



Southern Illinois University System
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INSTITUTE FOR RURAL HEALTH & OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

JULY - OCTOBER 2025

Welcome to the IRH & OCE Newsletter

Whether you've partnered with us before or are just getting to know us - welcome! You're reading the first issue of the IRH-OCE Newsletter, a joint publication of the SIU System Institute for Rural Health (IRH) and the Office of Community Engagement (OCE). Together, we are working to connect university resources with community priorities across central and southern Illinois - from Springfield to Mounds.

The SIU School of Medicine, SIU Carbondale, and SIU Edwardsville campuses all have long histories of developing and delivering high-quality programs for rural populations. With the creation of the Institute for Rural Health, approved by the SIU Board of Trustees and housed within the President's Office, we are building on that history by elevating our role as a statewide leader in rural health research, education, service, and policy development. IRH works across campuses and communities to increase rural cultural competence, improve health equity, and create sustainable programs that are rooted in the lived experiences of the people we serve.

The Office of Community Engagement, established in 2021, brings the strengths of the SIU System into direct partnership with communities, using tools like data, strategic planning, and student-powered research to address pressing social and economic challenges. We focus on trust, shared ownership, and transparency, and on using data for good.

This newsletter is part of our commitment to shared communication and collaboration. In each issue, you'll find updates from the field, stories of partnership, resources, and opportunities for deeper engagement. You'll also meet the students, community leaders, and institutional partners who make this work not only possible, but powerful.

Thank you for being part of this growing network of rural health champions, community advocates, and bridge-builders.

In partnership,
The IRH-OCE Team



<https://siusystem.edu/community-engagement/>



OCE at The Wedge:

Where Community Voices Shape Community Solutions

Each month, the OCE hosts a Community Collaboration Lab at The Wedge in Alton, a civic gathering where neighbors, community leaders, and university partners co-create local solutions to local challenges.

In May, our inaugural lab, “Alton by the Numbers: Finding Strengths, Sparking Solutions,” used recent data on housing, health, and opportunity to spark ideas rooted in Alton’s existing assets. Together, participants identified ways to leverage community strengths while confronting persistent barriers to well-being.

In June, the lab focused on digital access in Alton. Neighbors and local leaders came together to share stories, review broadband data, and identify strategies to improve equitable digital access across the community. The conversation emphasized real-life experiences with connectivity highlighting gaps that disproportionately affect older adults, job seekers, and students.

The May and June labs were grounded in data reports prepared by Constance Eze, a graduate research assistant with OCE. Constance is pursuing a Master’s Degree in Biological Sciences at SIUE and her research explores community-level dietary habits and chronic disease outcomes in Alton. Through her work with OCE, she leads data collection, analysis, needs assessments, and reporting -- turning raw numbers into accessible insights that guide community dialogue and action.

In July, we welcomed Dr. Meg Smith, interim director of the [SIUE IRIS Center](#), to lead the session “Putting Ourselves on the Map: Data, Bias, and the Stories We Tell.” The lab examined how everyday tools like maps and spreadsheets often reflect hidden biases in who is seen, heard, or valued. Participants explored community-based digital storytelling and contributed to a growing community map that uplifts local knowledge and identity across the Metro East. That map will continue to evolve in future labs as more voices and experiences are added.



The Wedge in Alton

 **Wednesday, August 13, 2025**

 **3:00 – 4:30 P.M.**

 **The Wedge, 620 E Broadway, Alton, IL**

 **Topic: Making Public Safety Data Work for Communities**

 **Facilitator: Dr. Dennis Mares, Professor of Criminal Justice Studies and
Director of the Center for Crime Science and Violence Prevention, SIUE**

Join us as we welcome Dr. Dennis Mares to share how his team is transforming complex public safety data into tools that are accessible, transparent, and usable by both the public and local agencies. From a public-facing dashboard to an internal analytics tool for police departments, Dr. Mares will show how practical, no-cost solutions can make data more actionable—especially for communities with limited technical resources. Come see how technology, research, and community needs intersect to build safer, smarter neighborhoods. For more information, contact Brian Bray at brian.bray@siue.edu.

 Free and open to the public | siusystem.edu/community-engagement

Meet the IRH and OCE TEAM

Jeff Franklin, Director, Institute for Rural Health

Jeff has more than 18 years of professional experience in the areas of coordinated school health education, bullying prevention, social and emotional learning, and youth development. He is a certified Master Trainer for Coordinated Approach to Child Health and the Michigan Model for Coordinated School Health Education, and has a Master's Degree in Education. Prior to joining the staff of the Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development as the Illinois Delta Network Project Coordinator, he worked as an educator for the University of Illinois Extension and also served as an elementary school health educator.

