



## 2020 Annual Report to Mecosta County



### A Message from the District Director Spring 2021

2020 will be a year to remember for many reasons. The creativeness, dedication, teamwork, and resilience

that our MSUE professionals exhibited during this global pandemic will be something I will always remember. This has been a difficult time for communities, families and staff, and I am proud of the work we have done to continue to provide high-quality educational programs throughout Michigan.

During the pandemic and subsequent stay-home orders, MSUE staff were given an opportunity to do something they have wanted to do for a long time - convert their in-person programming to a digital format. Digital formats don't work for everybody or every program, but to expand our reach and help more people incorporate the evidence-based learning from a major university into their homes, families, businesses and communities, has always been a goal worth pursuing. Many were moving in that direction already; the pandemic required others to move there faster.

Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) brings the science, programs and resources of Michigan's land grant university to organizations, communities and individuals throughout the state. Our outreach and engagement is built on a local basis, thanks to our county partnerships and more than 600 faculty and staff in offices across all 83 counties.

Historically, most of our relationships have been maintained through in-person meetings and programs. Over the last few years we have built up the breadth and quality of our website at [extension.msu.edu](http://extension.msu.edu) which now averages 1.25 million visitors per month.

Working from home with the tools and support needed to help them succeed in a remote environment, MSUE educators have continued to assist farmers, elected officials and decision makers, parents, families and

*In 2020, we expanded our capacity to provide high-quality virtual education. In this report, you will find stories of strength and effort, stories of resilience and creativity. There is no doubt this pandemic has pushed us all to the edge from time to time, but we have worked together to get beyond it and to continue to do the good work we do and deliver the best for our residents. We are looking forward to a time when we can all meet in person safely again.*

youth by meeting with them on virtual platforms through online meetings and webinars. With the work they have accomplished over the last months, staff have reported some of the benefits and disadvantages to "virtual" learning:

- Programs that are recorded allow people to view the meetings in a time convenient for them.
- We are reaching audiences that would not be able to attend our programs in the past because of time, travel and disability.
- We are reaching local, regional, state, national and global audiences.
- We are able to share our expertise, ideas and best practices more efficiently across the state.
- There are more opportunities available to everyone – once a program is made virtual anyone can sign up, regardless of where they live.
- A digital divide still exists, not all programs work in an on-line format, and nothing will replace our local, face to face, relationship- based work.

In the end, I believe this experience in on-line program development and investment in capacity will augment our face to face work (**once that resumes**) and provide greater access to our work than ever before. Thank you for your continued support!

**Shari Spoelman, District Director**

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## Response of MSU Extension to the impact of Novel Corona Virus

In late March, MSUE pivoted all of our programming to online formats to comply with the original Stay Safe, Stay Home order (EO2020-42). Within six days of that order, we launched the [Remote Learning and Resources](#) website and our teams immediately began modifying programming to a digital format that would provide equal educational value right in people’s homes. This online space provided a platform to launch this effort and since then has become a robust virtual one-stop-shop for everything MSU Extension has to offer online. Within a few days into quarantine, staff had new programming spooled up and ready to present digitally. A few noteworthy examples include:

**Adulting 101:** Staff members quickly pivoted from a face-to-face program offered in a few locations to a series of one-hour presentations called **Adulting 101**. Topics include things such as what to look for when renting, tips and tricks for easy cooking, how to keep your finances in order and the right way to do household tasks such as ironing and setting a table. Once promoted via social media, it went “viral,” attracting more than **3,000** registered participants statewide and was recommended by school districts. This program has now become a regular recurring series and engaged a team of program staff to share in its delivery.

**Gardening Cabin Fever Conversations** – Gardening became a highly popular series of webinars via Zoom and Facebook Live designed to get people’s minds off of being cooped up inside and get them thinking about their garden spaces. Sessions focused on lighthearted but educational conversations about topics like seed saving, houseplants, pollinator health, community gardening and container gardening. The webinar’s success of more than **500 attendees per session** prompted organizers to continue programming during winter 2021.

[Educational Resources for Parents, teachers and families](#) were compiled to assist with remote and home-based learning. 4-H Curriculum, videos, tip sheets and virtual learning tools were developed and continue to be added to and improved as we begin the Fall school year.

