

Implementing Effective Community Service Projects Fact Sheet

"I pledge...my hands to larger service..." We should all be familiar with this phrase. Most likely, you hear it each month at your club/group meeting as it's a part of the 4-H pledge that all members learn. 4-H members are encouraged to develop and practice skills to become helpful or useful in their club/group, community, country, and world. Community service projects are an opportunity for youth to develop a sense of pride and ownership for the community in which they live. Additionally, community service allows youth to learn the value of giving back to the community while working with adults and helping others at the same time.

Over the past several years, we've learned a lot about positive youth development (PYD) and the eight critical elements essential to PYD. One of the eight elements is the opportunity to value and practice service to others. This allows young people to develop a sense of pride and ownership in their community. It also allows youth and adults to work together while helping others. Finally, doing community service allows young people to build discipline, foster respect for others, promote civic responsibility, and participate in real world career-related experiences.

According to the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, in order for community service to work effectively for youth, five important elements need to be in place. Those elements include:

1. Meeting community needs. The community service performed by youth must be seen as relevant and timely for them. They will need to see or learn about the real needs in their community and what they can do to help with those needs. To help with this element, youth working with adults may want to survey community members, leaders, agencies or organizations to learn about the community needs. This will also help them build on existing community assets.
2. Careful planning and preparation. Youth should be a part of the planning of the project and each person should be prepared for their part in the project. The youth need to help prioritize activities, involve and inform parents and other adults, and keep safety and risk management procedures in mind.

3. Meaningful action. The activity needs to be necessary and valuable to the community. Participants need to feel like they made a difference in a meaningful way and the community needs to value their contribution. Most importantly, adults need to make sure all members are involved.

4. Time for reflection. Structured time needs to be provided at a 4-H meeting for the members to reflect on their community service project. Reflection gives the youth the opportunity to think about what they did, as well as what it means to them, to others, and to their community.

5. Evaluation of the project. Members should be involved in discussing the impact of their service and what they learned from completing the project, as evaluation gives the group direction for improvement, growth, and change. It also allows them to think about what else they might do because of this experience. Members need the opportunity to share what they learned individually and discuss what impact they felt they had on the community.

Nine Steps Toward Performing a Successful Community Service Project

Now that we know the essential elements of an effective community service project for youth, youth and adults can work together as a group to make it a success. Below are nine steps toward performing a successful community service project.

- Determine what the needs are in your community
- Ask members and parents to identify needs they see.
- Ask other community groups.
- Ask community leaders.
- Ask Extension staff what other clubs/groups have done.

2. Determine what type of activities your members have an interest in or ability to do

- Consider the size of your group and the age of the members.
- Consider the skills and interests of members.
- Determine how much time you want to devote to the community service project.
- Determine how much parental support you have for the project.

3. List all of the activities/projects/needs that have been suggested

- With the help of parents, junior leaders or a committee, narrow the list down to two or three ideas.
- Present the ideas to your group with an explanation of the need and/or project.
- Based on the presentations, the group can then choose a project to conduct.

4. Develop a plan to conduct your project

Review the risk management information provided to you by 4-H and use the resources available to you throughout this step. Your plan should include: goals of the project, tasks involved, time commitment, permissions that need to be obtained, budget (if necessary), insurance (if necessary), equipment and supplies, publicity, additional adult help, and a process for evaluation and reflection.

5. Prepare the youth for the community service project and the tasks to be accomplished

Go over the tasks to be accomplished in a positive manner. Review safety precautions and provide any specific training that may be needed. This may be the first time that some of your members are doing a job, so assure them that it's okay to ask questions or ask for assistance. This is a good opportunity to talk about societal needs and issues.

6. Carry out the project

The project should be hands on, if possible. Involve members in following through with the project, for example rather than donating money to buy toys for a child care center, take the members shopping to purchase the toys themselves and deliver them to the care center.

7. Document your group's efforts with pictures, videos, or written articles

Take pictures of youth involved in the project. You could incorporate these into certificates that you present to the 4-H members at the end of the project to celebrate their accomplishments. Write an article and submit it along with a picture to local media.

8. Plan for a reflection and application period

This can either be at the end of the community service activity or at your next group meeting. Let members share their thoughts about their experience. You may need to ask questions to get them talking. Some sample questions might include:

Reflect:

Describe what happened at our community service project.

What did you like about this community service project?

How did you feel about this project?

What did you notice about the people who were helped by this project?

Apply:

What might we do differently if we do this project again?

How else might we help in the future?

How can we use what we learned from this project?

9. Summarize your group's efforts

Share a brief project description with the Extension office to go into the county newsletter, submit an article with a picture to your local newspaper, or send a letter with a picture to your local town, township, county, or state official to highlight your efforts. You may even want to plan a group celebration of your successful completion of the project.

4-H is a community of young people across America who are learning leadership, citizenship, and life skills. Participating in community service is one way to continue to help youth learn those life skills and become productive and contributing members of their own communities.



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