



Southern Illinois University System
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IRH & OCE NEWSLETTER

INSTITUTE FOR RURAL HEALTH &
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Institute for Rural Health Appoints Dr. Abi Eilerman as New Director

Following a national search, the Southern Illinois University's (SIU) Institute for Rural Health is pleased to welcome Dr. Abigail (Abi) Eilerman as its new director. Dr. Eilerman earned her Doctor of Pharmacy degree from the Southern Illinois University School of Pharmacy in 2013 and began her career as a pharmacist with Walgreen's Pharmacy in Jacksonville, IL. In 2016, she was promoted to pharmacy manager of the Walgreen's Pharmacy in Maryville, IL and then opened and managed a Walgreen's Specialty Pharmacy in Springfield, IL.



Dr. Abigail Eilerman

In 2020, Dr. Eilerman joined the SIU School of Dental Medicine in Alton as an Assistant Professor and section head of pharmacology. During her tenure, she served as chair of both the Research Committee and the Faculty Assembly, and as a member of the Admissions Committee. In her clinical practice, Dr. Eilerman worked as a specialty pharmacist with Walgreen's Specialty Pharmacy and as a pharmacist with the Washington University School of Medicine's Division of Infectious Diseases in St. Louis, MO.

Throughout her career, Dr. Eilerman has been committed to helping others through community service. She has served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Illinois Rural Health Association, mentored students at the SIU School of Pharmacy, volunteered with the American Cancer Society, and volunteers with the Alton Boys and Girls Club. As an advocate for patients, Dr. Eilerman is committed to pursuing collaborative opportunities within the region and working in partnership with organizations and providers to advocate for increased access to health care for residents and educational resources for health care providers.

"On behalf of the SIU System, we are excited to have Dr. Eilerman serve as the next director of the Institute for Rural Health," said Dr. Gireesh Gupshup, SIU Vice President for Academic Innovation, Planning and Partnerships. "With her experience as a specialty pharmacist, section head of pharmacology at the SIU School of Dental Medicine, significant community-based leadership, and passion for rural health improvement, we are confident that her leadership will help the IRH contribute significantly to the rural health ecosystem in Illinois"



OCE Partners with The Springfield Project

The Southern Illinois University System and The Springfield Project (TSP) have established a long-term partnership designed to expand education, workforce, entrepreneurship, research, and community development opportunities for Springfield, IL residents. The partnership, announced during the July 9 SIU Board of Trustees meeting, launches what the organizations are calling the Springfield Model for Community-Led Change, a framework for aligning university resources with community priorities identified by residents, neighborhood leaders, local organizations, and community partners. Rather than focusing on one project or program, the agreement creates a lasting structure for shared planning, resource alignment, community-informed action, and long-term impact.



From L to R, SIU President Dr. Dan Mahony, TSP President Dominic Watson, and OCE Director Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock announce the partnership (Photo by Howard Ash)

"This agreement reflects how we believe universities can best serve the communities of Illinois," said SIU System President Dan Mahony. "It creates a structure for extended collaboration built on mutual trust, shared leadership, and community priorities. I believe it represents an innovative model that can inform future partnerships across our University System and beyond."

Through this formal agreement, The Springfield Project and the SIU System will combine community knowledge, academic expertise, institutional resources, and local leadership to support solutions connected to Springfield's needs and future. Leaders from both organizations believe the agreement can serve as a replicable model for future partnerships between universities and community organizations across Illinois.

Some initial areas of collaboration may include:

- Community-informed research, assessment, and data sharing
- Workforce and leadership development
- Non-credit education and career pathway's programming
- Graduate research assistant support for community-based initiatives
- Collaborative grant development and shared resource alignment
- Faculty, student, and community partnerships connected to local priorities
- Entrepreneurship education and business mentorship through TSP's CAPLaunch Accelerator Program

"The SIU System Office of Community Engagement (OCE) was created to build exactly this kind of relationship," said Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock, OCE Director. "This agreement moves beyond transactional partnerships and creates a shared framework for learning, innovation, and action. It demonstrates what is possible when universities and communities commit to working alongside one another over the long term."

Founded in 1996, The Springfield Project has worked with residents, neighborhood organizations, businesses, faith communities, and public agencies nearly three decades to strengthen Springfield's historically underserved neighborhoods.