[Rapid Response For Agriculture](#) was a site developed in 2019 to provide a single point for farmers to access resources developed in response to several weather related emergencies. In 2020, our agriculture team immediately rose to the challenge to assist the industry with resources and management tools to aid them through the pandemic emergency.

One first response was a series of articles and best practice options for the [floriculture industry](#) who were limited in the ability to sell to their wholesale markets. Other resources were aimed at keeping farm employees safe and how to best manage operations while still meeting consumer demands for a fresh, safe food supply during emergency conditions created by Covid-19.

**Canning food became more popular during the pandemic.** While working from home has its challenges, food safety staff witnessed some really great results with programming online. By having online classes, instead of face:face, the reach for food preservation classes increased by over 4,000%.

**Adulting 101: Preparing for Life and College**

**DATE & TIME:**  
 April 9 2 pm  
 Budget and Credit

April 16 2 pm  
 Rent Smart

April 23 2 pm  
 Cooking 101

April 30 2 pm  
 Household Tasks

**LOCATION:**  
 Virtual through web

**COST:**  
 Free

Prepare yourself for the future!

**SPONSORS:**  
 MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY Extension  
 MID MICHIGAN COLLEGE

**WHO SHOULD ATTEND:**  
 Older youth (11th and 12th Graders)

**DESCRIPTION:**  
 Learn some quick tips that will help you navigate life and college. Budget and Credit-Explore the basics. Rent Smart-Learn what to know when you rent. Cooking 101- Learn some tips and tricks for cooks for yourself. Household Task- Learn ironing, making bed, and other helpful hints.

**HOW TO REGISTER**  
<https://msu.zoom.us/j/257448955>

**CONTACT:**  
 Michelle Neff by [hydemic@msu.edu](mailto:hydemic@msu.edu) or 989-429-2359

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**Join Us Online**

**Food Preservation Series**

Every Thursday 1 p.m. & 6 p.m. EDT

March 18 - Introduction to Home Canning

March 25 - Preserving Maple Syrup

April 1 - Selecting Plants for your Garden

April 8 - With Spring's Arrival, Asparagus Won't Be Far Away

To Learn More Visit:  
[https://www.canr.msu.edu/food\\_preservation/events](https://www.canr.msu.edu/food_preservation/events)  
 To join by phone, call in advance to register at 877-643-9882.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension



## MSU Extension in Mecosta County

### 2020 By the numbers:

Jan—Dec 2020	
# of programs hosted in County	41
# of participants that attended programs hosted in County	1093
# of programs offered statewide attended by County residents	147
# of County residents who attended programs	708
# of MSUE staff reporting serving residents of County	50
# of Direct Consultations Reported <small>(Field Crops, Com Vitality, Prod Center, Soil tests, gardening, food safety, etc.)</small>	209

General Fund Budget Expenditure	
FY 2019-2020	\$124,511 (budgeted)
	\$107,082 (expended)

4-H 2019-2020	
4-H Adult Volunteers	76
4-H Youth Club Enrollment	333
Total Youth Served (duplicates removed)	1074

## MSU Extension District 6 Advisory Council

County	Name	
Clare	Sandy Bristol	Commissioner
Clare	Ken Brown	
Gladwin	Rick Grove	Commissioner
Gladwin	Dick Metz	
Isabella	Jerry Jaloszynski	Commissioner
Isabella	Bob Wachowski	
Mecosta	Marilynn <u>Bradstrom</u>	Commissioner
Mecosta	Vacancy	

County	Name	
Missaukee	Frank <u>VanderWal</u>	Commissioner
Missaukee	Vacancy	
Osceola	Jill Halladay	Commissioner
	Tim Michell	Alternate
Osceola	Russ Nehmer	
Osceola	David <u>Eggle</u>	
Wexford	Judy Nichols	Commissioner
Wexford	Mike <u>Soloman</u>	
Wexford	Chris Gentry	Chair



## 4-H Program Highlights



### MOLLIE HOGG

4-H Program  
Coordinator

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*"I feel extra close to my volunteers and youth because I grew up here and participated in 4-H. I have major support from so many people which helps us all feel like a family,"*

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Mollie Hogg loves to fish. She also loves 4-H. As the Mecosta County 4-H program coordinator, she loves working in the county in which she grew up and participated in the 4-H program. One of the favorite parts of her job is visiting schools throughout the county and working on different programs with youth, like embryology and reading.

