

Title: Georgia 4-H Serves as Lead State Advisor to National 4-H Tech Changemakers Project

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Summary: Through a partnership with National 4-H Council and Microsoft Cooperation, Georgia 4-H was invited to serve as the Lead State Advisor on the 4-H Tech Changemakers project.

Situation: There are 23.4 million people in the United States who lack broadband internet access (Federal Communications Commission, 2019). While access and affordability are a concern, for true digital inclusion, communities must adopt and use these technological services. This leads to overall community economic development and vitality. Sparse populations, weak infrastructure, net neutrality infringement, and topography challenges are some of the many reasons internet providers refuse to service rural America.

An increasing body of research indicates that if broadband access is expanded in rural areas and the average community member does not possess digital literacy skills, they will likely not purchase and utilize the service. Therefore, internet service providers have little to no incentive to expand their coverage areas. The digital inclusion pathway commonly includes three barriers: (a) readiness - in which the user lacks basic computer skills; (b) taste - in which the user lacks confidence, need or desire to use a computer; and (c) access - in which the user lacks access to computers, (Reder, 2015). Perhaps now more than ever, a COVID-19 world shows the importance of connectivity for the workforce population, youth education, healthcare, and e-commerce.

Response: The 4-H Tech Changemakers project is coordinated by National 4-H Council and the Microsoft Cooperation. The University of Georgia Extension/Georgia 4-H serves as the lead state advisor of the project. The 4-H Tech Changemakers project uses an adult-youth partnership model to empowers teens as teachers of digital literacy in areas with a lack of broadband Internet access. The 4-H teen leaders work cooperatively with adult Extension/4-H staff members and volunteers to plan, implement, and evaluate needs-driven educational programming in their local communities.

The 4-H Tech Changemakers goals are to: (a) empower adult community members to adopt and use technology to improve their opportunities and outcomes through the use of broadband internet; (b) raise the visibility of the partnership and mission as 4-H Tech Changemakers engage with lawmakers, media, and other stakeholders. Teens serve as spokespeople to showcase and expand the 'youth voice' in this critical conversation; and (c) infuse 4-H/positive youth development approaches concerning civic engagement and technology skills development throughout the project.

Results/Impacts: After the initial 1.0 pilot phase in 2018, Microsoft awarded National 4-H Council \$3 million over 12 months to develop, implement, and evaluate the 4-H Tech Changemakers project for 80 communities across 13 states. National 4-H Council utilized the National Digital Education Extension Team (NDEET) a team of Extension professionals and interested partners who are passionate about digital access issues. Georgia 4-H was selected as the lead state advisor for the project. These partners led a national training for state project leaders and then hosted three regional trainings for adult and teen leaders implementing the project in their communities. NDEET and Georgia 4-H developed a 106-page guidebook that provides valuable information for counties implementing the project, including program planning, community partnerships, youth recruitment, and grab-and-go lesson plans. Following the trainings, Georgia 4-H composes monthly e-mails to the state leaders, sharing resources and providing program updates. Virtual learning lessons for adult and teen leaders and hosted quarterly and individual one-on-one coaching sessions are provided bi-monthly for the state leaders. Georgia 4-H maintains a website with program resources.

The second phase of this project concluded in July 2020. According to reports submitted by the state leaders, 426 youth leaders and 250 adults served 19,300 hours with the project, reaching over 10,000 community participants with 475 total classes. Most frequent workshop topics included privacy & security, computer applications, smart devices, and information technology. Communities formed 257 unique partnerships, with the largest being in the education sector followed by social and civic organizations. One youth stated said, “Learning about the digital divide has made me so passionate about teaching others... I want to help others that want to learn more, but that don’t have access to that education.” An adult workshop participant shared, “thanks for the Tech Changemaker classes that I attended, I learned that I should not be afraid of online research or purchasing if I pay attention to the safety tips the kids explained. The information the kids presented was very helpful and well explained. I have even joined online classes following internet safety procedures.” Due to the success of the program, Microsoft has pledged additional funding to support the project through 2023.