

INFORMATIONAL PAPER

**STRENGTHENING VOLUNTEERS: 4-H LEADER  
RETREATS**

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## Abstract

Strengthening the knowledge, skills and insight of the 4-H club leader are the essential elements to maintaining vibrant 4-H youth development programming. When youth join the local 4-H club, the primary contact is the club leader. It is a challenge for 4-H Youth Development Educators to keep 4-H club leaders engaged, motivated and informed on a consistent basis. In an effort to provide opportunities for leaders to develop skills and learn best practices of youth development, Leader Retreats were developed to serve the needs of the Vernon County 4-H club leaders. Over an 18-month period, 78% of Vernon County 4-H club leaders have attended the semi-annual Leader Retreat and have significantly increased their skill development and capacity building as effective 4-H club leaders.

**Situation:** On-going training, resources and support for 4-H club leaders are critical elements to their continued success and essential for the long-term sustainability of a county 4-H program. It is important that 4-H Youth Development Educators realize that today's parent volunteers, who are typically willing to serve in leadership roles, may resist long-term time commitments. The volunteers of yesterday that served for 30 years are quickly vanishing. Leadership and membership of 4-H clubs is evolving at a more rapid rate. At the same time, expectations of society demand a more sophisticated, better prepared, and more accountable volunteer. UW Extension Department of Youth Development professionals have a responsibility to help meet those expectations.

The ES-237 data shows that Vernon County 4-H consists of 23 community clubs that serve 683 youth and are supported by 199 volunteers. Youth Development professionals are challenged to provide positive youth development opportunities for 4-H members, supported primarily by the general club leader, and secondarily by a core group of adult volunteers. Engagement of club leaders is the essential element to a healthy, thriving 4-H community club program. In Vernon County it was a challenge to engage club leaders and foster a common understanding and vision for the 4-H program with a single annual club leader meeting. The logistical challenge of Vernon County, being nearly 100 miles wide, meant that many 4-H leaders were traveling well over an hour, often times on dark, winding, rural roads, to attend multiple 4-H committee meetings with a singular focus. An informal needs assessment, with volunteers and staff, indicated the need for a semi-annual comprehensive educational and informational session to address multiple issues related to 4-H club leadership. In an effort to provide opportunities for leaders to learn best practices of youth development, new programming initiatives, and strengthen their relationships

with other club leaders, 4-H Leader Retreats were developed. The innovative 4-H Leader Retreats are not a typical meeting. The half-day Leader Retreat features highly interactive education, engaging team building, active inquiry, and facilitated discussion. Additionally, leaders have a voice in creating the agenda for future Leader Retreats.

### **Objectives:**

- \* 4-H Club Leaders will participate in educational opportunities in Vernon County.
- \* 4-H Club Leaders will identify needs related to 4-H clubs in the county.
- \* 4-H Club Leaders will report increased skill development.
- \* 4-H Club Leaders will network with other leaders and feel supported in their role.

Objectives are evaluated by reviewing number of participants, written evaluations, subjective statements, observations and follow up on items discussed (club chartering, fair entries, increasing parental involvement, etc.).

**Methods:** The Vernon County 4-H Youth Development Educator conducts the Leader Retreats. Multiple teaching techniques (lecture, discussion, brainstorming, reflection and sharing) are used to accommodate a wide variety of cognitive abilities and learning styles. Each Leader Retreat is unique in that different topics are addressed.

### **Participants:**

All 4-H club leaders and co-leaders are invited (Appendix A) to the Leader Retreat. Any leader unable to attend the Leader Retreat can send a delegate in their place. This has been a great way to engage other adults in a leadership role. Childcare is not provided and this is communicated in advance. Also attending the Leader Retreat are the executive members of the 4-H Leaders' Board and youth development staff.

**Facilities:** To foster a retreat environment, a site is selected away from the Extension office when feasible. Vernon County 4-H has utilized a vineyard, park pavilion and a restaurant. Most facilities welcome 4-H groups and many will negotiate a discount. Private homes are avoided, as there may be liability and accessibility issues. Leader Retreat sites are handicapped accessible, well-lit and spacious to accommodate small group work.

**Expense:** Given limited financial resources, creativity is needed in seeking funding for Leader Retreats. Costs will vary widely, depending on facilities and options available in each county. Approaching the 4-H Leader's board for funding is an appropriate place to begin. In Vernon County, the Leader Retreats are regarded as an essential educational program and are fully funded by the 4-H Leaders' Board for \$1,200 annually.

**Retreat Format:** While the topics addressed vary with each retreat, the standard format for the Leader Retreat is: ice breaker, team builder, identified educational topics, sharing of a topic (such as fundraising) and individual club experiences related to that topic. Rounding out the retreat are a meal and social time along with a summary and evaluation. See Appendix B for sample agenda.

