

Middlesex County 4-H Project GIFT

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Program of Distinction Category:

Leadership, Citizenship, and Life Skills Categories

- Leadership Development
- Caring Relationships, Community Spirit

Youth in Governance Categories

- Youth Action
- Community Engagement

Sources of Funding that support this program:

The Project GIFT program is supported primarily by direct fundraising efforts of the County 4-H Teen Council members, including County Fair fundraisers, clothing drives, and a haunted house planned and implemented by club members and adult volunteers. In 2004 alone, over \$10,500 was raised to support this event, with the majority of the funding from Teen Council fund raisers. Other support included materials and funds donated from over 30 local and regional businesses such as Target, Toys-R-Us, Russ Berrie, Bristol-Myers Squibb, local grocery stores, convenience stores, and bakeries. Other supporters included Kiwanis clubs, American Legion Auxiliary, and other community based organizations. Since Project GIFT was first initiated, grants have been received from the New Jersey 4-H Development Fund, Edison Center for Community Renewal, Middlesex County 4-H Leader's Association, and Youth in Action Campaign Honorable Mention award.

Knowledge and Research Base

For young people, leadership development experiences meet a number of needs, including meaningful engagement in community and civic life (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Youth need to not only participate within organizations and be involved in the planning of activities that affect others, but they also have a need to take on critical roles in which they exercise real influence in doing good and making changes (Forum for Youth Investment, 2002). These experiences help to enhance developmental assets that youth experience, which are powerful shapers of young people's behavior. The more assets that youth experience, the more they engage in positive behavior, and the more likely they are to grow up to be caring, competent and responsible adults (Search Institute, 1995). To compete in this global economy, youth must be able to identify and solve real problems, use appropriate tools, reason effectively, and apply critical thinking skills. Development of these life skills can enhance personal behavior and professional conduct in life and careers. Opportunities for service learning are critical to the overall development of youth. In service-learning programs, the learning is as important as the service. Furthermore, the service in itself emphasizes reciprocity, the exchange of both giving and receiving. The youth doing the service and the person receiving the service benefit equally (New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.).

Needs Assessment

Members of the 4-H Teen Council were interested in having a greater impact on the community and were looking for a new way to address community needs. Through discussions at club meetings, the teens became aware that many local families may not be able to afford gifts for their children during the holiday season, and they decided to address this issue with a service learning project. Teens expressed their concern that with many of the service projects they had participated in the past, adults did the majority of the planning, leaving little opportunity for them to take on strong leadership roles. They noted that they would like to have an equal involvement in developing, planning, and implementing the program. Current research does support the idea that involvement in these critical roles will help to develop life skills that will support young peoples' development into caring, competent, and contributing adults. Skills such as leadership, organization, planning, critical thinking, responsibility, empathy, and civic engagement were used as a focus when planning the program. These skills were addressed in order to meet the developmental needs of the youth involved.

Research demonstrated that in the Middlesex County communities of New Brunswick and Perth Amboy (which makes up 90% of the client base for the Project GIFT event), the median family income is \$38,000 and \$40,000 respectively, compared to \$75,000 for the state. In New Brunswick, 23.5% of individuals live below the poverty level, and in Perth Amboy this number is 17%, as compared to 8.3% in New Jersey overall (U.S. Census Bureau). More alarming, 80% of youth in New Brunswick, and 79% of youth in Perth Amboy receive free or reduced lunches as compared to an average of 24% in all of Middlesex County (NJ Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program statistics.)

Through discussions at club meetings, the teens decided to plan a project that would reach children and parents from these communities during the holiday season. Research of holiday related service projects demonstrated that there were many groups in the county that provided "anonymous" gifts to limited resource families in various communities. The Teen Council wanted to develop a project that was different from these types of community service projects. Based on discussion and input from youth and adult volunteers and staff, the Project GIFT program was developed with a goal of giving parents the opportunity to "shop for free" during the holiday season, thus being able to select and give gifts to their children. This supported the goal of empowerment and a nurturing connection to the community for parents, youth and families. As the Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) philosophy states: When families are strong, communities thrive; when communities are strong and support families, families thrive.

Goals and Objectives

The main focus of Project GIFT is to provide local families with the opportunity to "shop for free" and "purchase" gifts for their children, thus making the holidays more affordable through a service learning project developed by 4-H members.