**Plat Books.** During 2020, Mollie worked diligently preparing information for the publisher of the new plat book. This was a very intense project and timeline to meet the goal of having the books available before Christmas, so customers were able to purchase them for holidays gifts. The 2021 plat books were made available for purchase beginning in December of 2020. Due to the MSU Extension office being closed because of the pandemic, Mollie brainstormed new ideas to make the books available to the public. As expected, they were very popular during and after the holiday season and the office phone was filled with messages for the new plat books. Three businesses were willing to help market the books. Big Rapids Farm & Garden sold over 300 books in a short month. Remus Lumber made the books available for citizens on the east side of the county and the Mecosta County Building & Zoning department has assisted as well. This support has been a major factor in the success of the plat book sales which is important to the support of the local 4-H program.

#### **What would you like our commissioners and other stakeholders to know about your work during 2020?**

Another popular and successful way 4-H engaged with youth in the absence of face to face programming involved educational kits that were mailed to youth at their homes. One such program occurred in August and September with a program called FishFul Thinking. In partnership with Project Fish, a statewide program offered through Michigan State University, 86 youth in Mecosta County and throughout the state learned about a different aspect of fishing each week. The goal was to give them the skills to get outdoors and enjoy the hobby of fishing. Participating youth were taught how to make pop can caster rods, and how to clean and cook fish. Online games helped them learn to identify the fish found in Michigan while having fun. Another fishing program is planned for this spring about Michigan's salmon fishing industry.

#### **When not working, what do you like to do that makes you happy?**

Mollie has recently completed education in taxidermy and is working towards fulfilling her dream of having a taxidermy shop and side-business. She enjoys the creativity and art behind taxidermy. In addition to spending time outdoors fishing, hunting, and snowmobiling, Mollie loves to be with her family, especially her nephew.



*4-H'er Carver Hodges proudly poses with the fish he caught with the "pop can" caster rod he made.*



## PAM DANIELS

Disease Prevention & Management

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*“Offering workshops, cooking videos, and health programs virtually has opened the door for many more individuals to take advantage of Extensions resources.”*

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Pam Daniels is an Extension Educator specializing in chronic disease prevention and management. She enjoys working for Extension because it has allowed her to acquire a sense of community activism. “Extension’s resources, programs and network of expertise directly support people in our local communities,” said Pam.

### What would you like people to know about your work during 2020?

In 2020, MSU Extension worked meticulously, laying the groundwork to offer our Health programs virtually. Our highest priority was reaching the homebound. This outreach continues to grow and develop with overwhelming community support. In 2021, community residents can expect more cooking and nutrition tips online. With MSU Extension’s volunteer chef, Don Zimmer, we are working on a chef led cooking blog called, “Dish ‘n Nutrish’n.”



### Recently Pam shared a couple of “success stories” that happened in 2020 because of, or in spite of, the pandemic.

“These success stories are a prime example of how virtual contact with participants can be as effective as face-to-face, or more effective,” noted Pam. “Offering workshops, cooking videos, and health programs virtually has opened the door for many more individuals to take advantage of Extensions resources. Whether they are homebound, quarantined, or working, Extension’s virtual classes have been very well received!”

### From Her Hospital Bed - A Success Story of Inspiration & Commitment.

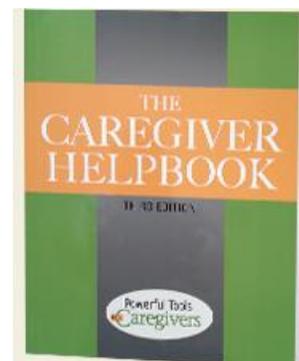
During the 2020 pandemic, MSU Extension transitioned their “Diabetes Prevention Program” from a face -to – face format to fully online. It was during that program that we witnessed the power of virtual programming! Katie, a class participant, was being hospitalized, and from her hospital bed she joined our class. “I didn’t want to miss this class!” Katie shared. “This class has made me so motivated, I just had to find a way to log-in and not miss it.” Class facilitator Pam Daniels said she has never witnessed such dedication. “Katie’s enthusiasm, while under the circumstance of being in the hospital was one of the greatest facilitating moments I’ve witness. She gave such a testimony to others in the class about pushing through obstacles to prioritize self-care, truly motivating to the entire class!” There would have been no way that (Katie) could have joined our MSU Extension class if it were a face-to-face class.