**Teaching Activities:** Teaching activities led by the 4-H Youth Development Educator include a variety of teaching methods including lecture, facilitated discussion, reflection, and problem solving. The core curriculum for Leader Retreats is located on the password protected Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development, Staff Resources, Program Management website. This resource provides in-depth information in multiple formats, which are helpful for educators as they focus in on important issues in their counties. Over the past two years specific sessions addressed at Leader Retreats included: club chartering, annual volunteer training, involving people with disabilities, volunteer interest survey, financial resources, fundraising guidelines,

risk management and parliamentary procedure. Additional volunteer development resources may be utilized depending upon the needs of the group.

**Results:** Three Leader Retreats have been conducted to date.

**Retreat #1**, held in August of 2007, focused on identifying needs in the overall county 4-H program, understanding county program policy changes in the 4-H family handbook, enrollment fees and 4-H literature. Evaluation of this retreat was useful in measuring the impact of this new teaching format. Evaluation was completed in January 2008, six months after the initial retreat. This was done to most accurately measure the effectiveness of teaching the new enrollment process after the enrollment process had occurred. The enrollment process began two months after the Leader Retreat. Club leaders who did not attend the retreat were provided written information on topics covered at the retreat. Evaluations by club leaders who attended the August 2007 retreat (Appendix C) showed significantly higher levels of knowledge prior to the enrollment process as compared with leaders who did not attend the August 2007 Leader Retreat (Appendix D). The increased knowledge reflected in the leaders who attended the retreat validate the effectiveness of the Leader Retreat. Direct results of this training were 19 out of 23 clubs had enrollments turned in on time with significantly fewer errors than in previous years.

**Retreat #2**, held in January of 2008, focused on the needs identified at the previous retreat. Concerns identified by club leaders included:

- the large number of youth
- lack of parent participation
- keeping youth involved
- very young club members
- competing with other commitments

- decreasing meeting attendance
- food stand help not showing up
- officers not at meetings

Using a group process the leaders worked together to rank these concerns and decided that the primary issue was leading effective meetings.

**Retreat #3**, held in July 2008, focused on leading effective meetings, introducing 4-H club chartering and the county fair entry process. Teaching included lecture, handouts and discussion on 4-H club chartering, which includes educational programming, recreation activities and community service activities. Other topics addressed included policy changes regarding Arts Fest and an explanation of what is done at the County Extension Office to support the 4-H club leaders, such as enrollment processing, project leader listings, fair entry questions and award trip applications.

Evaluation of this retreat (see Appendix E) reveals significant increase in knowledge and understanding of 4-H club chartering, club educational activities, community service activities and county fair entry processes. Fewer errors are seen on enrollment and county fair entry forms, increasing parental involvement in the 4-H program overall, and an increase in fundraising ideas have been direct results of the Leader Retreats in the Vernon County 4-H program. Subjective comments from leaders on the evaluation included: “I definitely have more ideas for my club and know of more resources;” “I now feel more comfortable in contacting other leaders;” and “I appreciate all the information and especially the time of sharing ideas.” Leaders reflected on changes they will carry forward as a result of the Leader Retreat, responses included: “I will share club concerns with other adults;” “I will include a physical activity as part of each

meeting;” and “we will incorporate educational activities and community service projects into our club activities.” Recently four longtime club leaders retired and they were readily replaced, one of the new leaders commenting that she had heard there was great support for leaders through the Leader Retreats. The support that club leaders receive at the Leader Retreats is valued and appreciated.

**Tips:** Clearly, the model of a Leader Retreat has provided positive outcomes in the Vernon County 4-H program. There are important considerations when using this teaching format.

- It can be very frustrating to schedule a date, time and location that works for everyone. In geographically large counties, such as Vernon County, the 4-H Youth Development Educator may want to consider conducting retreats in various locations throughout the county to make the retreats accessible for all club leaders.
- Managing costs can be a challenge and creativity is essential when looking at this issue.
- The 4-H Youth Development Educator’s enthusiasm is a key component in developing a successful Leader Retreat. The significant investment of time and energy to develop the program may not suit all personalities and work styles.
- The promotion of a Leader Retreat should be multifaceted, utilizing 4-H newsletter, UW Extension county website, local radio and newspapers. Promotion is recommended to begin a few months before the first Leader Retreat.
- Expect some censure from longtime club leaders who have never heard of a Leader Retreat. Be patient, let the word spread that the Leader Retreats are educational and enjoyable.

- Even though materials can be picked up later, be aware that it is very difficult to duplicate the day.
- Any educators brave enough to try a Leader Retreat will be practicing experiential education and will no doubt learn from the experience.
- The Leader Retreat is a form of recognition, which honors the volunteer club leader efforts. Small tokens of appreciation presented at the Leader Retreat are effective and much appreciated by the recipients.