OCE and IRH Sponsor Interdisciplinary Research Projects Focused on Health Outcomes

In Fiscal Year 2026, the Office of Community Engagement and Institute for Rural Health sponsored collaborative interdisciplinary research projects across the SIU System focusing on improving health outcomes. These one-time “seed grants” supported projects intended to “catalyze innovative applied research and translational scholarship that tackles persistent health and wellness disparities in rural and underserved communities.”

IMPROVING ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH OUTCOMES IN EAST ST. LOUIS

Dr. Ajay Kalra, Professor of Civil, Environmental and Infrastructure Engineering at SIU Carbondale, and Dr. Amardeep Kaur, Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering at SIU Edwardsville, teamed up to provide education and outreach opportunities to improve environmental and health outcomes in East St. Louis, IL. Decades of industrial pollution, regular flooding, stormwater and sewage run-off issues and aging infrastructure have contributed to detrimental health and sanitation conditions in the community.

Drs. Kalra and Kaur facilitated community meetings to share information about local environmental conditions and recruited local residents to join a citizen’s advisory board to play an active role in continuing revitalization efforts. Project researchers also led the effort to establish community gardens with native plants in multiple flood zone locations within the community. Garden sites include City Hall, the East St. Louis Public Library and several private residences where homeowners tend the plants. Additional steps in this project include Dr. Kaur sharing hands-on learning opportunities with school-aged children as they discover engineering and construction concepts and explore watershed cycles and drainage conditions. The team will also conduct thorough hydrologic modeling, which will assist in mitigation measures to be adopted in East St. Louis and other communities in the American Bottom watershed region at a later date.



City officials and residents of East St. Louis display signs at Community Garden Demonstration Sites

DESIGNING AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE TOOLKIT FOR PARKINSON’S DISEASE

SIUE Professor of Pharmacy Dr. Radhika Devraj was joined by collaborators Dr. Georgia Luckey, Research Associate Professor in Family and Community Medicine in the SIU School of Medicine, and Dr. Elaine Jurkowski, professor and graduate program director in SIUC’s Social Work program, along with three students from public health, medicine, and social work, in conducting a study to design

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROJECTS (Cont)

and pilot-test a patient informed educational resource toolkit for Parkinson's Disease (PD) prevention in patients with PD. Researchers concentrated their efforts on rural central and Southern Illinois, recognizing that residents in this region may have limited health care services, access to providers, and potentially face transportation and other barriers. They conducted focus groups and interviews with Southern Illinoisians with Parkinson's Disease and their caregivers who



Parkinson's Disease Focus Group

attended support groups in Edwardsville, Springfield, and online to understand fears, challenges, awareness of equipment and aids useful for self-management and fall prevention. They also gauged knowledge of local community health and provider resources helpful for managing their disease.

The focus group data was qualitatively analyzed by the research team and used to develop a user-friendly, accessible "toolkit". This informative toolkit has seven sections addressing several aspects of health that are impacted by the disease and outlining local community resources, fall prevention resources, and self-management tips for patients with Parkinson's Disease. Future plans include studying the effectiveness of the toolkit for patients with PD and their caregivers.

MAPPING PHARMACY DESERTS IN RURAL ILLINOIS

An interdisciplinary team of SIUE faculty, including Dr. Stacey Brown-Amilian, Chair and Professor of Geography and GIS, Dr. Jennifer Hookstra, Chair and Professor of Pharmacy Practice, and Dr. Jayme Swanke, Associate Professor of Social Work, completed a collaborative study examining pharmacy access across rural Illinois. Using geographic information systems (GIS), the team analyzed the locations of 772 community pharmacies and evaluated access for more than 1,200 census tracts outside the Chicago metropolitan area. The study found that more than one in five rural census tracts experience severe pharmacy access limitations, with residents living beyond a 10-minute drive to the nearest pharmacy.

The research highlights how pharmacy "deserts" disproportionately affect older adults, individuals with mobility challenges, and communities with lower educational attainment. Areas with the most severe access barriers were concentrated in central, southern and western Illinois and often contained residents who rely heavily on prescription medications, medication counseling, vaccinations, and other services provided by community pharmacists.

