MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension

CASS COUNTY ANNUAL REPORT 2025



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Our Staff:

- Terri Boulanger, Secretary
- Hilary Hunt, 4-H Program Coordinator
- Nora Lee, SNAP-Ed Community Nutrition Instructor



Message from Kai Gritter, Interim District Director

In 2025, MSU Extension in Cass County delivered impactful education through youth development, agriculture, and community programming. Expanded 4-H engagement, fair activities, and school and library partnerships reflected strong local collaboration. We thank Cass County partners and stakeholders for their continued support.

Impact in Cass County

1,401 adult participants from the County attended programs

616 4-H Enrolled Youth

169 Client Consultations

21 'Ask Extension' Questions Answered

Residents participated in **281** programs (across the State) and **72** programs (hosted in County)

183 MSU Extension Volunteers

79 Participants in County agriculture programs

18 County partnerships

Health & Nutrition: Nora Lee, Community Nutrition Instructor



Through education, outreach, and evidence-based resources, MSU Extension helped individuals and families take charge of their health and well-being. From older adults staying active, to parents raising healthy eaters, our practical solutions helped create lasting impact!

In 2025, MSU Extension delivered **39 nutrition programs** to **545 Cass County residents**. This was done in partnership with **18 community groups** and **organizations** including local schools, food banks, early care facilities, faith-based groups, senior housing, and the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi.

At Sister Lakes Elementary School, Nutrition Instructor, **Nora Lee** taught the popular *Show Me Nutrition* class to 4th graders. During a lesson review, one student rose his hand and exclaimed, "Vitamin C is good!" He'd recently had a cold and asked his mother for oranges to feel better.

Special Note: For over 30 years, MSU Extension SNAP-Ed staff delivered evidence-based, hands-on nutrition and physical activity learning opportunities that empowered youth and adults to build healthy eating habits and be more active on a limited budget. Following a federal decision to end funding, the program was discontinued after July 4, 2025.

Did You Know?

MSU Extension has an innovative referral system (extension.msu.edu/healthprograms) that connects people to the following FREE online health programs:

- **Tai Chi for Arthritis and Falls Prevention**
- **A Matter of Balance**
- **Mindfulness for Better Living**
- **Stress Less with Mindfulness**
- **RELAX: Alternatives to Anger**
- **Chronic Disease/Pain/Diabetes PATH**
- **Walk with Ease**
- **Sleep Education for Everyone (SLEEP)**
- **Mindfulness for Better Sleep**
- **Tai Chi for Better Sleep**

Get Involved & Learn More!

Visit our Food and Health website (canr.msu.edu/food_health)

Subscribe to our curated email news digests (bit.ly/MSUEdigest) **customized to your exact interests**
Choose from 75+ topics!

Need a healthy recipe for dinner tonight?
Explore recipes by scanning the QR code

Children & Youth: Hilary Hunt, 4-H Program Coordinator



Children and families continue to benefit from a variety of programs, in partnership with dedicated 4-H volunteers and MSU Extension's 4-H Program Coordinator (PC), Hilary Hunt (pictured left).
In 2025, Hilary served the Cass County youth and community in multiple ways by providing:





Volunteer Management
- Supporting 183 active volunteers (178 Gold and 5 Silver)
- Of note, 13 new volunteers joined the team in 2025!

4-H Club Support
- Working with 19 active 4-H Clubs
- Assisting with leadership transitions, team building, and conflict resolution
- Helping launch two new 4-H SPIN Clubs – *Cat Showmanship* (led by an adult volunteer and 4-H youth member), and *Get Hooked on Crochet* led by a volunteer and Hilary (4-H PC)
- Supporting two advisory councils - Cass County's 4-H Leaders' Association and the Horse Leaders' Association



Youth Education in PARTNERSHIP with multiple organizations, including:



- **Cass County Parks -** Coordinating 4-H participation in the Harvest Fest's *Trunk-n-Treat*, organizing trunks, and recruiting volunteers to host a 4-H information booth.
- **Cassopolis High/Middle School** for the 2025 *Embryology Program,* teaching agriculture and zoology classes on egg incubation, chick development, genetics, and animal care.
- **Cass District Library -** collaborating for the Summer Reading Program (*Color My World*) and for the 2025 Kiddie's Day at the Cass County Fair.
- **Cass County Fair Association** - represented 4-H at Fair Board meetings, coordinated Youth Still Exhibit Judging Day, ribbons/awards, and staffed the youth office during fair week to support superintendents, exhibitors, and shows.