Connie Frey Spurlock, Director, Office of Community Engagement

Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock is a sociologist committed to dismantling hierarchies of oppression and building in their place flourishing relationships. Her work focuses on community-identified goals and leveraging SIU System resources for the benefit of southern Illinois communities. Her dedication to community engagement is reflected in an extensive portfolio of grant-funded projects. Since 2017, Frey Spurlock has been principal or co-investigator on almost \$9 million in external funding for transdisciplinary projects such as the "Broadband Regional Engagement for Adoption and Digital Equity," "Integrating Hydrology and Social Science for Community Resiliency against Flooding Hazards," and the "Partners for Re-entry Opportunities in Workforce Development" grants. Frey Spurlock earned her PhD in sociology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Brian Bray, Program Coordinator

Brian, who earned a Bachelor of Arts from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and a Master of Social Work from the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, has worked in nonprofit administration throughout his career. He has coordinated programs and services in public health, the arts, and higher education. As a case manager at the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, Brian coordinated health and social services for clients living with HIV disease in rural areas in central Illinois. At the St. Louis Holocaust Museum and Learning Center, he developed and coordinated community programs to teach the history and lessons of the Holocaust. For the past 10 years, Brian has worked in higher education, coordinating academic conferences and community programs. In various capacities, he has successfully forged community partnerships, coordinated public programs, and managed innovative projects.

Leslie Brock, Program Coordinator

Leslie has worked in community outreach and education throughout her career with the SIU System. She started her career at SIUC as an event and conference coordinator, where she managed many campus and community programs. In her most recent role as assistant director in the SIUE Office of Educational Outreach, she developed and managed a variety of community programs, focusing on personal growth and workforce development opportunities. Leslie is committed to working with communities to find solutions to address their needs. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from Eastern Illinois University, a Master of Educational Psychology in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from SIUC, and a Master of Business Administration from SIUE.

Cindy Scarsdale, Administrative Aide

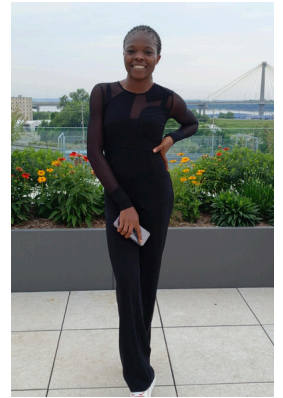
Cindy is a lifelong resident of the same southern Illinois town where her grandfather, great-grandfather and great-uncles mined coal. As a dedicated community volunteer, she has found inspiration in the character of George Bailey. She firmly believes that just one or two people working together for a common cause can be agents of positive change that have a profound impact. Her professional career has included roles as a radio news reporter and editor, newspaper copy editor, ballroom manager, accounting assistant, and small business employee. She has spent 25 years working in higher education on the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville campus (her alma mater), most recently focusing on development/advancement, donor relations, student scholarships, and budget management.



Spotlight: Confidence Ikpe

Confidence Ikpe is a graduate student in Environmental Sciences at SIUE. She began working with OCE in January 2024 and was to complete her graduate program requirements in July 2025.

Her first assignment was serving as the research assistant for the Metro East Environmental Justice Academy in East St. Louis, a 10-month program co-sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, SIUE, and the East St. Louis Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. The Academy brought together emerging leaders from across the Metro East to build skills in community-driven environmental action.



Confidence Ikpe

Confidence played a key role in supporting the effort by coordinating logistics, developing materials, and conducting research that grounded the Academy's sessions in data and local context. Her behind-the-scenes work helped ensure that the Academy's conversations were informed, inclusive, and focused on real-world solutions.

Since then, she has gone on to contribute to several OCE initiatives, including the American Bottom Communities project and AEG East St. Louis Stakeholder Challenge, where her work in grant writing, project reviews, and environmental justice engagement has made a lasting impact.

"Working with OCE has been transformative," Confidence shared. "It's more than just research—it's being part of a team that listens to communities and builds real partnerships to solve real problems. I've learned how to use data in ways that are grounded in trust, equity, and impact."

She brings curiosity, discipline, and a deep commitment to service to every project she joins. Her work reflects the best of OCE's mission: to connect student talent with community-identified priorities across the region.

Program Spotlight: Certified Recovery Support Specialists (CRSS)

The Certified Recovery Support Specialist (CRSS) Program, led by the SIU System Institute for Rural Health, offers no-cost training for individuals in mental health or substance use recovery who want to support others on their journey. Launched in May 2024, the program builds a rural behavioral health workforce by combining classroom instruction with real-world internships at recovery-focused organizations across southern Illinois. Participants receive wraparound support, like help with tuition, transportation, and technology—to ensure they can complete certification and succeed in the field.

Developed in partnership with the SIU Institute for Rural Health and funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services, this effort strengthens the region's capacity to deliver care rooted in trust, lived experience, and resilience. The CRSS Program reflects IRH's commitment to addressing workforce gaps, improving access to behavioral health services, and advancing equity in rural communities.

📌 Learn more: siumed.edu/crhssd/crss

✉ Contact: CRHSSD@siumed.edu

