and connect** in meaningful ways.

Partnerships with local schools and JCPRD allowed 4-H to **reach more than 6,500 youth** where they already spend their time. In classrooms, school enrichment programs such as chick embryology, butterfly gardens, and the mobile dairy classroom provided hands-on learning experiences to students within the Olathe, Blue Valley, and Shawnee Mission school districts as well as multiple private schools and home school networks. Camps and out-of-school programs through JCPRD extended learning into the community, giving kids a chance to explore environmental stewardship, health and wellness, and local food systems while **building teamwork and problem-solving skills**.

4-H Agents also provided Positive Youth Development training for JCPRD staff, centered around creating

inclusive environments, understanding developmental stages, managing group dynamics, and strengthening youth-adult communication.

Additionally, **458** youth and their families participated in traditional 4-H club programming. Traditional 4-H programming allows youth to participate in a community club and develop their sparks, passions and interests, and gain leadership experience in a safe environment with caring adults.

Through monthly meetings, project talks, county-wide activities, and volunteer work, youth and their families are always working to make the best better in Johnson County, gaining leadership experience and a safe environment to explore their sparks and interests.

One example is the Blue River Wranglers' 4-H Club and their leadership of the Stilwell Farmers Market.

"Something like magic happens at the corner of 199th and Metcalf every Tuesday night in the summer months," says volunteer Alicia Van Gotten.

Each Tuesday from mid-June through mid-September, youth transform a quiet parking lot into a lively **community gathering space** with more than 30 vendors selling local produce, handmade goods, and more.

In 2025, Johnson County 4-H had **458 4-H youth members** in **16 clubs**, and **171 registered adult volunteers**.



"The Stilwell Farmers Market has irrevocably changed me for the better and dare I say positively changed our community too. Creating a space where people can get together and see each other weekly, in a relaxed and convenient space, throughout the summer builds community." -Heather Bragg, Blue River Wranglers 4-H Club Leader

Strengthening Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement

Blue River Wranglers **youth take on leadership roles** every week such as welcoming vendors, helping with setup and takedown, and delivering water throughout the evening. These **responsibilities give hands-on experience** in communication, organization, and teamwork. The market also introduces families to 4-H through a club table where youth display projects, sell donation-based baked goods or crafts, and share what 4-H has meant to them. Many families first connected with 4-H through the market and later joined the club, drawn in by the welcoming atmosphere and the leadership opportunities.

Together, school enrichment, JCPRD programs, and the Stilwell Farmers Market show how **Johnson County 4-H blends learning with community engagement**. These programs help youth gain skills, confidence, and leadership experience, while also creating spaces where the community can come together and help youth thrive.

From leadership roles within collaborative projects, youth are growing into informed, confident, and civically engaged community members. Youth leadership programming supports county objectives for civic engagement and workforce readiness while complementing JoCo Unite initiatives focused on educational equity and lifelong learning.



Stilwell Farmers Market, led by the Blue River Wranglers 4-H Club

- Operated weekly from mid-June through mid-September
- Featured **30+ local vendors** each week
- Youth led vendor engagement, setup/takedown, and public interaction
- Provided entrepreneurial workforce development
- Served as an entry point for new families joining 4-H

The Market also supported access to local food and strengthened community connections, contributing to a healthier, more connected community.

"Seeing our youth members become more confident individuals through all these interactions and experiencing an overwhelmingly positive response to their special skills and talents is a gift to our families and the community at large."

-Alicia Van Gotten

Horticulture Ornamentals and Turf

By Markis Hill, Horticulture, Ornamentals and Turf Agent and Extension Master Gardener Leader

Prior to 2025, youth gardening programs varied by site and volunteer capacity, limiting scalability and long-term impact. At the same time, Johnson County schools, childcare providers, and community organizations increasingly requested consistent, research-based horticulture education to support STEM learning, healthy eating behaviors, and youth development.

