



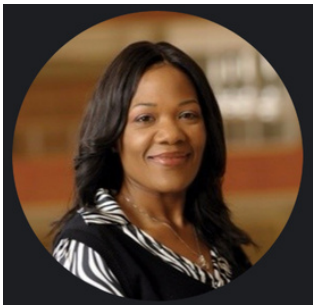
Southern Illinois University System
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IRH & OCE NEWSLETTER

INSTITUTE FOR RURAL HEALTH &
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

OCE Hires Staff for the Metro East Clean Energy Contractor Incubator



LaTonya Hull serves as the Program Director of the Metro East Clean Energy Contractor Incubator, where she leads efforts to expand access to Climate and Equitable Jobs Act opportunities through contractor development, workforce alignment, and regional partnerships. She is a community and economic development strategist with more than 20 years of experience advancing equitable growth and opportunity in underserved communities.

She previously spent 24 years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), where she managed a nearly \$700 million procurement portfolio, supported more than 400 businesses and organizations through consulting and capacity-building services, and secured tens of millions of dollars in contracts for diverse businesses; along with grant funding for workforce, economic development, and community initiatives. LaTonya holds an MBA and master's and bachelor's degrees in urban planning from UIUC. Her work is grounded in a deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, with a focus on ensuring that historically marginalized communities are included in and positioned to benefit meaningfully from economic, community, and workforce development efforts.

Wolf Veverka an SIUE alumnus with a BS in Bio-Geography and a minor in Environmental Sciences with an emphasis on sustainability, serves as a Construction Advisor for the Clean Energy Contractor Incubator. As a student, Wolf was in the leadership of the Student Organization for Sustainability & Gamma Theta Epsilon international geographical honor society. He co-founded a student organization that promoted student community engagement through community gardens called Natural Connections.

Wolf has more than 25 years of experience in the construction and project management field, and nine years' experience working in clean energy. He has spent the last 8 years working in community colleges in senior facilities management and has served as the lead on a variety of green building and clean energy projects.

"Community engagement has always been a part of my personal life and something I have a strong belief in. When one person's life experience improves; the lives of everyone around them becomes better," said Wolf.



2026 COMMUNITY DAY

On Saturday, April 4, the SIU Office of Community Engagement partnered with United Congregations of Metro East (UCM) to host the first annual Community Day at the Wyvetter H. Younge Higher Education Campus in East St. Louis. Community Day attracted more than 400 community leaders and residents who engaged in a variety of activities throughout the day. The successful event brought together residents, employers, service providers, and community organizations to support the four key pillars of a thriving community: health, wealth, jobs, and family. From on-site job interviews and financial empowerment workshops to free health screenings and family fun, Community Day had something for everyone.

"Community Day is about more than a single afternoon, it's about investing in the future of our region," said Darnell Tingle, Executive Director of UCM. "When we invest in health, wealth, and jobs, we invest in each other."



Photos by Howard Ash



OCE Honors Student Interns

As part of its 2025-2026 Roadmap, OCE is committed to enhancing and supporting student experiences and development. OCE offers opportunities for students to participate in and co-create academically based community engaged learning experiences that strengthens their ability to be involved, civic-minded community members, professionals, and scholars. As such, OCE engages SIUE students in meaningful service projects that advance their knowledge and offers them real-world experiences. This past year, OCE worked with several student interns who provided valuable support on a variety of projects.



Jaiden Bryant

Major, Applied Communication Studies; Minor, Mass Communications (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: St. Louis, Missouri

Intern Project: Community Day

"Through this experience, I am developing skills in communication, teamwork, and community engagement. As a team, we are applying the materials and strategies we have learned in class to help plan and execute a successful Community Day. This project has helped me understand how important clear communication and organization are when working with real clients and community members. It has also given me hands-on experience that connects what we learn in the classroom to real-world situations."

Kennedy Burns

Major: Sociology (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Charleston, Illinois

Intern Project: Community Engagement & Workforce Relations

"With this experience, I have been able to build meaningful relationships and hear a variety of perspectives. I have learned how to ask questions that bring deeper understanding from all types of voices. Understanding people's needs and how to turn them into action starts with listening. The Community Collaboration Labs have given local communities the opportunity to be heard and taught me how to be a part of that step. From these conversations, action becomes possible and representative of the community's real needs."

Charles Drake

Major, Applied Communication Studies; Minor, Business Administration (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Alton, Illinois

Intern Project: Community Day

"One of the skills I am developing through this experience is creating and maintaining relationships with different organizations. As a public relations major, it is key to exceed in relationship building. The Office of Community Engagement has given me so many opportunities to introduce myself to local organizations within communities and maintain relationships with them, assisting me in developing this essential tool in the public relations field."



OCE Honors Student Interns (Cont)

Sarah Gauch

Major, Sociology with a concentration in Employment Relations; Minor, Spanish (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Belleville, Illinois

Intern Project: Community Day

"What has surprised me most in my work with communities is just how essential a truly supportive, caring network can be. A community that stands with you not only through difficult moments but also celebrates your successes plays a powerful role in your overall well being."

