

OPINION

Notes from UW Extension

SO, WHAT IS 4-H?

By Debbie Moellendorf, 4-H Youth Development Educator UW-Extension Lincoln County

4-H is a community of young people across America who are learning leadership, citizenship and life skills. In 4-H, youth and adults work together to learn new things, meet new friends, and have fun. The purpose of 4-H is to provide real-life experiences for youth through a fun and practical, learn-by-doing, educational program and to provide opportunities for adults to work with youth in their development.

4-H is open to any youth between the grades of 5-year-old kindergarten through one year past high school graduation regardless of race, color, creed, religion, sex, national origin, disability, ancestry, sexual orientation, pregnancy, marital or parental status. As a 4-H member youth belong to a 4-H club in their community. In 4-H clubs, youth serve as officers and learn to conduct meetings, handle club funds, and facilitate group decision-making. In a growing number of communities, 4-H youth serve as youth representatives on local coalition or as members of Teen Courts. They give back to their communities. 4-H members get involved in volunteer projects to protect the environment, mentor younger children and help people who are less fortunate.

Do I have to live on a farm and have animals to be in 4-H? No. Youth involved in 4-H live in cities, the country and on farms. During the 2010-11 4-H year, over 70% of Lincoln County 4-H members did not live on a farm.

Along with Animal Science projects there are also over 80 projects to choose from in Arts and Communication; Natural Resources and Environmental Education; Mechanical Sciences; Family, Home and Health; Plant and Soil Sciences; Service Learning and Citizenship; Science, Technology and Engineering Projects; International Programs; and Youth Leadership. And if a young person can't find a specific project that matches their interest from one of these 80 projects, they can also take the Self-Determined project.

In addition to projects, youth can also choose to participate in other 4-H events and activities. Examples include music, drama, camps, or educational trips to other parts of the country and world. Through 4-H projects, events and activities, young people learn to be leaders, active citizens and develop important life skills such as decision making, communication and the ability to work with others.

How are adults involved in 4-H? The 4-H program would not be possible without the dedication of the 176 adults who serve as 4-H volunteer leaders. These adult volunteers carry out the roles of club organizational leaders, project leaders, activity leaders and resource leaders to supplement the work of Extension professionals in providing educational opportunities for young people throughout Lincoln County. Volunteer leaders receive resources and training from 4-H Youth Development professionals to assist them in carrying out their roles. In a recent survey of Wisconsin 4-H volunteer leaders, volunteers indicated they contributed an average of \$41 an year

and spend around eight hours a month volunteering. With a conservative value of \$10 per hour, that volunteer service was worth \$168,960 to Lincoln County during the 2010-11 4-H year.

In addition to the impact on youth, volunteers surveyed also responded that volunteering with Wisconsin 4-H contributed to their own personal growth and enrichment. For 35 percent of volunteers, working with 4-H contributed to their sense of community and social capital. Nearly a quarter of volunteers said they gained new skills in public speaking, leadership and organization while developing more confidence. Each 4-H volunteer brings special skills and expertise to their work, helping 4-H Youth Development staff provide quality programming for youth in more areas. Volunteers involved with 4-H devote time and energy to the program, and their impacts – from increased confidence to strengthened communication skills to new talents and interests – are visible on the youth they work with.

Can the whole family be involved in 4-H? Yes, in fact many families have indicated that 4-H is something they choose to be involved in because the whole family can participate. There are many ways for the whole family to be involved in 4-H. Be active in your club. Participate in club meetings, events and activities. There are many county events and activities as well that family will enjoy. Families receive a 4-H newsletter every two months filled with information about upcoming opportunities that they can get involved in. We also encourage families to subscribe to the Lincoln County 4-H Blog at <http://fyi.uwex.edu/lincolncounty4h/> for up to the minute 4-H news. When you subscribe you will receive a weekly email listing items that have been added to the blog that week.

How can a person join 4-H? If you are interested in learning more about 4-H or how to get involved in Lincoln County 4-H, please feel free to contact Debbie or Amanda at the UW-Extension office at 715-539-1072 or visit our website at <http://lincoln.uwex.edu/> or subscribe to the Lincoln County 4-H Blog. We will be happy to help you get started on your 4-H experience.

Upcoming 4-H events:

- Saturday, January 21, 2012 – 4-H Music and Lip Sync Festival at 9:00 a.m. at St. John's School in Merrill. The public is invited to view musical performances performed by 4-H members from throughout the county

- Saturday, February 18, 2012 – Communications Contest at 9 a.m. at Lincoln County Service Center in Merrill. The public is invited to attend this event and hear speeches, poems, stories, demonstrations or view puppetry performances performed by youth from throughout the county.

- Saturday, March 24, 2012 – 4-H Project Discovery Day from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Tomahawk Middle School. Youth from throughout the county are invited to attend this event to learn about the variety of projects they can participate in through 4-H.

More information and registration materials for each of these events is available on both the 4-H blog and the UW-Extension website.