In response, **Extension invested** in Junior Master Gardener (JMG) **leadership training and curriculum development to create a sustainable, countywide model.** Leaders attended the Junior Master Gardener Leadership Conference (Texas A&M) and **collaborated to develop a standardized three-year curriculum** with monthly lesson plans and materials. All resources were centralized on the Extension Master Gardener website to ensure consistent delivery and support both experienced and new volunteers.

Teaching young children about gardening **builds understanding of plant science, ecology, and food systems while fostering teamwork, communication, and healthy eating habits.** To cultivate future gardeners, Extension strengthened curriculum, expanded countywide outreach, and integrated youth engagement into the Master Gardener training program. Through the Junior Master Gardener program, we delivered school-based afterschool education and community outreach that engaged students, families, and educators across Johnson County.



Reach and Participation

- Over 2000 hours by Extension Master Gardener volunteers dedicated to youth education in 2025 (up 600+ hours from 2024)
- 130+ in-home child care providers trained through the USDA-approved [Grow It, Try It](#) program
- 300+ homeschool families reached through community-based horticulture education
- 9 additional 4-H horticulture programs delivered in collaboration with 4-H Extension Agents
- **7 Johnson County schools served**

Youth Development and Lifelong Learning

Increased Knowledge Youth participants **increased their understanding of plant science**, including plant parts, seed dispersal, plant growth, and basic horticultural practices through **hands-on lessons and applied activities**. Caregivers, educators, and volunteers gained increased knowledge and confidence in delivering gardening education using a **standardized, research-based curriculum**. Participant evaluations from childcare providers showed **strong intent to apply newly learned gardening concepts** within early childhood settings.

Health and Community Benefits Youth gardening education supported the development of healthy eating behaviors by increasing familiarity with fruits, vegetables, and food production. **Hands-on exposure** encouraged curiosity and willingness to try new foods, laying the foundation for healthier dietary choices over time. **Community partnerships expanded access** to science-based education while **strengthening connections** between Extension, schools, families, and youth organizations.

Long-Term Impact By strengthening curriculum consistency, volunteer capacity, and community partnerships, Extension has **positioned youth horticulture education for sustained growth**. These efforts cultivate future gardeners, informed consumers, and potential volunteers while supporting long-term community health, environmental literacy, and local food system awareness.



These successes are the result of a deliberate investment in volunteer education. Extension Master Gardener volunteers engage in continuous learning through advanced and monthly topic-specific trainings, leadership development, advisory board service, and the Extension hotline. This ongoing education strengthens volunteer expertise and ensures youth and community members receive trusted, research-based information.

“When I retired after 39 years in education, my biggest fear was that I would miss the mental stimulation that teaching brought on a daily basis... Through training, lesson development, and interaction with fellow EMGs, I have continued to learn and grow.”

— Susan Thacker, Extension Master Gardener, Class of 2022

Volunteers learn. Then they teach. This cycle of lifelong learning strengthens program quality, builds public trust, and improves quality of life across Johnson County.

Nutrition, Food Safety and Community Health

By Chelsea King, Nutrition, Food Safety and Community Health Agent and Extension Master Food Volunteer Leader

Improving the health and wellbeing of our community members starts with **innovative and strategic partnerships**. These partnerships **leverage existing community infrastructure** to deliver accessible, engaging, and impactful wellness programming.

Park and Recreation districts are uniquely positioned to support the health and wellbeing of community members. With established trust in the community, accessible facilities, and a **mission centered on enhancing quality of life**, they serve as ideal partners for health-focused programming.

Their reach extends across age groups and demographics, making them a **powerful ally** in addressing health disparities and promoting wellness and nutrition education. Partnering with our local Park and Recreation districts has enabled us to reach every corner of our county.

Participants who attend our classes at local Park and Recreation centers have the **opportunity to socialize with peers, learn new information, try new recipes or foods, and build confidence** in their ability to make behavioral changes. Our programs consistently received **very good to excellent ratings from participants** and resonated with our audience. Based on our evaluations, we can see that our programs have a positive impact on individual knowledge and motivation for behavior change.

