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Staying, Thriving, and Leading: A Statewide Assessment of 4-H Volunteer Experiences

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Introduction

VOLUNTEERS ARE THE BACKBONE OF 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING across the United States. More than five hundred thousand volunteers support over six million young people annually, guiding them through hands-on projects, building communities of practice, and modeling the kind of leadership that 4-H has championed for more than a century. In Idaho, nearly two thousand volunteers show up for their communities every year, coordinating clubs, leading projects, mentoring youth, and helping plan local, regional, state, and national 4-H events across our state.

Despite their essential role, volunteers are not guaranteed to stay. Research consistently identifies gaps in training, support, recognition, and communication as key drivers of volunteer attrition in 4-H programs (Arnold et al. 2009). Multistate studies document meaningful variation in how volunteers experience their service across different states and local contexts (O'Neil et al. 2021) and more recent work on Gen Z volunteers highlights the growing importance of organizational responsiveness, clear role expectations, and a sense of value in recruiting and retaining the next generation of 4-H leaders (Miner et al. 2025). Volunteers come because they care about youth. They stay or leave, based on how well programs support them.

In Idaho, the question, "How well are we supporting our volunteers?," has never been systematically answered at the state level until now. In the 2025–26 program year, a statewide survey was conducted to better understand Idaho 4-H volunteers' experiences across six key domains: role clarity and safety, communication, support and consistency, confidence and training, value and satisfaction, and retention intent. The survey yielded 318 completed responses from volunteers in 41 of Idaho's 44

counties—one of the most comprehensive statewide assessments of 4-H volunteer experiences conducted in Idaho.

This bulletin presents those findings. It is written for anyone who cares about the future of 4-H, as well as for county educators, state staff, volunteers themselves, program supporters, and Extension professionals in other states who may wish to conduct similar assessments. The goal of this study is simple: To put data in the hands of people who can use it, so that Idaho 4-H volunteers get the support they deserve to stay, thrive, and lead.

Who Are Idaho 4-H Volunteers?

Before examining what volunteers reported about their experience, it helps to understand who they are. The 318 survey respondents represent a broad cross section of Idaho's 4-H volunteer workforce, spanning age groups, roles, experience levels, and connections to the program.

Experience and Tenure

Idaho 4-H volunteers are not newcomers. More than a third (34%) have served for ten or more years, representing a deep well of institutional knowledge and commitment. Another 31% have been involved for two to four years and 24% for five to nine years. Only 11% of first-year volunteers. The distribution reflects a program with strong roots and underscores why retention matters: These people are not easy to replace.

Primary Roles

Half of the respondents (50%) serve as organizational leaders who coordinate clubs and manage the broader volunteer experience at the local level. Another 38% are project volunteers who work directly with youth on specific skill areas. Resource volunteers make up 7% of respondents and the remaining 5% serve in support-related capacities, including chaperoning.

Connection to 4-H

Most Idaho 4-H volunteers come to the program through a personal connection. Sixty percent are parents or guardians of current 4-H members, while 49% identify as community leaders or volunteers without a parenting role. This indicates that many respondents hold more than one connection to the program. Nearly one in three (32%) are former 4-H members themselves, bringing lived experience of the program to their volunteer service.

Age and Gender

The largest age group is 35–44 years (36%), followed by those aged 45–54 (26%) (Table 1). Fourteen percent of respondents are 65 or older, reflecting the program's multigenerational volunteer base. The vast majority of respondents identify as women (85%), with men comprising 13% of respondents. The gender distribution is consistent with national patterns in 4-H volunteerism.

Race and Ethnicity

Ninety-five percent of respondents identified as white. Hispanic or Latino/a/x volunteers represented 2% of respondents and American Indian or Alaska Native volunteers represented 1%. These figures reflect both the demographics of Idaho's population and an ongoing opportunity for 4-H programs to broaden volunteer recruitment to better reflect the diversity of Idaho's communities, including the program's work with three tribal nations.

What the Survey Found

The survey measured volunteer experience across six domains using a 1–5 scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate more positive volunteer experiences. Table 2 presents the mean score for each domain.

Across all six domains, Idaho 4-H volunteers reported positive experiences, with four of six scales scoring above 4.00. The two domains with the most room for improvement are communication at 3.86 and support and consistency at 3.95. These highlight actionable opportunities.

Role Clarity and Safety

Idaho 4-H volunteers report strong clarity about their roles and responsibilities. The highest rated item in the entire survey is "I know what to do if I suspect abuse or misconduct" at 4.66, reflecting the effectiveness of mandatory reporting training across

Table 1. Idaho 4-H volunteer survey respondent snapshot (N = 318).

Characteristic	Category	% of Respondents
Age	35–44	36%
	45–54	26%
	55–64	13%
	65+	14%
	25–34	8%
	18–24	2%
Gender	Woman	85%
	Man	13%
Years of Service	10+ years	34%
	5–9 years	24%
	2–4 years	31%
	0–1 year	11%
Primary Role	Organizational Leader	50%
	Project Volunteer	38%
	Resource Volunteer	7%
Connection to 4-H*	Parent/Guardian of Member	60%
	Community Leader/ Volunteer	49%
	Former 4-H Member	32%

*Respondents could select more than one connection type; percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 2. Mean scores by domain (N = 318).

