



Delivering Hunter Education in Illinois



Mission Statement:

“Drive economic efficiencies, innovation and accountability in conservation.”

A report by the McGraw Center for Conservation Leadership/ August 31, 2016

Executive Summary

Modernizing hunter education in Illinois to improve economic and program efficiency requires a systematic approach. It is not enough to launch an online-only course. An online-only course is just part of the larger, necessary changes in hunter education and must be part of an integrated reform plan that embraces existing and emerging technologies to achieve economic efficiencies and better serve the public. By making hunter education a cornerstone of the agency's operations, we will ensure better recruitment and retention of future hunters and foster a culture of safe, ethical hunters.

There are three areas of required action:

Technological:

Create an updated point-of-sale system on the DNR website that links hunter education to licensing sales, recruitment opportunities, and other state services. This will allow state officials to better track – and better serve – those who wish to hunt in Illinois. This would be a quick and meaningful enhancement to existing strategies, and is crucial to the success of every step that follows.

An online hunter education certification process will increase recruitment, enhance consistency of program delivery and provide high quality instruction. At least 17 states offer an online-only option. By creating its own accessible online option, Illinois would better serve its constituents and ensure that their hunter education experience is representative of our laws, regulations and high safety standards.

Solicit bids and services from leading vendors to create an online-only hunter education course that complies with statutory requirements. The two leading providers of online hunter education courses in the U.S. have stated that developing such a course would be relatively straightforward. Such a course could be enhanced by an online instructor-moderated message board that would personalize instruction, promote matching hours, and involve a younger generation of instructors who are entirely familiar with online learning.

Outreach:

Develop a mentoring/advanced hunter education system. This would allow the state to continue to use its extensive volunteer network of hunter education instructors, thereby capturing Pittman-Robertson funds while providing the critical link between hunter education and experiential learning. Specific advanced courses focusing on types of hunting



or equipment should be offered, with incentives to encourage participation. For example, completion of an easily accessible upland hunting safety seminar could be required for hunting upland game on state-owned land. The same could be true for deer, turkey and waterfowl hunting. This option should be examined further by DNR staff.

Outreach to NGOs and the general public. This will be a critical step to persuade volunteer instructors that they will be needed more than ever, and in fact will have the opportunity to teach specific courses in their favored areas to help mentor the next generation of hunters. Existing NGO programs such as the National Wild Turkey Federation's "Save the Hunt" are proven successes and could be linked to state programs.

Fiscal:

Ensure that all potential matching funds are being captured by Illinois. The IDNR should convene a summit with federal officials to ensure that every opportunity for matching funds is captured, and to explore the potential for using new programs to acquire federal matching dollars. For example, the proposed online mentoring program is a likely candidate for matching funds from Pittman-Robertson. This would have the added benefit of helping the state to prepare for mandatory federal audits involving matching funds across all related programs.

There is little time to waste. Illinois is badly trailing behind other states in fully embracing technology, and its citizens are frustrated by the difficulty in completing mandatory hunter education in person, compounded by the scarcity of locations and dates where hunter education is offered. Increasingly they look to other states when they must complete hunter education courses. They should be better served at home, and given incentives to participate in the DNR's programs.

There will be costs associated with the establishment of an online certification process. If the IDNR cannot cover these costs due to the current budget climate, the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation will commit to providing the necessary financial resources until such time as the IDNR has the funds to do so.

The attached summary details the step-by-step approach that will place Illinois at the forefront of delivering hunter education, increasing hunter recruitment and improving hunter retention. We would like to thank Director Wayne Rosenthal and his team at IDNR for working with the McGraw Center for Conservation Leadership to reach this point where Illinois can move forward, and lead.



Delivering Hunter Education in Illinois

The IDNR's hunter education program depends on establishing the purpose and delivery of hunter education as a foundational piece of the agency's conservation mission. The processes outlined would achieve this goal. Each step is critically linked to a multitude of tasks and departments that will advance hunter education, improve recruitment efforts, deliver fiscal efficiency, and promote a culture of safe and ethical hunting practices among the constituency.

1) Integrate hunter education registration and completion into the licensing system

When Illinois residents seek a hunter education course, they should automatically be registered into the licensing system and issued a unique and permanent customer identification number that corresponds to the IDNR's point-of-sale system. This allows the individual to be "known" within the system, track progress of course completion(s), and determine the rate and frequency of license purchases over the long term. This will also be a useful tool to create customer-specific communications, advance safety campaigns, and track marketing strategies over time.