This program supports Johnson County goals for improved public health and equitable access to nutritious foods, while advancing JoCo Unite initiatives that promote healthy, safe communities and empower residents to make informed dietary choices. By meeting residents where they are, **Extension reduces barriers to information, fosters social connection, and empowers behavior change** that benefits both individual and community health.

Participant Outcomes based on Evaluation Data

- Greater intention to add fruits and vegetables to diets.
- More ideas for healthy cooking.
- Improved confidence in reading food labels.
- Increased intention to reduce sugar intake.
- Participants reported learning something new in every class.

Building Healthier Communities Through Partnerships

Knowledge is the first step toward making healthier choices, but confidence and practical skills are what make those choices stick. Extension's nutrition, culinary, and food safety education **reaches residents of all ages**—whether in summer Parks & Recreation programs, community events, or group classes. Our nutrition and culinary classes cover a wide range of topics, from the basics of nutrition to using an air fryer, preserving food, eating throughout the life cycle, current dietary guidelines, and promoting good physical and mental health, among others.



Our partnership with local Parks and Recreation departments has proven to be a key strategy in supporting community health and nutrition education. By combining accessible community spaces with expert-led, engaging programming, we've been able to reach diverse populations across the county and deliver meaningful impact. The positive feedback and behavioral intentions reported by participants highlight the importance of continued collaboration. As we look ahead to 2026, we remain committed to expanding these partnerships and building on our success to create healthier, more informed, and more connected communities.

In 2025, with the support of **Extension Master Food Volunteers**, we provided **25** classes, reaching **400** participants, and participated in **6** community outreach events, reaching **135** community members, and educated over **100** children!

Local Food Systems

In 2025, Extension hosted its first Johnson County Local Food Fellow, Andie-Kate White, a K-State Urban Food Systems graduate student funded through the Kansas Local Foods program. The fellowship focused on inventorying community gardens and food pantries across the county to better understand their needs and identify opportunities for collaboration.

Through this work, four primary areas of need were identified: **financial support, education, volunteer capacity, and avenues for distributing excess produce.**

These findings are shaping new Extension initiatives in 2026, including the launch of a Johnson County Local Foods webpage and the development of a communication and resource-sharing network connecting community garden managers and food pantries.

“By sharing resources and connecting community stakeholders, the Local Food Fellows program played an active role in increasing food access within the local food system.”

— Andie-Kate White, Johnson County Local Food Fellow



Why Community Food Systems Matter

Food access challenges continue to grow locally and nationwide. Research conducted in 2025 underscores the importance of strengthening local food systems and reducing barriers to fresh, healthy food.

- Food insecurity in Johnson County increased by **more than 60%** between 2021 and 2023, **affecting over 56,000 residents.***
- Residents earning **less than \$35,000** annually were nearly **half as likely to eat vegetables** daily compared to higher-income residents.**
- In a [2023 Community Health Assessment](#) conducted by JCDHE, community members identified affordable, healthy food as **both highly important and difficult to access.**
- An estimated **33 million pounds of edible food go to waste annually** in Johnson County.***

*(Feeding America, 2025)

** (Padya, 2021, pg. 39)

*** (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023)

Growing Skills Where People Live

Fresh produce plays a critical role in food pantry offerings, but access alone does not guarantee impact. Pantry partners consistently share that many families have had limited exposure to fresh fruits and vegetables, shaped by affordability, availability, and lifelong food habits. Produce can feel unfamiliar. Some items require preparation knowledge or are best used as ingredients rather than standalone foods. Without guidance, even nutritious food can feel intimidating. That is where Extension's work becomes transformative.

By pairing food access with education—through garden-based learning, nutrition partnerships, and hands-on demonstration, **Extension helps close the gap between receiving fresh food and confidently using it.** Families are not simply given produce; they are given the opportunity to understand it, prepare it, and incorporate it into daily life.

This philosophy connects and strengthens multiple Extension partnerships across Johnson County.