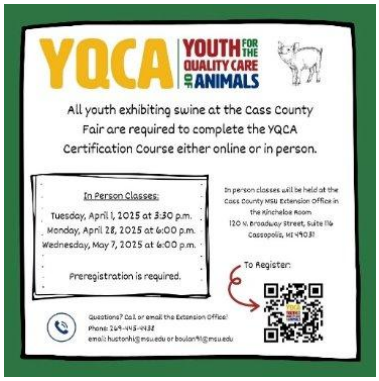






Children & Youth: Hilary Hunt, 4-H Program Coordinator

Additional 4-H Programs & Activities



- **YQCA Certification** – Certified instructor; led trainings designed for youth exhibiting swine but open to all youth.
- **Fair Communication** – Shared updates through Clover Newsletter; email, and social media leading up to fair week.
- **New Partnerships** – Worked with Cass County Tractor Pullers Association to plan a Farm Safety Course for youth.
- **4-H Summer Camp** – Collaborative overnight camp with Branch and St. Joseph Counties; recruited youth counselors/volunteers; trained counselors; chaperoned and delivered programming.
- **4-H Exploration Days** – Promoted the event; handled registration and logistics; recruited chaperones; led orientation and served as staff/chaperone. Also taught a Mindfulness session!
- **4-H Winterfest** – Recruited volunteers; promoted event; instructed sessions and served as a chaperone.
- **Still Exhibit Workshops** – Planned, promoted and instructed youth workshops with the Leaders' Association (topics included barn quilts, terrariums, cake decorating, entomology, and crafts).
- **To Go Kits**– Developed the "*Sold! Make the Most at Your Fair Auction*" kit with marketing lessons, thank-you materials, and entrepreneurship activities. Also developed *4-H Friendship Bracelet* Kits for 4-H Clubs.





Helping youth find their SPARK!

*FYI: A total of **1,460 Cass County youth participants** benefited from MSU Extension programs in 2025!*





Children & Youth: Janice Zerbe, 4-H Educator

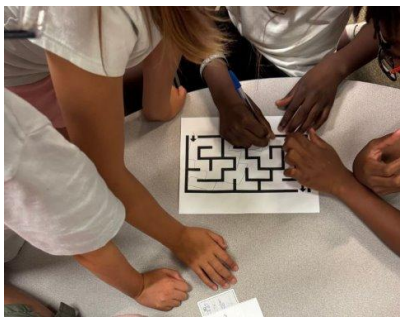


Janice Zerbe coordinated an **Entrepreneurship Camp** in partnership with Southwestern Michigan College (SMC) in August. A total of 27 youth attended (**12** from Cass County) to learn about entrepreneurship best practices:

- Youth completed self-assessments to determine their *Real Colors* and entrepreneurship skills.
- They created business names, logos, flyers, and practiced with a "Build Business of Cards" activity.
- The students visited local entrepreneurs and attended an SMC marketing presentation, then developed products and marketing materials, including business pitches.
- Finally, youth sold their products, raising a **record $1,426.25,** which they chose to donate to the **Dowagiac Fire Department!**

Between April and May, **Janice Zerbe** taught job skills through ice breakers to **over 90** 9th and 10th grade students at:

- Cassopolis Public Schools
- Marcellus Community Schools
- Volinia Outcomes School
- Dowagiac Union High School



Session components included:

Hands-on learning: Ice breakers were used to simulate workplace challenges and teach job skills through active participation.

Blindfolded Paper Maze: Students practiced communication and listening, learning that clear, focused instructions improve task success.

Group Juggle: Students built teamwork and strategy skills by passing balls in a structured pattern, reinforcing the importance of planning and communication.

For additional information on the topic, explore Janice's article at
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/using-ice-breakers-to-teach-job-skills

Community, Food & Environment:

MSU Extension educators work with businesses, local and tribal governments, and communities of all sizes to improve local economies and the lives of Michigan residents. Extension educators also provide programming aimed at protecting and sustainably managing our state's natural resources. In 2025, our Government & Community Vitality team provided the following trainings in Cass County:

Governing Essentials for local elected and appointed officials
- At the Cass County Administrative Building (2/12/25) - attended by 19.
- With the Village of Marcellus (10/7/25) – attended by 21.