- The IDNR should ensure that its licensing system is compatible with top vendors who can provide customized Illinois hunter education courses and require that the two systems be seamlessly linked, even if using multiple vendors.
- Special care should be given to not limit customer participation by providing only one access point (IDNR website). The system can be linked to multiple course providers or entry points and then funneled through the Illinois point of sale/ customer identification system to allow for future user identification.

2) Modernize Hunter Education through online options and incentive-based learning

The IDNR needs to do more than simply provide an online-only option for hunter education. It needs to redefine how hunter education can be achieved and promote an agency wide approach that recognizes the changing needs of citizens, fulfills statutory requirements, and allows for effective collection of Federal Aid match. Illinois hunter education can be an incremental learning process that blends established core



educational requirements with an incentive based approach that motivates users to continuously learn more.

All 50 states have reciprocity regarding completed certification for hunter education. At least 17 states have online-only options, including neighboring Indiana and Iowa. They report that online course provide a more consistent delivery of core safety standards. Additionally, some states like Texas, have an online-only option open to residents and non-residents. This ultimately provides a “national loophole” allowing Illinois residents to take hunter education courses online using the Texas standards.

The IDNR must develop an online-only course option that is open to anyone who hunts in Illinois. This course will be delivered in specific test modules that demonstrate that graduates have a high level of understanding of topical hunter and firearms safety standards. To ensure safety standards are met, a requirement of an 85 percent pass rate for all sections should be enforced.

- Work with third-party vendors who specialize in hunter education, such as Kalkomy and Fresh Air Educators among others, to develop the course modules and any needed supporting technology at no direct cost to the agency.
- Create an online library of basic and advanced hunter education material that can be accessed on the website, downloaded for reference, or printed for study.
- Develop an online forum/discussion Board for registered users who are completing the online modules to post questions and receive answers from Illinois’ pool of certified hunter education instructors. Instructor hours related to this effort should be documented for federal Pittman-Robertson matching funds.
- Continue to offer traditional classroom programs and supporting field day options. These can be an alternative and complement to online education and testing for citizen who desire aspects of both. All options (traditional, online, and online + field day) should be viewed and standardized as basic hunter education courses.



3) Expand and Incentivize Advanced Hunter Education Options

All advanced hunter education offerings should engage Illinois hunters in focused areas of need and provide incentives for participation through recognized certifications of completion and designations of eligibility. Specific certifications can be integrated into various regulatory and voluntary standards within the agency and hunting community to assure a culture of safe and ethical hunting standards.

Potential examples include:

1) All waterfowl hunters who wish to participate in a draw held on public property must complete the free online advanced hunter education module, *“Waterfowl identification and key hunting safety principles.”*

2) Individuals who have completed the modules *“Tree Stand Safety”* and *“Whitetail Deer Shoot/Don’t Shoot Scenarios”* are given preference to register for a *“Learn-to-Hunt Deer”* workshop.

Once expanded, advanced hunter education programs will further develop hunting safety standards in Illinois and/or enhance an individual’s skills. Advanced hunter education options should include online, classroom, field days, and learn-to-hunt programs, each delivered as a selection of independent and incremental modules that build from the basic course certification.

- Develop online, subject-specific modules designated as Advanced Hunter Safety to include everything from entry level exposure to enhancement of shooting and safety practices and hunting skills. Specific topics could include Tree Stand Safety, ATV Safety and Legal Restrictions, Game Preparation and Safety, Field First Aid and Hazard Avoidance, Ethical and Legal Shoot/Don’t Shoot Scenarios, and Safe and Ethical Hunting Standards for Hunting Individual Species (turkey, waterfowl, dove, deer, etc.)
- Develop online safety refresher modules based on trends in Illinois hunter accident data, violation records, and changing technology such as pop-up blinds, drones and motion decoys. These could also be added as an optional link during any online license renewal/purchase.



- Standardize existing traditionally taught skills-based field days to refresh and reinforce core firearms safety standards and ethical/legal hunting considerations that were learned in the Basic Hunter Education Program.
- Develop additional advanced field day modules focusing on safety and legality involved in hunting specific species or use of equipment. These field courses will provide a vital step of mentorship and hands-on learning regarding safe hunting practices and effective methods of ethical and legal take. (Field days should provide a vital link among hunter education graduates, recruitment efforts, and a highly trained volunteer instructor network that can be further empowered to help deliver these efforts and make Illinois eligible for federal matching funds.)

