
Title: Georgia 4-H Faculty and Project SAFE Coaches Lead Program Rebound

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Summary: Georgia 4-H offers multiple programs across the broad content areas of Agriculture and STEM, Healthy Living and Civic Engagement to help youth develop into well-rounded adults. Within Healthy Living, the Georgia 4-H Shooting Sports program (Project SAFE) offers youth positive learning experiences in one or more shooting sports disciplines.

Situation: Project SAFE allows 4-H to reach many youth who may not participate in other parts of the Georgia 4-H program. Since we are using archery equipment and firearms, it is essential that club leaders complete 12 hours of training that emphasizes positive youth development, 4-H program management and, of course, safety. This volunteer training is offered three (3) times each program year. Georgia 4-H strives to train 200 new shooting sports coaches to maintain an active roster of 1200 coaches statewide. There is natural attrition among volunteers as adults move, change jobs, experience health changes, or “retire” after serving multiple years. Only 54 coaches were certified during the three (3) trainings held in August, October and November 2020. Each shooting sports discipline has a coach to student ratio for safety. Fewer coaches means less youth Georgia 4-H can reach through Project SAFE.

Response: It has been said that “perception is reality.” COVID-19 disrupted nearly everything. Georgia 4-H was impacted as many volunteers got out of the habit of serving during the times we had to be separated or operate under restrictive measures. Our March through May 2021 SAFE Matches all operated under COVID-19 protective measures as appropriate. We focused on positive expectations in all pre-event communications. We knew our 4-H member enrollment and volunteer numbers were down, but we resolutely moved forward. While participation was down from prepandemic matches, 1538 youth were able to enjoy their shooting sports discipline and compete with their peers from all across Georgia. Youth, families and coaches were pleased with the season.

Capitalizing on the “Georgia 4-H SAFE is back” perception, we encouraged county faculty to make every effort to recruit new coaches to restore program capacity.

Results/Impacts: County faculty worked hard to recruit new volunteers to attend Project SAFE Certification Training. Attendance at the three (3) training weekends rebounded and 160 adults were trained. This translates to nearly three (3) times the number (54) trained the previous year. The expanded coaching corps was instrumental in 22% more youth participating in seven state matches in Spring 2022 than the same matches in Spring 2021. While state competitions allow 4-H youth to demonstrate skill mastery, the sense of belonging that comes from being in a 4-H shooting sports club is more meaningful. With county faculty focus on volunteer recruitment and support along with an increased number of Project SAFE volunteer coaches, club membership grew 84% during 2022 (2804-5155). It is easy to read statistics and not fully grasp that 2351 more youth had a long term, beneficial 4-H experience in 2022!