Through collaboration with Johnson County Park and Recreation District (JCPRD), nutrition education programs reinforce practical cooking skills and healthy meal preparation strategies. At the same time, Anthony's Food Forest and Community Garden Education initiatives expand residents' ability to grow their own food, increasing both availability and confidence from seed to table. **Together, these efforts ensure that fresh produce is not only distributed—but understood, valued, and enjoyed.**

Introducing JoCo EATS: A Unified Approach

In 2025, Extension further strengthened these connections through the re-launch of JoCo EATS, a **countywide initiative designed to unify food production, nutrition education, and food access under one collaborative framework.**

By bringing these efforts together, JoCo EATS **creates a clearer pathway from growing food, to preparing food, to sharing food.** It reinforces a simple but powerful idea: food access and food literacy must work hand in hand.

Where one program grows the food, another teaches how to prepare it. Where one partner distributes fresh produce, another builds confidence to use it. **JoCo EATS provides the shared platform that connects these efforts, strengthening communication, increasing visibility, and expanding impact.**



www.jocoeats.org

Horticulture, Small Farms

By Anthony Reardon, Horticulture Small Farms

Using the principles of natural ecosystems to work with nature rather than against it guided two of Johnson County K-State Extension's collaborative efforts in 2025. **Through strategic partnerships and volunteer leadership, Extension advanced two complementary tiers of food production: long-term ecological systems at Johnson County Community College and immediate, neighborhood-level production through community gardens across the county.** Together, these initiatives show how strong partnerships can expand both ecological resilience and community food access, strengthening local food systems while creating opportunities for public learning.

One of Extension's newest collaborations, the JCCC Food Forest, reflects a systems-based approach to food production rooted in permaculture principles. In 2025, Extension Master Gardeners and Extension Master Naturalists partnered for the first time on a joint project. Working alongside [Johnson County Community College](#), and the college sustainable agriculture programs to rejuvenate and expand a campus food forest originally initiated in 2015 by former student Megan Gladbach.

Their work followed an ambitious, long-term plan. Bioswales were restructured to demonstrate water catchment principles, and pathways were constructed to guide visitors through the display area. Existing plant life was identified and labeled, while established planting areas were weeded and rejuvenated. The team also designated themed "guilds" with attached learning objectives and incorporated them into a master planting plan. Installation of plant material began as part of a multi-phased effort that will continue to expand the garden over several years.

By embracing the ecological relationships among soil organisms, roots, canopy layers, and plant communities, **the project demonstrates how resilient food systems develop over time.** Soil microbiomes must rebuild, root systems establish, and beneficial plant relationships mature.

Public education remains central to the effort. As canopy, understory, shrubs, herbaceous plants, groundcovers, and vines continue to develop, **the site functions as a living classroom**, illustrating how food production can support environmental stewardship while helping communities better understand the ecological foundations of resilient food systems.



Layer by Layer: Building a Stronger Local Food System

While the Food Forest models long-term ecological design, Extension's Community Garden Outreach Series focused on strengthening immediate food production where residents already grow food.

With support from Extension Master Gardeners, horticulture agents delivered monthly, in-person technical support directly within neighborhood gardens, partnering with Lone Elm Community Garden, God's Garden Community Garden, and Prairie Village Community Garden.

The outreach model recognized that many participating gardeners are experienced growers. Rather than just introductory instruction, sessions provided research-based guidance, advanced troubleshooting, and collaborative problem-solving tailored to real-time seasonal challenges. Topics such as soil health, irrigation efficiency, pest management, and space optimization were addressed in ways that allowed gardeners to immediately refine their practices.

By bringing expertise into the garden environment, Extension helped growers refine practices, increase efficiency, and improve yields. Participants reported greater confidence in addressing production challenges and frequently requested individualized follow-up consultations. As a result, **gardens strengthened their capacity to produce fresh food for participating households—helping offset grocery costs while reinforcing neighborhood food resilience.**

From a developing food forest canopy to raised beds in neighborhood plots, **these partnerships illustrate how Extension connects people, land, and knowledge—building resilient food systems layer by layer.**



Jen Stefanchik, EMG, speaks with community members at Lone Elm Community Garden about garden maintenance techniques.