**Implications:** The model of a Leader Retreat is an effective tool in which to teach, inform and support 4-H club leaders in Vernon County. Fostering a sense of partnership between the 4-H club leaders and the 4-H Youth Development Educator has had a positive impact in moving the 4-H program forward. Since the first retreat in 2007, the Leader Retreats have evolved from leaders solely in a learning role, to leaders sharing their expertise, and some embracing teaching roles. The January 2009 Leader Retreat will feature breakout sessions with club leaders teaching two out of four sessions offered. At the recent county fair, an issue came up with working at the 4-H foodstand. The leaders brought the issue forward, asking that it be on the agenda for the next Leader Retreat because it is a county-wide issue. At the Leader Retreat, the educator has the group establish ground rules and the educator facilitates the discussion, which empowers the leaders to share ideas, and problem solve together. This enables the educator to focus on the educational role, and not get drawn into micromanaging conflicts that are bound to arise.

## References

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APPENDIX A Leader Retreat Invitation



TO: ALL 4-H General Club Leaders  
FROM: Colleen Pulvermacher, 4-H Youth Development Agent  
DATE: January 7, 2008

Please join us for a *Day at the Beach* Leader's Retreat scheduled for Saturday, January 19th from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the Ext. Office.

Some of the topics we will cover include:

- \*Evaluation of enrollment and fair entry processes
- \*Review leader resources
- \*Upcoming Arts Fest
- \*On-line Resources

Each leader is asked to bring the following:

- extra 4-H literature
- a dish to pass for lunch w/ the recipe
- a sense of humor & winning attitude

If you have a specific topic you would like to see discussed, please contact Colleen ASAP.

Please remember, if the leader cannot attend please send someone in your place. This retreat will feature education, information, discussion, idea sharing, laughter and fun! The hula hoop contest is optional! **Please** RSVP by Friday January 11th by calling the Ext Office 637-5276.



Appendix B



***Vernon County 4-H Leader Retreat  
Saturday January 19, 2008***

***Agenda:***

- Deal the cards (get acquainted activity)
- Arts Fest: procedure ---sign up to help by club
- Announcements: camp counselors needed, spring Super Saturday, letters to volunteers, enrollment issues, project meetings
- Evaluation of summer retreat and enrollment process
- Identifying your needs as leader
- Navigating our uwex website – how leaders can contribute!
- Federation update – who are the new officers, what are the goals this year, what issues would leaders like addressed?
- Lunch
- 4-H Literature trade
- Evaluation

***Trivia Question: What does pozdrowienia z wakacji mean?***





N=12 out of 18 (66.6%)

7-11-08

Thank you so much for attending the Leader Retreat. It is hoped that a day like this will provide you with information, new ideas and also let you know how much we appreciate all that you do. Your comments are valued and appreciated.

Rate your knowledge of 4-H Club Chartering:

Before today: None **8** Minimal **3** Adequate **1** Extensive  
 After today: None Minimal Adequate **11** Extensive **1**

Rate your knowledge of what the Extension Office does:

Before today None Minimal **5** Adequate **3** Extensive **4**  
 After today None Minimal **1** Adequate **4** Extensive **7**

Rate your knowledge of changes in Arts Fest:

Before today None **1** Minimal **8** Adequate **2** Extensive **1**  
 After today None Minimal Adequate **7** Extensive **5**

Rate your knowledge of club educational activities:

Before today None **3** Minimal **2** Adequate **7** Extensive  
 After today None Minimal Adequate **6** Extensive **6**

Rate your knowledge of ShareShops:

Before today None **1** Minimal **8** Adequate **3** Extensive  
 After today None Minimal Adequate **9** Extensive **3**

Rate your knowledge of 4-H community service activities:

Before today None Minimal **3** Adequate **6** Extensive **3**  
 After today None Minimal Adequate **6** Extensive **6**

What changes will you make as a result of this program?

I definitely have more ideas for my club and know of more resources.

I now feel more comfortable contacting other Leader.

I have lots of ideas to share with my club from this retreat.

I know who to call if I have questions or need advice on 4-H problems.

I will share club and county concerns with others.

I will recognize the 4-Hers more than just at fair time.

I will include a physical activity for the club recreation

We will incorporate educational activities and community service projects.

We will explore the idea of joint ventures with other clubs

What topics would you like to see addressed in future retreats?

I would like more ideas to use at club level

More of the same, I really like the sharing and knowing other resources

More recognition ideas, for both 4-H members and parent helpers.

More information on club chartering and help completing packets

Intro to 4-H for people who didn't grow up with it.

Opportunities for middle school youth; I've found in our club that if you get kids involved in middle school it is more likely that they will stay through high school.

Developed by Colleen B. Pulvermacher, Vernon County 4-H Youth Development Educator, 2008