4-H Issues Forums Impact Rural Delaware Communities

**Introduction**

As a result of a grant from National 4-H Council through USDA, Delaware 4-H selected five rural Delaware communities to participate in the Engaging Youth, Serving Communities Program. The goal of the program is to help youth and adults in these diverse communities identify issues; and using the youth-adult partnership model, as well as the National Issues Forum process, help local citizens articulate possible solutions. The four-year long process builds significant human and social capital in each community and creates lasting outcomes.

The local 4-H educator in each community assembles an action team of 10-15 youth and 5-10 adults. Using a needs-assessment approach, action teams identify a topic of local concern. After topic selection, the teams conduct research about the topic to provide background to conduct a community issue forum. The team attends training to learn the roles of facilitator, scribe, timer, greeter and more. Teens are trained using the National Issue Forum Booklets, but develop their own questions from their research to customize the topic to their community. All the youth on the team have an active role and the adults serve as helpers and guides.

After training and practice, the teens are ready to market and hold their forum. Forums occur during school time or after hours depending upon the desires of the community. Community leaders, parents, and other partners who have an interest in the topic are invited, as well as the general public. Forum participation ranges from 40-200 people. Action plan initiatives reach hundreds. Following the forum, the youth and adult team meets to discuss the thoughts and comments expressed by the community, and develop their action plan. They then use a $2000 mini-grant to implement their plan.

Action plans have been amazing in their ability to complement the previous year’s initiative and reach many members of the community.

**What were the Issues?**

Over four years, issue identification was diverse. Teams focused on Land Use (2), Energy, Drugs (2), Healthy Weight (2), Internet Safety, Community Values, Violence (4), Racial and Ethnic Tension (2) and Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety.

**What Happened?**

As a result of the mini-grants, 4-H action teams:

- Purchased Spanish language materials for the Georgetown library
- Held anti-drug events for over 500 people in Harrington
- Conducted an internet safety night for parents of teens at Lake Forest High School
- Developed a nature trail that later morphed into a fitness trail in Middletown
- Developed a car seat and bike helmet bank in a Hispanic community in Georgetown
- Developed a “competition” between students at two high schools in Middletown to measure increases in physical activity and weight loss

For more information, contact: de4h@udel.edu

It is the policy of the Delaware Cooperative Extension System that no person shall be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex, disability, age or national origin.