A Shared Foundation: Partnerships that Multiply Impact

Though different in scale and timeline, both initiatives share common elements:

- **Cross-program volunteer collaboration**
- **Strategic institutional partnerships**
- **Applied, research-based horticulture**
- **A commitment to working with natural systems**
- **Education embedded within real-world food production**

Natural Resources

By Amy Keigher, Natural Resources Agent, Extension Master Naturalists Leader

Healthy communities depend on healthy ecosystems. Extension's natural resources education and community stewardship programs support County priorities for environmental health, sustainable land use, and conservation, while contributing to JoCo Unite initiatives aimed at environmental awareness, ecological resilience, and long-term sustainability. Johnson County extension **empowers residents** to understand, care for, and protect the land, water, and wildlife that sustain Johnson County. Through hands-on education, invasive species management, and community science initiatives, **volunteers and partners contribute to measurable improvements** in environmental health. These efforts, often conducted **in partnership with JCPRD, municipal agencies, and local organizations**, expand public understanding of sustainable land stewardship and foster long-term conservation practices that benefit both people and nature.

In 2025, **222** Extension Master Naturalists volunteered over **12,862** hours to community educational projects. This is an **increase of over 3,300 hours** from last year's **9,500**.



Piles of honeysuckle removed from the area behind the Sunset Government Building



Tackling Invasive Species & More Through Collaboration

Johnson County Government/Extension Partnership

One collaborative Extension project in particular is showing county residents what a Northeast Kansas woodland should look like. Located behind the Johnson County Sunset Building, the Sunset Nature Trail is a demonstration woodland that shows visitors the process of woodland restoration. In collaboration with Johnson County Facilities, the woodland has been transformed into an educational space for residents to use. While invasive species removal is ongoing, much of the area has been cleared and replanted with natives.

Along with hard labor, we have increased our efforts in educating the public on invasive species. **In 2025, we attended over 20 community events** in an effort **to provide residents with the tools and resources they need to keep invasive species from flourishing** on their property. Extension-led presentations and guided hikes were also offered throughout the year at Ernie Miller Nature Center and other central locations to educate on invasive species removal.

At one such class, an attendee remarked, *"I knew invasives were bad, but I didn't know how to get rid of them. I'm going home to work on my yard right now!"*

It is this kind of behavior change that dramatically supports the county's land management goals.

Over **3,500** of EMN hours were specific to invasive species removal. This is equivalent to over **\$107,380.00** of labor.

Through collaboration, volunteer engagement, and education, Johnson County is making meaningful progress in addressing complex natural resource challenges that no single organization could tackle alone. **The combined efforts of K-State University Extension, Extension Master Naturalist volunteers, county departments, and community partners demonstrate the power of shared responsibility in protecting local ecosystems.** By restoring habitats, reducing invasive species, and empowering residents with knowledge and tools, these **partnerships are building healthier parks, more resilient landscapes, and a stronger connection between people and the natural resources that sustain the county.**

Continued investment in collaboration and education will be essential to ensuring that Johnson County's natural areas remain vibrant and thriving in 2026 and beyond.





**2025 Extension Business
Appreciation Award
AdventHealth Community
Investment**

**Sondra Wallace
Director of Community
Investment**

**2025 Extension Individual
Appreciation Award
Susie Mize**

**For effective and
inspiring leadership
and service in support
of Extension work in
Kansas**



K-State Extension, Johnson County, is an organization of dedicated, passionate, hardworking staff who **collaborate and connect** people with university supported education, resources, and services - through volunteers, community, and partner organizations.



In partnership together

11811 South Sunset Drive
Suite 1500
Olathe, Kansas 66061
913-715-7000



johnson.k-state.edu



K-State Extension is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services, and activities. Program information may be available in languages other than English. Reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, including alternative means for communication (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, and American Sign Language) may be requested by contacting the event contact, our main office, or the event's program leader four weeks prior to the start of the event at 913-715-7000. Please see the full Johnson County staff list for detailed contact information. Requests received after the program's deadline dates will be honored when it is feasible to do so. Language access services, such as interpretation or translation of vital information, will be provided free of charge to individuals with limited English proficiency upon request.