By combining spatial analysis with demographic data, the project demonstrates how community-engaged research can identify health service gaps and support evidence-based solutions. The resulting maps provide actionable information for healthcare providers, policymakers, and community organizations working to improve healthcare access in underserved areas. Findings from this study may help inform future efforts related to rural healthcare infrastructure, telepharmacy services, workforce development, and community health planning across Illinois.

The researchers have submitted a manuscript and are hopeful that their findings are published.



Seeing Alton Through Data:

How Research Can Help Build a Child-Friendly Community

by Altynai Abdybekova, MEd 2026

During my graduate studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, I had the privilege of serving as a Research Assistant on the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) Situation Analysis for the City of Alton. Working under the mentorship of Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock, and in collaboration with SIUE's Community Oriented Data Engagement (CODE) initiative, I contributed to a project designed to better understand children's well-being and support evidence-based community planning.

This project allowed me not only to apply the research skills I developed at SIUE but also to see firsthand how data and evidence can support decisions that improve the lives of children, families, and entire communities.

Rather than simply collecting statistics, our goal was to understand the story behind the data and build a comprehensive picture of children's well-being in Alton. Our objective was to examine children's well-being through a comprehensive lens rather than focusing on a single issue. We explored public safety, education, health, housing, environmental quality, transportation, recreation, youth participation, and access to community services. Looking at these indicators together allowed us to understand how different aspects of city life are interconnected and how each contributes to the overall well-being of children.

Our team analyzed hundreds of indicators by bringing together information from numerous federal, state, county, school district, and municipal sources. These included the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Community Survey (ACS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH), the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the Illinois Report Card, as well as reports and data provided by the City of Alton, Madison County, local school districts, and community organizations.

Many of these datasets had previously existed independently, but they had rarely been viewed together through the lens of children's well-being. By connecting these pieces of information, we were able to build a more complete understanding of what it means to grow up in Alton today.

Our findings highlighted many of Alton's strengths. The city has invested in parks, public spaces, educational opportunities, youth programming, and strong partnerships among local government, schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations. These efforts provide a strong foundation for Alton's continued progress as a UNICEF Child Friendly City and demonstrate the community's ongoing commitment to supporting children and families.

Throughout the project, our goal was not simply to collect statistics but to understand how evidence can support better policymaking. The Situation Analysis is not intended to be viewed as a final report - it is a planning tool that can help guide future decision-making. The information



*Altynai Abdybekova with
Alton Mayor David Goins*

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Alton Data (Continued)

gathered through this research allows community leaders to recognize existing strengths, identify opportunities for improvement, strengthen partnerships, and make evidence-based decisions that benefit children and families.

The project also reinforced the importance of collaboration among local government, schools, healthcare providers, nonprofit organizations, and community members. Bringing together data from multiple sectors allows policymakers to understand children's well-being more holistically and develop long-term strategies based on evidence rather than isolated observations.

One of the most valuable components of the project was the opportunity to present and discuss our findings with Mayor David Goins, members of the City of Alton administration, and community partners. Those conversations demonstrated that the true value of research extends far beyond producing a report. Data become most meaningful when they inform conversations, strengthen partnerships, and support collaborative decision-making. Rather than focusing on problems alone, our discussions explored how the findings could help shape future priorities, guide strategic planning, and continue building a city where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

The most important lesson I learned from this experience is that effective public policy begins with reliable information. When communities have access to high-quality data, they are better equipped to evaluate programs, apply for grants, allocate resources effectively, measure progress, and make decisions that genuinely reflect the needs of children and families. Research is far more than analyzing data or writing reports. It is about listening to communities, recognizing their strengths, identifying opportunities for growth, and creating evidence that supports meaningful action.

SIUE to Host 2026 IIN Conference

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville will host the 2026 Illinois Innovation Network (IIN) Conference. The conference, *Powering Illinois' Future Together*, is scheduled for **October 22 - 23, 2026** at the Health Sciences Complex. It will provide a forum to convene university faculty researchers, students, funded program managers, and business and industry innovators from across the region to showcase, discuss, and learn about projects to support ethical, socially engaged, and sustainable economic growth in Illinois. Students will gain knowledge about critical ways their research interests converge with business. Founded in 2017, IIN is a system of connected university-community-industry-based hubs throughout the state that work together to drive innovation along with economic and workforce development across Illinois. For more information, visit [IIN Conference](#).



SIUE Health Sciences Complex

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