### The second example of success during Covid is found here, in this feedback from a participant.

*Dear MSU Extension,*

*I want to thank you so much for the virtual “Powerful Tools for Caregivers” class. I had my doubts about enrolling and considered cancelling before it began. But from the first day I was so glad I stayed. Even your first slide filled my heart with the knowledge that you really understood! Meeting virtually “face to face” with other caregivers was more rewarding than I knew was possible and really showed me how isolated I had become and how much I needed more human interaction.*

*I really learned solid skills and new coping strategies. I’m just so grateful for your help. I feel that staying connected might help our group and I know would help me. Feel free to share my email address with our class and let them know I am open to communication. - Jan*





## Nutrition



**RENEE SANDERS**  
*Community Nutrition  
Instructor*

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*“Even though we are not in the office, we are serving our community. We are still answering phone calls for recipes and questions, we are keeping in touch with our community partners, and we are doing our best to offer education to our local schools and community.”*

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Renee enjoys working closely with small groups of people and teaching them new ways to improve their health through nutrition and physical activity. She is MSU Extension’s Community Nutrition Instructor for Mecosta and Osceola counties. For her, the interaction with consumers is always engaging and fun. “I enjoy building relationships with individuals and families, as well as community partners,” said Renee.

**MOISD Cognitively Impaired.** For the past few years Renee has been working with an adult cognitively impaired classroom at the Mecosta Osceola Intermediate School District Education building. Pre Covid-19 she went into the classroom and taught the “Teen Cuisine” curriculum and provided a food demo each week. The young adults (18-26) helped her prepare the recipe and they all got to taste it. The pandemic put an end to



that. Outside groups are not allowed in the schools. To complicate matters, there are several students who cannot risk exposure, so they are homebound. The solution? Renee has been able to “Zoom in” with the class and do a new curriculum, Cooking for One, utilizing food demonstration videos with her own instruction to teach the class how to make a recipe. The at-home students, as well as the in-class students are all able to attend the Zoom class. In class, the teacher has purchased all the ingredients for the students to make the same recipe (with the help of their paraprofessionals). One young man always complained when onions were being cut up because he doesn’t like onions. But onions are rich in vitamins and minerals. He

would want them chopped big enough to be able to pluck them out, so he always volunteered to cut them up. Virtually, Renee was able to ask for the students input on what recipes they would make. Oddly enough, this same young man wanted potato leek pizza, which is simply pizza crust with pan fried potatoes lightly seasoned, sliced leeks and mozzarella cheese on top. The students watched the cooking demonstration online, Renee logged off and they went to work in their kitchen. The next week this young man told Renee that the potato leek pizza was some of the best pizza he has ever tasted. When asked about the leeks, he said they were really good. For a young man with such strong opinions about onions to find out that he likes leeks and would eat them again made her glad he chose potato leek pizza for one of the recipes. Trying something new can be scary for most adults, but for adults with cognitive impairment it could have been devastating. This is what nutrition instructors call a win!

When not working, Renee is busy in her garden, raising her grandchildren, camping, puzzling, and painting. Since the pandemic, she has started raising chickens.





### Agriculture

Paul Gross is an Agriculture Extension Educator specializing in Field Crops and Soil Health. When not working, he is happiest spending time with his family and friends.



### PAUL GROSS

Field Crops  
Educator

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*“I am utilizing technology to improve efficiency in my work and to reach more people.”*

Paul enjoys working with farmers and agribusinesses, bringing the research and information from MSU’s Extension Specialists and applying it to their farms to improve productivity, profitability and environmental practices. Paul engages in on-farm research in the county to test products, practices, and systems that address issues on their farms.

During the pandemic, Paul worked with his colleagues to develop a stronger online presence for programming. They developed online courses, podcasts, informational videos, and short how-to videos that farmers can view on demand. These have been posted on our social media sites. Covid-19 has forced all of us to be more creative in how we communicate and interact with farmers.



### Impact of COVID:

According to Paul, “Like everyone else, Covid-19 changed our world and how I carried out my programming. I am fortunate that I was able to conduct all of my planned on-farm research in the summer of 2020. I was able to travel to

fields to monitor pest traps, provide soil samples and scout pests. We utilized pictures and videos for weed, insect, and disease problems when travel was not possible. I am utilizing technology to improve efficiency in my work and to reach more people.”