Scale	Mean Score (1–5)	Interpretation
Role Clarity and Safety	4.37	Strong
Retention Intent	4.34	Strong
Value and Satisfaction	4.12	Strong
Confidence and Training	4.04	Strong
Support and Consistency	3.95	Moderate
Communication	3.86	Moderate

Note: Scores of 4.00 and above are considered strong; scores between 3.50–3.99 are moderate.

the state. The weak point is understanding how to handle misconduct by other leaders at 4.15. This is still a strong score, but additional scenario-based training could build even greater volunteer confidence. Table 3 provides further description details.

Table 3. Role clarity and safety—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I know what to do if I suspect abuse or misconduct.	4.66
I know who to contact if a safety concern arises.	4.53
I understand the required training and certification expectations.	4.37
I clearly understand what is expected of me as a 4-H volunteer.	4.28
I understand the process of handling conflict with youth or parents.	4.23
I understand what to do if there is misconduct by other leaders or others in 4-H.	4.15

Communication

Communication is the lowest-scoring domain in the survey. Volunteers report receiving regular, timely, and clear communication from their county offices (items scoring 4.15–4.39), where scores drop around preparedness and statewide connection. Volunteers feel somewhat less certain that they receive enough information to feel fully prepared in their roles at 3.97. Interest in statewide and district-level forums is moderate at 3.23 and 3.45, respectively. This pattern suggests that communication quality may be less of an issue than communication reach and relevance, particularly around what is happening at the state level. Table 4 gives further description details.

Table 4. Communication—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I receive regular communication from my county 4-H office.	4.39
I receive timely information and have enough time to respond.	4.19
Communication from the 4-H office is clear and easy to understand.	4.15
I receive enough information to feel prepared in my volunteer role.	3.97
I would like more communication about statewide 4-H initiatives.	3.62
I would be interested in a district-wide volunteer leadership forum or training.	3.45
I would be interested in a statewide volunteer leadership forum or training.	3.23

Support and Consistency

Volunteers feel genuinely supported by their county educators (Table 5). "I feel comfortable reaching out to staff for help when challenges arise" scored 4.13 and "I feel supported by my county 4-H educator" scored 4.02. The weaker point is policy consistency: "Policies are applied consistently in my county" scored a 3.70. This suggests that while relationships between volunteers and educators are strong, systematic consistency may vary across counties or situations.

Confidence and Training

Idaho 4-H volunteers feel confident in their work (Table 6). Confidence in managing youth behavior (4.51) and addressing parent concerns (4.38) are both strong. This is a meaningful finding given that interpersonal challenges are among the most cited reasons volunteers disengage from youth programs. The item "I would benefit from additional training to feel more effective" scored 3.33, indicating that although volunteers are not struggling, a meaningful portion sees room to grow.

Value and Satisfaction

"I enjoy volunteering in 4-H" was the second highest-rated item in the entire survey, with a rating of 4.43 (Table 7). Overall satisfaction scored 4.21. Both scores support strong signals of a volunteer workforce that finds deep meaning in its work. The item to watch is "I feel valued for the contributions I make," which scored 3.73. These scores are noticeably lower than the other items on this scale. Volunteers may love the work while feeling their efforts go unrecognized. Recognition matters.

Retention Intent

The most encouraging finding in this bulletin: Idaho 4-H volunteers intend to stay (Table 8). "I intend to continue volunteering in 4-H next year" scored 4.46—the second-highest rated item in the entire survey. "I would recommend volunteering in 4-H to others" scored 4.23. Together, these scores paint a picture of a volunteer workforce that is not just staying put but actively advocating for the program. This is a strong foundation to build on. Targeted improvements in communication, consistency, and recognition could strengthen it even further.

Table 5. Support and consistency—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I feel comfortable reaching out to staff for help when challenges arise.	4.13
I feel supported by my county 4-H educator.	4.02
Policies are applied consistently in my county.	3.70

Table 6. Confidence and training—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I feel confident managing youth behavior.	4.51
I feel confident addressing parent concerns.	4.38
The training I have received prepared me for my role.	3.92
I would benefit from additional training to feel more effective.	3.33

Table 7. Value and satisfaction—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I enjoy volunteering in 4-H.	4.43
Overall, I am satisfied with my volunteer experience.	4.21
I feel valued for the contributions I make.	3.73

Table 8. Retention intent—item-level means.

Survey Item	Mean
I intend to continue volunteering in 4-H next year.	4.46
I would recommend volunteering in 4-H to others.	4.23

Training Needs and Preferences

Beyond the six survey domains, volunteers were asked to identify their specific training needs and share their preferences for how and when training should be delivered. Of the 318 respondents, 278 (87%) answered the training question, indicating a strong response rate and genuine interest in the topic.

What Volunteers Want to Learn

Technology tools topped the list by a significant margin (Table 9). Forty-two percent of respondents selected technology tools, specifically ZSuite, the platform used to manage 4-H enrollment and club records statewide, as a training need. Club organization and leadership followed at 37% and

Table 9. Volunteer training needs (N = 278 respondents).