Objectives – Community

- To secure \$10,000.00 in funds and/or donations annually to purchase gifts for low income families
- To provide a sense of empowerment and pride for parents with limited financial resources during the holiday season
- To develop collaborations and partnerships between the Middlesex County 4-H Youth Development Program and community-based organizations and local businesses

Objectives – 4-H Teens and Adult Supervisors

- To provide experiences to develop valuable life skills such as organization, planning, leadership, service learning, and community development for teens and adults

- To increase an awareness of community issues and needs of “youth and families at risk” in 4-H teens and adults
- To increase teamwork, communication, problem solving, and organizational skills of the 4-H Teen Council group
- To provide youth and adults an opportunity to work together as partners in developing a project to address a critical community need
- To provide a sense of accomplishment, positive self-concept, and empowerment in youth and adults implementing the program

Target Audience

The primary target audience of the Project GIFT program is parents of families with limited resources. In addition to the demographics stated earlier, families are selected based on their participation in the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP) Program, and through contacts made by 4-H program staff based on information provided by the Middlesex County Social Services, such as the Women Aware and FISH Hospitality groups. (See Table 1)

The EFNEP program provides nutrition programming for Middlesex County communities which have at least 52% of families enrolled in one or more food assistance programs. Of these families, 40% receive food stamps, and 30% are on welfare. Over 90% of the families served through Project GIFT are of Hispanic, Black/ African American background or identify with two or more races.

The target age for youth served through the program is infant through age 18, with 71% of the youth between the ages of 2 and 10. The average number of children per family served through the program is 2.5.

Table 1. Summary of Families Served by the 2004 Project GIFT Event

Name of Agency	Population Served	Number Families Served	Number Youth Served	%Hispanic	%Black/ African American	%Bi-Racial
Amandla Crossing	Shelter for Mothers with Children	10	21	40%	10%	50%
English for Parents of Pre-Schoolers - Level 1	ESL program for low-income families in New Brunswick	7	22	100%	--	--
English for Parents of Pre-Schoolers - Level 2	ESL program for low-income families in New Brunswick	14	42	100%	--	--

Name of Agency	Population Served	Number Families Served	Number Youth Served	%Hispanic	%Black/ African American	%Bi-Racial
Even Start	ESL program and job training program primarily for low socio-economic families	18	49	100%	--	--
FISH Hospitality	Family Shelter	10	20	--	70%	--
Adult High School	Programming for low-socio economic families	2	9	--	--	--
Job Corp	Job placement program for low socio-economic parents	6	10	--	--	100%
Open Door	Drug/Alcohol Rehabilitation Program	3	14	--	--	100%
PARTS	Live-in Drug/Alcohol Rehabilitation program for moms (purpose is to reunite them with their children)	5	11	--	40%	60%
Women Aware	Battered Women's Shelter	32	66	Data unavailable		
Puerto Rican Association for Human Development	Latch Key Program	17	22	100%	--	--

Program Design and Content

Methods used to deliver the program

Project GIFT, a free day of holiday shopping event for low income families, has been planned and implemented by the Middlesex County 4-H Teen Council since 1997. Project GIFT is primarily a service learning activity. Clients identified from community based organizations in urban and suburban areas with working relationships with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Program (EFNEP) staff or the County 4-H program are invited to attend the Project GIFT event. Free transportation is offered as part of the invitation. Parents that have provided information on their children are given entry "tickets" which allow them to select gifts.

Youth-Adult Partnerships established with the 4-H teen members, adult advisors, and 4-H staff is a secondary objective of Project GIFT. Youth and adults work in partnership on all aspects of the program with responsibilities as follows:

- Youth and adult volunteers work in committees throughout the year to develop the goals and strategies for implementation of the Project GIFT event, and utilize evaluations from previous years to help with event planning.
- Youth establish and independently run committees that focus on program set up, donation requests, child care, and overall coordination of the event.
- Youth and adult volunteers work cooperatively to make contact with local businesses and regional companies to request donations of new clothing, toys, games, wrapping paper, refreshments and other items for the event. Contributions are requested through letter writing, visits to local businesses, and follow up calls and letters to previous donors.
- A committee of teen and adult volunteers plan and implement fund raisers held throughout the year, which provide a significant portion of the overall funding needed for the project. Specifically, a month long Haunted House is planned and operated by Teen Council members and volunteer leaders.
- Information on the number and ages of youth in each family is requested from community agencies and those working with the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP) program. Information on the event (in both Spanish and English) and tickets are sent to participants through the appropriate agencies.
- With monetary donations and funds raised, teens purchase clothing, toys and books for the event, based on information on numbers of families, youth and ages of youth received from the agencies involved. Teens organize shopping lists and work as a team to assure the items purchased will be appropriate for the ages of the children being served.
- Free bus transportation is organized from various shelters and agencies for clients who need it.
- Teens and adults spend the 2 months prior to the event developing and distributing promotional materials and collecting donations.
- Teens and adults work for one to two days prior to the event organizing donations and setting up the 4-H Center. A committee of youth is responsible for developing the organization of toys and gifts, separating them by age and other categories on tables. Teens also set up a gift wrap station and refreshments.
- 4-H teens plan and coordinate a "child care area", working cooperatively to select games, crafts and activities that would be appropriate for the children who attend with their parents. These teens also developed a system for parents to drop off and pick up their children after shopping, one which allows both youth and adults to feel comfortable and safe.
- During the event, teens and adults help parents find specific gifts for their children, and a group of teens wraps gifts and hands out refreshments to parents. Parents attending the event use the tickets they receive to "purchase" gifts for their children. A "freebie table" is also provided, which includes small items that parents can use as "stocking stuffers" or additional gifts. Each parent attending the event leaves with a bag of gifts for their

children to open during the holidays and children leave with completed holiday crafts, goodie bags and a picture with Santa.