Jason Kelsaw

Major, Liberal Studies; Minors, Criminal Justice Studies, Psychology, Health Society, and the Human Condition (Anticipated Graduation - May 2027)

Hometown: Godfrey, Illinois

Intern Project: Building Veteran Connections: Expanding OCE's Veteran-Serving Organization Network to Support the Clean Energy Contractor Incubator

"I decided to join this project to help provide extra resources to help veterans. As being a veteran, there are so many resources out there that if you don't dig deep, you more than likely won't find it, so I wanted to search for those and expose those for those might want to utilize them. This project that I worked on showed me that there were a lot more organizations out there that supported military veterans then what I previously knew of. During your separation class they tell you about a few different ones that are more widely found throughout most areas, but then when you start and dig deep, you will find ones that support specific areas (ex. Catholic American Veterans, Jewish American Veterans & Blind Veterans). I also realized that there is an abundance of different training/specializations that veterans can use their GI Bill for that are outside of the traditional school setting (ex. Pipefitters unions, cosmetology schools)."

Mikayla Lotz

Major, Sociology; Minor, Pre-Law (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Bethalto, Illinois

Intern Project: Justice-Impacted Workforce Access & Systems

"Through this internship, I've been developing skills in data organization, research, and communication. A big part of my work involves building a structured database of agencies, which has pushed me to think carefully about how to categorize information so it can actually be used for analysis later. I've also been learning how to verify information by reaching out to organizations directly, rather than just relying on what's publicly available. This experience has helped me become more detail-oriented and intentional in how I approach research. I feel like I'm getting better at turning scattered information into something practical and useful."

Please join or follow us on social media for program updates and news about our projects in the community.



OCE Honors Student Interns (Cont).

Nyah Marcano

Major, Applied Communication Studies; Minor, Art Studio (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Swansea, Illinois

Intern Project: Community Day

"The SIU System Office of Community Engagement is seen as a connector within the Metro East area. As I sought to establish my pre-professional experience, I leaped at the opportunity to work with an organization whose mission centers on uplifting the community it serves. The office's extensive involvement with local organizations and its strong partnerships throughout the community have provided me with a unique networking opportunity to expand my professional connections while gaining meaningful experience."

Gregory Thomas

Major, Applied Communication Studies; Minor, Psychology (Graduated May 2026)

Hometown: Springfield, Illinois

Intern Project: Community Day

"Through my marketing and PR experience, I am continuing to develop strategic communication, data analysis, and project management skills. I have learned to move beyond simply creating content and instead focus on building structured campaigns with measurable goals. By tracking analytics before and after campaign launches, I am strengthening my ability to evaluate performance and implement data-driven improvements. I am also refining my ability to manage timelines, collaborate with various stakeholders, and maintain a consistent brand voice across platforms. This experience is helping me grow into a more strategic, adaptive, and results-oriented marketing professional."

SIU Day at the Capitol

On March 24, the OCE and IRH staff attended the annual SIU Day at the Capitol. The event was an opportunity to connect with community partners and explore new program opportunities.



OCE Director, Dr. Connie Frey-Spurlock, Co-Presented at the SIUE Climate and Sustainability Annual Symposium

Earth Day and a geodesic dome designed by R. Buckminster Fuller provided a prominent backdrop to this year's Energy-Water-Food Nexus symposium on the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) campus.



Facilitated by the Climate and Sustainability Advisory Board at SIUE, the event focused on local, regional and statewide efforts to improve sustainability, create safe drinking-water, and improve community health and well-being through innovative agriculture and nutrition programs.

OCE Director Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock discussed the Metro East Clean Energy Contractor Incubator program, and the impact this grant-funded initiative will have on the nine Illinois counties it will serve. The program will help contractors navigate paperwork and business requirements for the renewable energy industry, and connect employers with a skilled workforce.

Other presenters included Matthew Maas, division manager of public water supplies at the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Chad Warner, an urban ag coordinator at the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Food, Agriculture, Nutrition Innovation Center in East St. Louis; Mike Crawford, the chief operator of the Collinsville Water Department; and Donna Meyer, the associate/acting director of Facilities Management at SIUE. After individual talks, presenters also took part in a panel discussion. The Environmental Resources Training Center at SIUE co-sponsored the session.



Photos by Howard Ash

IRH / OCE Calendar of Events

May 20, 2026, 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM

**Collaboration Lab: Alton Food Hub
The Wedge, Alton, IL**

Community leaders, partners and residents will explore opportunities to create a food hub that provides access to fresh and healthy food.

June 2, 2026, 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

**Clean Energy Open House
City Hall, East St. Louis, IL**

The City of East St. Louis will host an open house to educate residents on clean energy programs, incentives and resources.

June 24, 2026, 3:00 PM - 4:30 PM

**Collaboration Lab: Alton Medical District
The Wedge, Alton, IL**

Community leaders, healthcare professionals and residents will convene to discuss the proposed Alton Medical District, which would consolidate and coordinate healthcare, education, and community resources in the community.

IHDA Conducts Statewide Housing Planning Project

The Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) is leading a statewide housing planning effort this year, the Illinois Housing Blueprint. The Blueprint will be a tool for municipalities, state agencies, nonprofits, and local leaders across the state to better understand how housing fits into the economic fabric of their region and to support targeted, community-specific policy and investment decisions. As part of this initiative, IHDA is conducting a community survey (in English and Spanish). Please help us to learn about the housing needs and goals of your community by distributing it to your network. To learn more about this project and to take the survey, visit

[Illinois Housing Blueprint](#).