



Southern Illinois University System
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IRH & OCE NEWSLETTER

INSTITUTE FOR RURAL HEALTH &
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Jeff Franklin, IRH Director, Set to Retire

Jeff Franklin, who was hired as the inaugural director of the Institute for Rural Health (IRH), is scheduled to retire in January, 2026 after serving for more than 30 years in higher education and public health. In addition to his role at IRH, Franklin has served as the Executive Director of the Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development for the SIU School of Medicine since 2010. He previously served as an educator for the University of Illinois Extension and as an elementary school health educator. Jeff has also presented and co-presented on the regional, state and national levels in the areas of school health, bullying prevention and social and emotional learning. He is a certified Master Trainer for CATCH and the Michigan Model for Coordinated School Health Education and has a Master's Degree in Education. He has also served as a board member for various organizations and currently serves on the board for the Illinois Rural Health Association. Over the course of his career, Jeff has made an indelible mark in public health throughout Illinois and has impacted many lives.



Jeff Franklin

"From the very beginning, Jeff made me feel comfortable stepping into leading the Office of Community Engagement - something that's meant more than he probably knows. As a working-class, first-generation college student from East Nashville, it isn't always easy to feel like you belong in rooms where decisions are being made. Jeff created space, extended trust, and led with quiet confidence. I've learned so much from him - not just about rural health, but about the kind of relationship-building that makes work meaningful. His example has shaped how I show up in communities and how I think about partnership. I'm grateful to have had the chance to learn alongside him"

~ Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock, OCE Director

"From the moment I started with OCE/IRH, Jeff welcomed me warmly and with the greatest kindness. During my time working with him, I have seen his passion shine through in every aspect of his job from caring about his employees to ensuring his projects are completed to the utmost caliber. He is truly a bright spot in everyone's lives that he touches and will be greatly missed by all!"

~ Leslie Brook, IRH/OCE Program Coordinator

"I admire Jeff's compassion, kindness and commitment to his co-workers and the health-care needs and general well-being of residents in Southern Illinois. He has done a phenomenal job of making connections and laying the foundation for continuing work for the Institute for Rural Health that will continue for many years to come."

~ Cindy Scarsdale, IRH/OCE Administrative Aide

"Jeff has made considerable contributions to the field of public health and has made a lasting impact on the lives of residents in Southern Illinois. Beyond his contributions, I have been particularly impressed by his kindness and compassion. He is greatly admired and appreciated, and will be missed by his colleagues."

~ Brian Bray, IRH/OCE Program Coordinator



Green Energy Contractor Incubator

The SIU System Office of Community Engagement is receiving a \$1.5 million grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to launch two regional incubators that will strengthen the capacity of Metro East communities to compete for and deliver clean energy and energy efficiency contracts. The incubators will be located at The Wedge in Alton, IL and at Lansdowne Up in East St. Louis, IL.



The incubators will serve as anchor institutions for inclusive economic growth, expanding access to education, training, and technical assistance in historically under-resourced communities. The incubator is designed to strengthen regional resilience by supporting both the clean-energy workforce and small business development in historically underinvested communities. Programming will include:

- Business incubation and coaching for emerging or small clean-energy and construction contractors
- Wrap-around technical assistance, including licensing support, accounting and back-office assistance, bonding and insurance readiness, digital literacy, and safety training
- Workforce development pathways delivered in partnership with regional training providers
- Cross-sector collaboration events connecting contractors, training institutions, community organizations, and residents

OCE identified two primary objectives for the Incubators. The first objective is to provide targeted support for minority- and women-owned businesses, emerging entrepreneurs, community-based organizations, and workforce intermediaries seeking to participate in Illinois' growing clean energy economy. The second objective is to have the Incubators serve as launchpads for innovation, capacity-building, and community wealth generation.

Key Performance Indicators for the Green Building Collective by the Numbers

- 27 training sessions annually (both locations participate via hybrid option)
- 24 networking events annually (2 per month across 9 counties)
- 2,000 hours of one-on-one coaching and mentorship annually
- \$500,000 in contracts secured annually
- 50 new jobs created per year

TheWedge
powered by SIUE



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

Lansdowne UP



Green Energy Contractor Incubator Launch

On December 17, the SIU Office of Community Engagement launched the Green Energy Contractor Incubator. More than 70 community members, partners and business leaders attended the event to network and to learn more about this project. The program was held at Lansdowne Up in East St. Louis, which will host one of the incubators. Following a panel discussion, guests enjoyed refreshments and networked to explore collaborative opportunities with community partners.