FaceBook Live weekly “Lunch Break” is an ongoing event that brings up to date information from the MSU Extension field crops team and other members of MSU’s ag educators and specialists to growers.



## Farm Stress



### ERIC KARBOWSKI

Community Behavioral  
Health Educator

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*“Every connection and outreach made to someone that is struggling can have a lifelong impact.”*

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Eric Karbowski is our Farm Stress educator who enjoys spending time with his family and friends, football, hunting, kayaking, and cutting wood. He is passionate about working with farmers, creating tools, and developing resources to support those in need. Eric joined MSU Extension to help provide behavioral health supports and services to farmers and farm families in our community. The existing farm stress programs created a nationally recognized foundation that set the stage for the advanced opportunities and supports now available to those we serve. The focus on adhering to the programming models, yet flexibility to be creative and innovative, have proven to be important in allowing resources such as the teletherapy program and “wrap around” model to be implemented. For Eric, his position with MSU Extension is helping him fulfill both personal and professional goals.

**Mental Health Minute:** When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Eric and his team of colleagues in agriculture were able to make an impact despite the inability to provide in person programming. One of those examples is a program called “Lunch Break.” Once a week, ag educators and Eric provide a Facebook live feed for updates and advice for growers and producers. Each week, Eric provides a Mental Health Minute, and embeds good, sound mental health education for the participants. Sometimes, you don’t know that you can use this information until you receive it.

**Teletherapy:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, MSU Extension through a partnership with Pine Rest Behavioral Health, created the teletherapy program for farmers to access supports through online-counseling with master’s level clinicians that have a connection to agriculture. This was timely because the roadmap to support and recovery was already in place, making connecting farmers with the services efficient. It later received funding to help offset cost further reducing access barriers.

According to Eric, “The heralding truth behind behavioral health is that often the effectiveness of the supports we are providing will not likely be publicized. Every connection and outreach made to someone that is struggling can have a lifelong impact. Although we have a large amount of reportable farm stress impact data and outreach engagements, as friends, neighbors, and supporters of MSU Extension, you are supporting the continued development of resources and tools further reducing the impact of stress, mental illness, and the potential loss of life by suicide through our farm stress efforts.”



### Responding to Farmers in Need



## Finance and Homeownership



### TEAGAN LEFERE

Financial &  
Homeownership  
Program Instructor

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*I enjoy hearing back from individuals who learn something new during one of our classes and the positive changes they are making in their personal finances.*

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Teagan Lefere is a grandma that loves to crochet. But don't let that fool you. She is also an active Finance and Homeownership instructor for MSU Extension, helping hundreds of people every year prevent a mortgage foreclosure, improve their family budgets, prepare for homeownership, or become stable renters. Teagan loves working with individuals and families toward a positive financial outcome. I enjoy hearing back from individuals who learn something new during one of our classes and relay back to me what they learned and the positive changes they are making in their personal finances.

During the pandemic and work from home orders, Teagan had to become more creative while working with people who may not have had the abilities or technology to fulfill documentation requests from Step Forward.



This is a Success Story that happened in spite of COVID. But it's also a story about why Teagan is such an amazing employee. Without her persistence, this outcome wouldn't have materialized.

*Many things changed with COVID-19 and how I work with homeowners and assisting them in applying for Step Forward Hardest Hit funds. Before COVID-19 I would meet with individuals in a convenient location to assist them in gathering paperwork or to sign documents. Once I began working from home and travel restrictions were imposed, that became a challenge. One woman I assisted was in a wheelchair and had a hard time scheduling rides to meet me in my office. Step Forward needed a letter of explanation regarding her hardship and subsequent delinquency in her property taxes. Before COVID I would take her documents to sign or pick-up documents requested by Step Forward at her home. She had been admitted to a nursing care facility due to health issues and I was unable to meet with her due to COVID restrictions. With her permission, I contacted the facility director and asked if I emailed her a letter, would she be able to print the letter, have her sign it and email it back to me. She said that would not be a problem and I was able to fulfill Step Forward's request. She was approved for Step Forward funds to bring her property taxes current from 2017 to the present tax year.*

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