

4-H Volunteers Make a Difference for Allegan County Youth

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Allegan County MSU Extension (MSUE) continues to proudly host a very successful 4-H youth program in 2009, supporting forty-eight (48) 4-H Clubs with seven hundred and forty-eight (748) members. The total participation in all Allegan 4-H programs, including clubs, was 5,595 youth, 41 teen leaders and 210 adults.

The goal of the program is to create informal educational opportunities to help youth thrive in a complex and changing world. At the core of 4-H are adult and teen volunteers that make 4-H happen. Youth from 5 to 19 years old may participate in 4-H with the 5 to 13 year olds making up the majority. 4-H in Michigan is most popular in rural communities with less than 10,000 in population. However, it is important to know that only 9% of 4-Hers actually live on farms.

Local adult and teen volunteers working with MSUE 4-H educators and program assistants provide learning opportunities through clubs, camps and other activities. Many people may think that MSUE 4-H educators work extensively with youth, however their primary function is to recruit, screen and train volunteers to provide research based educational methods and environments for youth learning. Since a safe environment for youth is so important, 4-H educators use a standard volunteer selection process (VSP) that involves a background and criminal history check. The purpose of the process is to both help ensure the appropriate selection and placement of volunteers for MSU Extension activities involving youth, and to document all volunteer selection and placement. A similar process is used for MSU Extension staff who work with other youth programs.

How does one become a 4-H volunteer? If you decide you have the time and interest in helping kids as a group leader and providing a positive role model, the first step is to contact the county 4-H program staff to begin the VSP process. Once Educators check references and criminal history, they conduct a personal interview with each applicant, focused on skills in leadership, organization and human relationships. The interview will also focus on your understanding of diversity and youth development.

One indication of both the 4-H program success that can be directly credited back to the work of 4-H volunteers was revealed in a recent survey focused on college attendance by Michigan 4-H alumni. It was found that 38% of all State of Michigan 18-24 year olds are enrolled to go to or were in college. That percentage grew to 53% for all 4-H high school seniors and graduates. In addition, 66% of 4-H alumni were enrolled in college who were the most active participants and attended Capitol Experience, Exploration Days, or the Great Lakes & Natural Resources Camp.

Further, when one places a financial value on volunteer time, that contribution to the future success of the youth they serve is most impressive. In 2003, Michigan 4-H estimated that volunteers averaged about 36 hours per year at a value of \$17.19/hour. At that rate, Allegan County 4-H volunteers contributed a minimum of \$155,329 worth of time to the youth and their community in 2009.

To learn more about 4-H or becoming a 4-H volunteer, contact the Allegan MSU Extension office at 269-673-0370 or go to www.msue.msu.edu/allegan and click on 4-H.