L to R, Jenn Atanasov, Office of U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth; George McClellan, NAACP; Dr. Donnie Frey Spurlock, SIU Office of Community Engagement; Kevin Harris, NAACP; Robin Carey-Boyd, NAACP, Paul Davis



Following the panel discussion, guests networked and explored opportunities to expand workforce development through the Green Energy Contractor Incubator



Jackie Daniels (L), Macedonia Development Corp. and Paul Davis (R), candidate for U.S. House of Representatives



L to R, Jo Ann May, Center for Small Business Development; Mary Sue Love, SIUE School of Business; Robin Carey-Boyd, NAACP served as panelists for the program



Gerry Golden, of Bolden Construction Services, participated in the discussion and learned about opportunities to expand his business



Kevin Harris (L), NAACP and Heather Navarro (R), Midwest Climate Collaborative



L to R, Robin Carey-Boyd, NAACP; Kevin Harris, served as panelists for the program



Guests participate in a Q&A session with panelists during the evening event



Daniel Terry (L), Macedonia Development Corporation, and Richie Darling (R), CEJA Workforce Manager at Lewis and Clark Community College

STRATEGIC VISIONING AND DOING

As part of our mission to strengthen communities and foster collaborations, IRH and OCE launched the Southern Illinois Strategic Doing Hub, a growing network of practitioners using the Strategic Doing methodology to design and guide complex collaborations. The Hub is an important initiative that helps organizations, communities, and institutions develop actionable, community-driven strategies through its Strategic Visioning & Doing framework. This approach moves beyond traditional planning by engaging stakeholders in a structured yet flexible process that turns vision into reality. By combining vision with action, IRH and OCE empower communities to create sustainable, high-impact solutions that drive long-term success.



Group work is an important part of Strategic Doing.

The Southern Illinois Strategic Doing Hub is a growing network of practitioners using the Strategic Doing methodology to design and guide complex collaborations. The Hub was established with the 2024 founding cohort that included Jeff Franklin (SIU System Institute for Rural Health), Miranda Sellars (SIUE We CARE Clinic), Vanessa Sneed (SIUC Business Innovation and Research Park), and Connie Frey Spurlock (SIU System Office of Community Engagement). In 2025, the pathfinder cohort expanded the network with additional practitioners committed to fostering collaborative, action-oriented solutions in their communities. To date, OCE and IRH have worked with the Alton Housing Authority, Bunker Hill, IL, Brooklyn, IL, and the SIU School of Medicine to utilize strategic doing to prioritize actionable goals and find solutions for a variety of community or institutional challenges.

Key Elements of Strategic Doing

Collaborative Visioning – The practitioner facilitates inclusive discussions where community members, leaders, and partners identify shared goals and challenges. This ensures that strategies align with real community needs.

Asset-Based Approach – Rather than focusing on deficits, the practitioner helps communities recognize and leverage their existing strengths, resources, and networks to drive progress.

Action-Oriented Planning – Instead of creating lengthy reports that may sit unused, the practitioner emphasizes Strategic Doing — a process that breaks goals into achievable steps, assigns responsibilities, and ensures measurable progress.

If your organization or community is interested in working with IRH or OCE to engage in a Strategic Doing initiative, please contact Dr. Connie Frey Spurlock at connie.freyspurlock@siu.edu.



FLOODPLAIN TRAINING ESSENTIALS

This fall, the SIU Office of Community Engagement partnered with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to schedule a series of trainings on flood preparation and mitigation to communities throughout southern Illinois. The program, which was led by Erin Conley, the DNR State Floodplain Manager, was open to the public and free of charge. Sessions were held at The Wedge in Alton and at the Gower Translational Research Area in Carbondale. OCE, which is a member of the Midwest Climate Collaborative as well as the Metro East Flood Relief Collaborative, scheduled the program as part of its mission to advance environmental justice and economic development.



Erin Conley leading the training series

Illinois has one of the largest inland systems of rivers, lakes and streams in the United States. Nearly 15% of Illinois' total land area is subject to flooding, which is expected to increase as the land is impacted caused by climate change. Floods are by far the most common natural disaster in Illinois, accounting for more than 90% of the declared disasters in the state. Training covered a wide range of topics, including the role of floodplain managers, the requirements of both state and local floodplain permit programs, and the concept of substantial damage and substantial improvement when addressing floodplain management. Students on the SIU Carbondale and Edwardsville campuses were invited to attend the sessions to learn about career opportunities in floodplain management.

OCE will partner with Senator Tammy Duckworth's office and DNR to present a workshop on Friday, January 16 for community members on disaster insurance that covers floods and tornadoes. The workshop will take place at the Wyvetter H. Younge Higher Education Center in East St. Louis.

Leslie Brock Receives Distinguished Service Award

Leslie Brock, Program Coordinator for the Institute Rural Health and the Office of Community Outreach, was honored as the recipient of the 2025 ACHE Meritorious Service Award. The award, presented by the Association for Continuing Higher Education, Inc., recognizes individuals for their outstanding leadership, performance, and service to continuing higher education at their own institution and within the Association for a minimum of five years. With more than 1,200 individual members and 300 institutional members, ACHE has served the entire spectrum of continuing higher education since 1932. Leslie accepted her award in person at ACHE's 87th annual conference, which took place in Milwaukee, WI in October. Leslie has spent her career working in community outreach and education in various roles within the SIU System.



Leslie Brock with her award at the ACHE Conference

The Office of Community Engagement (OCE) has launched social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. Please join or follow these accounts for program updates and news about our projects in the community.