Training Topic	# Selected	% Selected
Technology tools (e.g., ZSuite)	118	42%
Club organization and leadership	103	37%
Mentoring teen leaders	92	33%
Conflict resolution with parents	83	30%
Fundraising and financial management	79	28%
Behavior management strategies	63	23%
Youth mental health awareness	49	18%
Conflict resolution with youth	48	17%
Other	46	17%

Note: Respondents could select more than one topic; percentages do not sum to 100. Zero respondents selected risk management/safety as a training need.

mentoring teen leaders at 33%. Together, these top three needs point to a volunteer workforce eager to strengthen its organizational and relational skills.

How and When Volunteers Want to Train

When asked whether volunteers would like more training from the county and/or state office, 24% said yes and 48% said maybe, meaning nearly three in four volunteers are open to additional training opportunities. An overwhelming 82% said they would attend training via Zoom, making online delivery the clear preference for Idaho's geographically dispersed volunteer base. In terms of frequency, 47% prefer training once a year, 34% prefer twice a year, and 19% would welcome quarterly training. The takeaway: Offer accessible online training once or twice a year to reach the majority of your volunteer audience.

Recommendations

The survey findings point to six concrete opportunities to strengthen the Idaho 4-H volunteer experience. These recommendations are intended for county Extension educators, state 4-H staff, and program leaders and also serve as a model for Extension professionals in other states designing similar volunteer support systems.

1. Make Technology Training a Priority

ZSuite was the number one training need, selected by 42% of respondents. Consider developing short, accessible ZSuite tutorials, recorded videos, step-by-step guides, or brief Zoom walk-throughs that volunteers can access at any time. Given that 82% of volunteers are willing to attend Zoom training sessions, a live session with a recording option reaches the broadest audience.

2. Invest in Club Organization and Leadership Development

Club organization and leadership were the second-most-identified training needed at 37%. Many volunteers, particularly newer ones, want practical support for running effective clubs. Building a simple tool kit for club leaders, including checklists, templates, and meeting guides, directly addresses this need.

3. Strengthen Communication About Statewide Initiatives

Communication was the lowest-scoring domain (mean: 3.86). The gap is in the state, not county. Volunteers want to feel more connected to what is happening across Idaho 4-H. A regular statewide newsletter, brief video updates, or a dedicated section in the Leaders' Corner Newsletter focused on state-level news and opportunities helps to bridge this gap.

4. Build Consistent Policy Application Across Counties

"Policies are applied consistently in my county" was the lowest-scoring individual item in the Support and Consistency domain (mean: 3.70). Providing county educators with plain-language policy summaries, FAQ documents, or brief training on common policy scenarios could help create a more consistent volunteer experience statewide.

5. Recognize Volunteers Intentionally and Often

"I feel valued for the contributions I make" was the lowest-rated item in the Value and Satisfaction domain (mean: 3.73). Volunteers love the work they do. They want to know what others notice. Simple, consistent recognition practices, a personal thank-you from the county educator, shout-outs in newsletters, recognition at county events, or a statewide volunteer appreciation initiative makes a meaningful difference without requiring significant resources.

6. Support Mentoring for Teen Leaders

Mentoring teen leaders was the third-most-identified training need at 33%. Consider developing a brief mentoring guide for 4-H volunteers, hosting a Zoom session on strategies for supporting teen leaders, or connecting volunteers who excel at this with those who are newer to the role. Peer-to-peer mentoring among volunteers can be just as powerful as formal training.

Methods

The Idaho 4-H Volunteer Experience and Retention Survey was developed by the author and administered statewide via Qualtrics during the 2025–26 program year. The survey was distributed to Idaho 4-H volunteers through county Extension offices across all 44 counties. Of 400 total responses received, 335 were completed in full (84% completion rate) and 318 of those included county identification. These 318 responses, representing volunteers from 41 of Idaho's 44 counties, form the basis of the findings presented in this bulletin.

The survey assessed volunteer experience across six domains using Likert-scale items rated 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Additional questions addressed demographic characteristics, volunteer connections to 4-H, specific training needs, and training delivery preferences. Open-ended questions captured volunteers' own words about what keeps them engaged in the program.

Two limitations are worth noting. First, counties with fewer than five respondents are not statistically generalizable to the full volunteer population in those counties and should be interpreted with caution. Second, as a convenience sample distributed through county offices, these findings may not capture the perspectives of volunteers who are less connected to their county Extension office.

Summary

Idaho 4-H volunteers are experienced, committed, and optimistic. They understand their roles, feel supported by their county educators, enjoy their work, and most importantly, plan to keep showing up. That is good news for a program that depends on them.

The data also reveals where targeted investment can make the greatest difference: Clearer communication about state-level initiatives, more accessible technology training, stronger recognition practices, and greater policy consistency across counties. These are not sweeping changes. They are practical, achievable steps that county educators and state staff can begin taking now.

The volunteers have spoken. This bulletin is an invitation to listen and to act. For Extension professionals in other states, it offers a replicable model for asking your own volunteers the same question: What do you need to stay, thrive, and lead?

Further Reading

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