Topics included Navigating the Open Meetings Act (OMA); Mastering Parliamentary Procedure with Robert's Rules of Order; The Components of Extraordinary Governance. Participants were grateful for the information shared and provided the following feedback:

"Amending our bylaws to reflect the derivation of Robert's Rules"

"The instructor provided several resources for further information, and I appreciated that along with his knowledge. Thank you, again."

Cass County Board of Commissioners Workshop
- At the Cass County Administrative Building (4/22/25) – attended by 15.

Topics mirrored the Governing Essentials training and included Budgeting, with a focus on reading financial reports, understanding the Headlee Amendment, and knowing what to expect during budget season.

New Developments!

Cass County's **Volinia Township** website now features MSU Extension land use resources (www.voliniatownship.gov/home/msu-extension-resources) to help residents engage in zoning and local government decisions. These include:

- Planning and Zoning Primer
- How to Influence Zoning Decisions
- How to Participate in the Zoning Process for Zoning Amendments (including legislative Planned Unit Developments)
- How to Participate in the Zoning Process for Appeals & Variances
- How to Participate in the Zoning Process for Special Use Permits

Tyler Augst, Extension Educator, suggested linking these tools after well-attended planning commission meetings.

****New for 2026****The **Governing Essentials** Webinar Series (canr.msu.edu/outreach/events) now includes **Ethical Public Service!**

Agriculture and Agribusiness:

Michigan State University (MSU) Extension educators work with farms of all sizes to positively impact individual farming operations. When individual operations do well, their success helps to fuel state and local economies. In 2025, Agriculture Educators **facilitated 11 sessions** to **79 Cass County residents.**

Beth Ferry, Swine Educator, conducted **seven** Pork Quality Assurance (PQA) Site Assessments to ensure that pig farms adhere to high standards of animal care and well-being. Evaluations involve:

- **Assessment** - A PQA Plus Advisor reviews records, facilities, equipment, and animal care practices
- **Evaluation Criteria** - Checks compliance with food safety, animal well-being, environmental stewardship, worker safety, public health, and community standards.
- **Site Status -** Farms meeting standards earn *PQA Plus certification.*

Extension Educators based throughout Southwest Michigan collaborated to provide Crop and Pest Management Update Meetings for 32 participants **(19 from Cass County).**
Sessions addressed:

- The latest recommendations for managing weeds, diseases, insects, and nematodes
- Sudden death syndrome in Soybeans
- Water efficiency and irrigation, and more!

Participants received a copy of the updated bulletin E-434 "Weed Control Guide for Field Crops, "**which brings statewide research to southwest Michigan and puts it in the local perspective for conditions unique to the growers in our region.**



In April, **Paola Bacigalupo Sanguesa delivered three trainings in Spanish to 10 Cass County workers** at the Sparks Cedarlee Farms. The training session focused on cow health and care, including milking routines, dry cow and maternity care, mastitis prevention, down cow care, animal handling, and colostrum management and feeding.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORT!



MSU Extension partnered with USDA, with support from GreenStone Farm Credit Services, to launch the **Beginning Farmer Resource and Decision-Making Guide**. The guide offers research-based education and decision tools across production and business topics, helping new and aspiring farmers plan, manage, and grow successful farm operations. The resource guide is now available for FREE download at MSU Extension's **Beginning Farmer** website! (canr.msu.edu/beginning-farmer)

MSU Extension's Statewide Impact

Helping people improve their lives by bringing the vast knowledge and resources of Michigan State University directly to individuals, communities and businesses.

$244.2 billion annual impact of food and agriculture on Michigan's economy

206,346,096 contacts through social media, web activity, e-newsletters, and handouts

133,301 total youth participants

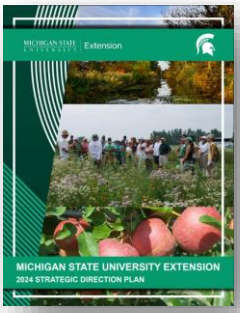
13,661 total volunteers

11,944 people participated in Food Safety programs including ServSafe®

72,517 Participants in Community, Food and Environment Programs

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENER VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

1,998 Extension Master Gardeners (EMG) spent 119,864 hours helping individuals and communities grow



MSU Extension recently completed a comprehensive Strategic Direction Plan, which illustrates our vision for the future, outlining strengths to build on and opportunities to embrace. To read the full report, go to canr.msu.edu/od/directors_office/strategic-direction or scan the QR code.

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