4) Planning and Stewardship towards Volunteers

Trained volunteers are the backbone and civic voice of hunter education in Illinois. Their role needs to be shaped and clearly defined to help mobilize their expertise with a focus on delivering Advanced Hunter Education and Recruitment Retention needs. A growing number of species-focused NGOs are funding recruitment efforts and encouraging their membership to volunteer in their own education outreach. This creates an opportunity for further collaboration, funding and reciprocal gains in effective program delivery.

- Highlight the tremendous skill set and opportunity for mentorship within the existing instructor core. Before launching the online-only basic hunter education option, the hunter education coordinator should draft communications to the volunteer instructor network, recognizing instructors for their longtime commitment to excellence and safety, identifying the strengths of moving forward with an online option, and directing their future efforts into existing programs and the modular advanced courses. Specific attention should be given to highlighting the instructor's role and the critical need for meaningful mentorship in hunter education and recruitment and retention efforts.
- Review the certification process for instructors and adapt existing training procedures to represent new programs and encourage new, younger, and diverse instructors who can engage through online and social outlets.



5) Build and Plan Effective Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation Strategies from the Hunter Education Experience

A primary mission of state wildlife agencies is to grow, maintain, and serve the hunting, angling, and trapping constituency that provides the majority of funds accessible for wildlife conservation. Collectively these efforts are referred to as Recruitment, Retention and Reactivation (R3). Extensive national efforts are being made in the state, federal, and private sector to better understand how to best develop and deploy effective R3 strategies. The IDNR has made recent and impressive initial efforts to pilot R3 programs. These and other programs to grow and retain hunters should be advanced and integrated into the larger supporting framework highlighted within this report, with specific attention to the following:

- All R3 programs and associated advanced hunter education offerings should be mapped out using a results chain logic model that charts the necessary links between goals, identified metrics of success, benchmarks for continuation, and demonstrated return on investment.
- Internal leadership teams should be developed to ensure that each department understands how effective R3 strategies are developed and what specific role their department has in delivery, monitoring, and reporting. Key areas of responsibility include Hunter Education, Wildlife Management, Law Enforcement, Legal, Federal Aid, and the Director's Office.
- Develop specific learn-to-hunt programs that build on hunter education certifications, provide the critical link to mentorship, and help new hunters navigate existing barriers such as access and development of technical skills.
- Reach out to current and potential hunters through marketing campaigns informed by the demographics of hunter education program enrollment, electronic license sales data, and analytics of web- and social media-based communications.

6) Engagement and planning with NGOs

Engage in direct conversations with specific NGOs (National Wild Turkey Federation, Ducks Unlimited, Delta Waterfowl, Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation,



Quality Deer Management, etc.) to strengthen partnerships that serve hunter education, R3, and foster a community of hunter safety and mentoring.

- Look towards NGOs to help increase and leverage the number of hunter education instructors and advance expertise represented in volunteer instructor core.
- Include and engage NGOs into the advanced hunter education, mentoring, and learn-to-hunt programs -- many are already funding and coordinating these activities in the state.

7) Review and Expand Processes for Federal Aid Reporting and Match

The proposed changes and advancement to hunter education, licensing, and R3 will help the IDNR document, report and maximize funding under the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Act, better known as Pittman-Robertson or PR. An immediate and thorough system-wide review of existing practices and federal audit history should be done to determine what is working, if additional resources are needed, and how best to position the agency regarding federal funds over the next eight years. The review should be concluded by January 1 and include the following:

- Identify and chart existing sources of match that support the use of federal aid, with a specific focus on eligibility for hunter education (section 4 and 10), R3, and other needed wildlife management match.
- Specific to hunter education and R3, determine which current programs are generating match and identify strategies that maintain those sources.
- Look at all related hunter education and R3 programs being conducted in Illinois, including IDNR programs and those of others, and determine ways to better capture “unclaimed” match. This should include, hours of instruction, mentoring, supplies, waiving of overhead, partner effort, and traditional donations.
- Compare IDNR practices to other states who share the same U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service federal aid officer to determine effective governance and reporting strategies.

Several of these items could be facilitated through discussions at a regional workshop hosted in Illinois. This would highlight the IDNR’s leadership in this area and build valuable networks with other states and federal aid officials in the region.

