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Teens Reaching Youth (TRY) 4-H Volunteer Program

Donna Carter, 4-H Extension Agent

Volunteers play an integral role in helping Extension staff deliver 4-H educational programs to area boys and girls. Yet Extension staff might be overlooking an important potential volunteer pool to teach programs. If your county currently focuses recruiting efforts on adult volunteers, it might be time to consider engaging teen volunteers as well. Effectively trained and properly supported by adult mentors, teens can be very effective educators for 4-H.

In 1986 the North Carolina 4-H Youth Development Program piloted a new teen volunteer program called Teens Reaching Youth (TRY). In the TRY model, teams of three to four teens and their adult coach were provided with in-depth training in effective teaching skills and a specific 4-H curriculum. Once trained, teams taught the curriculum to younger youth. By 1992, over 2,000 North Carolina teens had been trained as TRY team members—providing quality educational programs to thousands of younger children.

The TRY model was first utilized in Utah in the late 1980s and was the main leadership program until about 1996. An effort to resurrect this valuable program began in Salt Lake County in 2006. It spread to Weber County the following year. Over the two-year period, 40 teens and coaches completed 10 to 12 hours of training and taught robotics and nutrition curricula to more than 150 younger youth. Pre- and post-tests of study participants revealed that youth taught by TRY teams had similar gains in knowledge as youth taught by para-professionals. Certainly, these results support the assertion that teens can teach effectively. However, there are additional benefits of the TRY program, beyond the knowledge that participants gain in a 4-H curriculum. Some of these include:

- *A positive mentoring experience:* Younger youths have a positive teen role model in their lives. At the same time teen members benefit from the respect and admiration of younger youths.
- *Engage new teens:* Teens are a historically challenging group to recruit into 4-H. However, the TRY program has been successful in drawing teens to the program because of their attraction to the projects they will be trained to teach.
- *Reach new audiences:* Because teams recruit the youth they will teach, they are often successful in reaching out to boys and girls who may otherwise not be served through traditional 4-H programs—allowing more children and families to learn about 4-H.
- *Introduce new projects:* Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) programs are some of the most in-demand projects offered by 4-H, yet finding volunteers to teach these technical projects is sometimes challenging. Teens are often very adept in learning and teaching technical project areas.

Although there is great flexibility for counties to adapt the program as needed for their unique situation, the core parts of the 4-H TRY teen volunteer model include the following:

1. A TRY team consists of a team of teenagers and an adult coach.
2. All team members, including the coach, complete training that adequately prepares them to successfully teach the curriculum.
3. Training includes:
 - In-depth knowledge in a specific curriculum.
 - Knowledge and skills in teaching younger youth, marketing 4-H, organizing workshops, and completing reports. Key training modules include: an overview of the TRY program (including member and coach responsibilities, timelines, and recognition), developmental characteristics of youth, experiential learning, learning styles, team building, marketing, reporting, and peer teaching.
4. Each team member and coach signs a contract that clearly outlines the responsibilities of the team.
5. Each team commits to teach at least 20 younger youth during the year, providing each participant with a minimum of 6 hours of instruction in the selected curriculum.
6. Each team recruits the boys and girls they will teach and coordinates the logistics for the workshops they will conduct. Although teams may choose to teach 4-H club members, they might also reach out to other youth audiences such as scouts, church youth groups, after school youth, etc.
7. The team chooses when and how they will deliver the curriculum. They may choose to teach for 1 hour over 6 weeks, or teach in a 1-day camp setting. Likewise, teams may reach all their youth participants in one large workshop, or teach several small groups. Teams gain valuable life skills, such as decision-making and planning, by facilitating their own curriculum delivery.
8. Teams complete a TRY report following each teaching session and submit it to their local 4-H office.
9. Although team members commit for a 1-year period, many teens enjoy the opportunity so much they want to continue beyond their initial commitment. Counties will want to have an annual TRY team registration that facilitates on-going involvement and training. Youth may want to continue their experience by:

- Working with their existing team and teaching the same curriculum to additional youth
- Working with their existing team and being trained in a new curriculum
- Organizing a new team and being trained in the same or a new curriculum

10. Counties may choose to honor their members in a variety of ways, consistent with their current awards program. Utah counties piloting the TRY program have awarded perpetual plaques at 4-H Achievement Night, thus encouraging teens to continue their teaching experience in subsequent years. The following standards acknowledge each member's completion level:

- *Gold*: A minimum of 6 hours of instruction in one curriculum to 30 or more youth during the year.
- *Silver*: A minimum of 6 hours of instruction in one curriculum to 20 or more youth during the year.
- *Bronze*: A minimum of 6 hours of instruction in one curriculum to 10 or more youth during the year.

The following resources are available from the Weber County 4-H Youth Development Program to assist your county in implementing a TRY program: training modules which have been modified from those developed by the North Carolina 4-H Youth Development Program, team contracts, logos, marketing brochures, and report forms.

Resources:

Safrit, R. D., Edwards, H. C., and Flood, R. W. (2004). An Initial Assessment of an Interactive Web-Based Extension Curriculum to Engage and Prepare Teens as Volunteer Teachers. *Journal of Extension*, 42 (3). <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/rb1.shtml>.

Groff, J. A. (1992). Teens Reaching Youth. *Journal of Extension*, 30 (4). <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992winter/a5.html>.

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