

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Supporting volunteers during a pandemic: creating resiliency

AT A GLANCE

In the face of the pandemic, 4-H professionals had to rapidly adopt online tools to meet the needs of 4-H volunteers to continue to lead University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development programming.

The Situation

Many have experienced feelings of isolation, disconnectedness or of being overwhelmed in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially 4-H professionals and volunteers who have had to adapt significantly to moving 4-H programs to online options. The stress of juggling youth who are home from school, potential job loss or working from home, and maintaining involvement in the 4-H program have been felt by families across the state.

Our Response

Idaho's 4-H professionals quickly responded to meet the needs of 4-H volunteers and youth across the state since the pandemic began. In an initial survey conducted in May 2020 of 4-H volunteers in Canyon County, the data showed many had feelings of discomfort trying to manage their way through a pandemic and using online tools. Out of the volunteers polled, 26% were not sure how they would meet yet, 11% responded they were having trouble just keeping up with everyday life and 53% said they were interested in utilizing online lessons.

Many 4-H programs, events and activities were rapidly changed to online delivery in response to pandemic



An online 4-H Know Your Government youth meeting with Ada County Prosecutor's office in January 2021. Photo by A. Taggart.

safety precautions. 4-H professionals increased communication, training opportunities and outreach to 4-H volunteers and clubs. Many 4-H professionals increased communication both internally and externally by using mail, email, social media, group texting and phone calls. From this communication, many 4-H volunteers were interested in being trained to use online tools. 4-H professionals met online with volunteers and provided materials through email and mail to build volunteer skills in online learning environments. A focus was placed on increasing connectivity with youth, volunteers and 4-H professionals to continue providing 4-H positive youth development opportunities.

Program Outcomes

Staff provided training to volunteers and met with them regularly to meet their needs and support them throughout the 4-H year, and thereby help youth members. Staff and volunteers came together to keep youth feeling involved and co-create learning experiences online.

A survey was sent out during December to capture information from volunteers from the start of the pandemic in March. Over 150 volunteers responded to the survey, representing 35 of the 44 counties in Idaho. Volunteers indicated that communication from their county office met their needs (82.9% definitely yes and probably yes). One of the major areas surveyed was confidence level in holding a virtual/online meeting before and during COVID restrictions. Using the Wilcoxon Rank Test there was a significant difference ($p < .001$) from confidence level prior to COVID restrictions to December during COVID restrictions (see Figure 1). Volunteers in the 4-H program achieved these results through their tenacity and continued support from staff.

Volunteers were further asked about their preference for holding future meetings online. For 4-H club meetings with youth, 66.67% would prefer to go back to face to face meetings and 25.33% would be interested in hosting a hybrid in person and online meeting. For adult volunteer committee and association meetings, respondents indicated that 56.95% would prefer to go back to face to face and 33.11% would be interested in a hybrid in person and online meeting.

One major concern during the pandemic has been internet connectivity. Survey respondents indicated that they had access to high-speed internet and other types of internet connection that should allow them to meet

online (see Figure 2). This warrants further study as this survey was conducted online.

Future research is warranted to determine the effectiveness of creating a supportive environment for both staff and volunteers during a crisis.

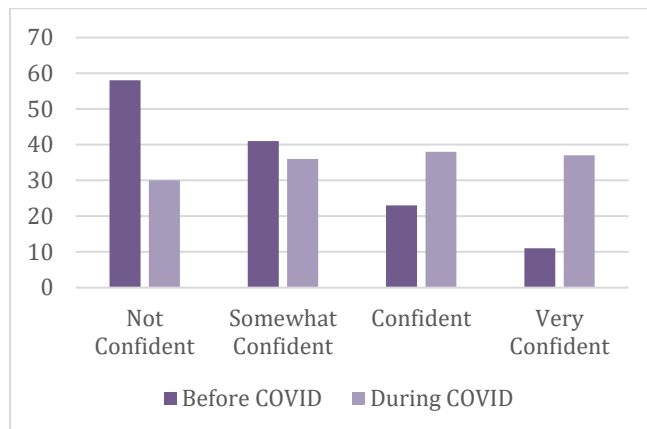


Figure 1. Confidence Level in holding a Virtual/Online Meeting Before and During COVID Restrictions ($p < .001$ using Wilcoxon Rank Test)

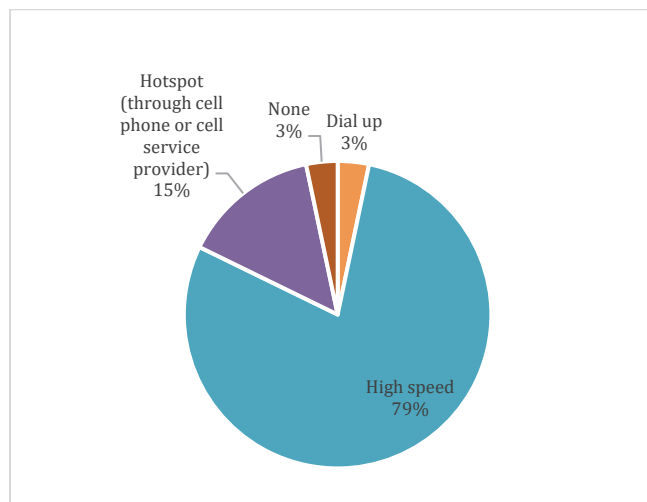


Figure 2. Type of Internet Service

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