The Panhandle 4-H Team: A Positive Transition in Northern Idaho Youth Development Programming

The Situation
From 2001 to 2003, the Panhandle region (Benewah, Bonner, Boundary, Kootenai & Shoshone counties) lost two full time county-based Extension faculty positions due to budget reductions. One position had major 4-H/Youth responsibilities, and the two part-time and two full-time county funded 4-H program assistants were unable to take on additional responsibilities due to hourly wage restrictions and lack of supplemental county funding. Although other faculty attempted to assume some of the 4-H responsibilities, their time was limited due to other needs identified by local advisory committees.

In addition to the challenges of reduced staffing, the Panhandle counties also had significant differences related to 4-H program operations and management. The lack of continuity was negatively impacting the overall strength and credibility of the 4-H program.

Our Response
In 2003, the Panhandle region received funding from University of Idaho Extension to hire one full-time 4-H Program Coordinator. By partnering with commissioners in Bonner and Kootenai counties we combined existing local support to establish full-time 4-H Program Coordinators in both counties. These individuals have taken on a majority of the day-to-day management of 4-H programs, activities and events within their respective counties.

The Area 4-H/Youth Extension Educator duties were then assumed by the Kootenai/Shoshone County Extension Educator who had primary responsibility for 4-H in Kootenai County. While still operating out of the Kootenai County Extension Office and providing local program support, the responsibilities were expanded to include developing curricula, creating program continuity, providing educational training sessions for program staff and volunteers, and providing overall 4-H/Youth Development program management within the Panhandle.

Recognizing and respecting the past history and autonomy that each county 4-H program has had, incremental changes were made to assist in developing program continuity which will enable us to better serve the educational needs of adult volunteers, youth and their families.
Program Outcomes

The Panhandle 4-H Team has made significant progress in establishing a common foundation upon which to build greater consistency in regional program development and implementation. We are more effectively utilizing our available human resources in conducting volunteer education training. We are continuing to work on enhancing curriculum management, and to clarify/communicate program expectations more effectively to all leaders throughout the region.

Within the 14 months since this program was implemented, our Panhandle 4-H Team has met on a bi-monthly basis and has made significant progress in bridging the differences that had existed within the 4-H program from county to county. This process will ultimately benefit the multitude of 4-H members and adult volunteer leaders with whom we work. A number of Panhandle publications and resources have been developed, including:

- Panhandle 4-H Operations Handbook
- Panhandle 4-H Leaders Guide
- Panhandle 4-H Website
- Various programmatic forms

Team members have reported that most members, parents and leaders have been very supportive of developing a consistent set of guidelines/standards. These efforts have enhanced local communication and have assisted new staff to get “up to speed” more effectively.

Other Panhandle Extension faculty noted that not only has this transition produced a stronger network of support for faculty and staff, but has enabled them more time to focus in other areas of Extension programming. Sue Traver (Bonner County Extension Educator) noted that her 4-H/youth assignment has dropped from 30% to just 5% in the past 2 years. She is able to focus additional effort in Community Development programming to address rural poverty and business customer service training. Through the customer service training alone, she has reached over 250 new clients in just the past 6 months.

Boundary County Extension Educator, Carol Hampton noted a drop in her 4-H assignment from 35% to 5% as a result of the Panhandle 4-H Team programming effort. “This change has allowed me to focus more attention on volunteer leader training, outreach to after-school populations and expansion of programming efforts with adult family and consumer science audiences.” said Hampton.

“Our goal is to maintain a high-quality 4-H program while developing a common operational framework within the 5 northern counties,” said Jim Wilson, Area 4-H/Youth Extension Educator. “We understand and respect the fact that for various reasons some minor differences may need to exist based on local circumstances; however, to most effectively utilize our limited human and financial resources, developing consistency wherever feasible is vitally important.”

The Future:
While we have made initial in-roads in developing a truly dynamic multi-county youth development program structure, additional actions/changes will be necessary to reach our ultimate goals. These goals include greater 4-H program continuity and having at least one full-time Program coordinator in each of the respective counties.

Preliminary results have shown excellent volunteer participation. We have achieved high evaluations of our educational training sessions, and member enrollments have remained strong. We will continue to monitor this information over time to further assess the overall effectiveness of programmatic changes and educational efforts.

Recognizing the process of change can be very uncomfortable for some volunteers and staff, education and incremental adjustments will need to be phased in over the next 3-5 years as this transformation takes place.

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