
Title: Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol Reaches Larger Audience Than Ever Before

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Summary: 4-H Day at the Capitol is typically held in Atlanta during each regular session of the General Assembly to provide 4-H members a hands-on civic engagement learning experience. However, this year's experience went entirely virtual due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. Though unable to physically gather under the gold dome this year, 4-H'ers were still able to learn about the structure and function of our state legislature, gain understanding about the lawmaking process, develop skills for interacting with elected officials, and even virtually tour the Georgia State Capitol. Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol was made possible through partnership with the Georgia Center for Civic Engagement and the generous contributions of Gulfstream Aerospace. Thanks to this support, civic engagement toolkits were mailed to each 4-H office and online, interactive resources were developed and made available to 4-H professionals, empowering them to host a Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol within their county programs.

Situation: 4-H is the nation's largest youth development organization, with civic engagement being a core focus. This aligns with the mission of Georgia 4-H to assist youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive and contributing members of society. This mission is largely accomplished by providing various civic engagement opportunities for our state's youth in partnership with caring adults trained in positive youth development. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development found that youth involved in 4-H are 3.4 times more likely to contribute to their communities than youth who do not participate in 4-H. Leadership studies indicate that youth who participate in leadership roles are highly motivated, more developmentally adjusted than their peers, and, in general, are more likely to feel an improved sense of support from their local communities (Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg, 2006). Furthermore, if adolescents are to develop the skills necessary for adulthood, they must learn basic skills for everyday life (Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development, 1995).

Through civic engagement programs, 4-H empowers youth to become well-informed citizens who actively engage as leaders in their communities. Young people learn about civic affairs, build critical-thinking skills, and develop the confidence and understanding necessary to effectively interact with government and civic leaders. 4-H provides opportunities for youth to learn about and practice these necessary life skills through activities such as Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol. By taking part in an event like Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol, young people can acquire the leadership life skills they need to become socially responsible for their actions and to work well with others to achieve both individual and collective goals. Youth gain experience in understanding themselves, communicating, getting along with others, making decisions, and managing and working with groups.

The ability to build networks of connection and support is another invaluable life skill that 4-H helps to teach and foster. While we've all likely heard the expression, "It's not what you know -- it's who you know," the U.S. Department of Labor suggests that our networks may be just as important to successful job searching as one's life skills and experience. In fact, according to Cornell University's Career Center, almost 80% of available jobs are not widely advertised, which reinforces the importance of having large networks of connections.

<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/odep/topics/youth/softskills/networking.pdf>

Response: 4-H Day at the Capitol is usually held annually in Atlanta during the regular session of the General Assembly to provide 4-H members a hands-on civic engagement learning experience. 4-H Day at the Capitol is designed for mature middle and high school-aged 4-H'ers. Typically, the program encourages 4-H'ers to visit with their elected representatives, serve as House and Senate pages, witness fellow 4-H'ers being honored for their leadership achievements, and hear the State 4-H President address both legislative chambers. Georgia 4-H also hosts a luncheon so youth can eat with and meet legislators from around the state. Recognizing the importance of developing civic awareness early in life, Gulfstream Aerospace has become a perennial sponsor of 4-H Day at the Capitol.

However, this year's experience went entirely virtual due to the limitations imposed by the ongoing pandemic. So, Georgia 4-H youth in elementary through high school were invited to participate in "Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol" and were still able to have a positive civic engagement experience. Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol was made possible through partnership with the Georgia Center for Civic Engagement and through the generous contributions of Gulfstream Aerospace. Thanks to such unwavering support, civic engagement toolkits were mailed to each 4-H office and interactive online resources were developed and shared with 4-H professionals, empowering them to host a Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol within their local programs. Furthermore, every legislator in Georgia's General Assembly received an informational packet containing 4-H infographics, the annual Georgia 4-H Cloverleaf Report, handwritten thank you notes from 4-H'ers, and small memento with Georgia 4-H branding. These packets helped to tell part of the 4-H story to our legislators, and 4-H youth were encouraged to contact their legislators to share their own 4-H stories, as well.

Results/Impacts: Despite the challenges of creating a virtual civic engagement experience that would be as instructive as the face-to-face event, Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol was a tremendous success. In fact, more than twice as many youths were able to participate in the virtual experience compared to the usual participation of fewer than 500 students in a typical year. In total, 1,223 youth from across the state participated, in some way, in the Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol.

The success of Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol was dependent on the facilitation provided by local 4-H leaders. 4-H agents noted that the virtual nature of the resources and curriculum meant that they could pick-and-choose components to incorporate into their club meetings, based on the needs and interests of their audiences. They also appreciated being able to utilize the curriculum and tools on their own schedule – another advantage of going virtual. This year's program also eliminated the challenges of travel, particularly for those counties in the southernmost counties.

"Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol is an outstanding opportunity to help youth develop civic understanding, leadership skills, citizenship skills, and helps prepare them to put those skills to use in their community," said Jason Estep, Extension 4-H Specialist. "Plus, it is one of the most fun ways to learn about our state's legislative process!"

One of the most popular components of Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol has been the virtual capitol tour – hosted by Georgia Virtual Tours, Georgia Center for Civic Engagement, University of Georgia Libraries, et al. – accompanied by a virtual scavenger hunt designed by Toni Hunlen, a Georgia 4-H AmeriCorps VISTA member. Another notable resource is an interactive simulation that follows a bill through the Georgia legislative process from initial concept to the Governor's signing it into law. The resource is set up like an interactive game and is called "Let's Make a Law! How a Bill Becomes Law in Georgia." Jason Estep, Extension 4-H Specialist, designed the simulation with inspiration from a similar resource created by the State Bar of Texas's Law-Related Education Department. With a variety of activities for individuals or groups, for virtual or in-person sessions, and for both younger and older students, Virtual 4-H Day at the Capitol offered a smorgasbord of civic education and civic engagement experiences for more of Georgia's young people than ever before.

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The University of Georgia 4-H program is the largest youth leadership organization in the state.

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