Efforts are made to develop skills necessary for youth and adults to take strong leadership roles in the event. Teens and adults are provided with learning experiences in communication, teamwork, problem solving, and organizational skills through year long planning that takes place in accomplishing Project GIFT.

Curricula and/or educational materials

Lessons from various curriculum relating directly to the life skill development goals are integrated into monthly club meetings and actual teaching of activities is held prior to the club's business meeting. Teaching methods are based on the Experiential Learning Model and provide a variety of activities and experiences based on the Targeting Life Skills Model (<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/lifeskills/homepage.html>) and the diversity of potential learning styles and levels of referred youth. Activities are compiled from resources such as True Colors, Character Counts materials, the Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships Curriculum (National 4-H Council, n.d.), and various team building materials. Planning strategies for the participants are based on youth community service project planning lessons from resources such as Teens Take the Lead (Eagan, et al., 1995) and the NJ 4-H Leader Training Series (Smith et al., 2001). These lessons provide the skills and knowledge needed for teens to develop an action plan for each year's event, a solid foundation of essential life skills, and a practical application that serves a very real and immediate need.

Partnerships or collaborations

The event is run with the cooperation of the County Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program Staff. Clients of agencies reached through EFNEP staff are invited to the event, and EFNEP staff members help on the day of the event. A community battered women's shelter (Women Aware) and community family shelter (FISH Hospitality) also provide support and clients for the event. A local bus company (Browntown Bus Service) provides free busing for the clients who need transportation. Rutgers Cooperative Extension Staff also help by soliciting media support and providing video documentation of the event. Middlesex County 4-H volunteers and members from clubs other than Teen Council provide assistance by donating gifts, and assisting on the day of the event.

Program Evaluation

Process

The number of families reached is an indicator of the project's overall success as the primary objective is to provide a community service. The Project GIFT program has been held annually since 1997 and has grown from reaching approximately 75 children to over 275 children from 124 families in 2004. Each year, the program reaches families from approximately 11 different county agencies that serve low socio-economic families. Project GIFT receives support from over 30 businesses and organizations, and has grown to include support and involvement from other 4-H clubs and families.

An assessment and evaluation of the program and the life skills developed by 4-H youth and adults involved in the program is conducted each year at a Teen Council meeting following the event. Changes in program development and implementation are made based on the feedback of members involved. Evaluation tools were modified from the Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension Evaluation Instruments (<http://www.rcrc.rutgers.edu/evaluation>). Qualitative data were analyzed by compiling information received from participants and looking for common themes based on the life skills targeted through the objectives and goals on which the program is based.

A qualitative survey of Expanded Foods and Nutrition clients attending the event was performed by EFNEP staff, with six of the nine agencies reporting. Language and literacy barriers made it necessary for a qualitative survey of clients as opposed to quantitative surveys. General feedback on the event is also solicited from the agency directors that do not work directly with the EFNEP program.

Outcomes and Impact

Rutgers Cooperative Research and Extension 4-H Youth Development Program Evaluations completed by 4-H teens and adults involved in the 2004 Project GIFT event indicates through participation in activities at Teen Council meetings and involvement in the planning and implementing of the event, program objectives were met:

- 85% report they learned leadership skills
- 85% report they learned to plan and organize
- 80% report they learned group cooperation skills and how to work as a part of a team
- 90% report they learned the value of volunteerism and empathy toward the needs of others
- 87% report they learned how to work as a youth and adult partnership
- 80% rank Project GIFT as the most valuable project they do in 4-H each year.

4-H participants also report the following:

"For me, to be able to make this much of an impact on these people gives me the greatest feeling in the world."

"It means a lot to me because they can experience the same joy of the holidays regardless of their economic situation."

"I get to talk to the women and children getting to know them year after year, and hear their stories. It is almost funny that something as small as a \$10 toy can bring so much joy, when most of us will spend more than that on a single meal."

"It makes me feel good to take care of others and let them know that someone cares."

"It's more than just raising money for a cause, you really feel like you are making a difference in the parent's and children's lives and it's eye-opening to see the amount of needy people in the community. It's an important reminder of how fortunate we are."

Teens involved in the event expressed interest in furthering their involvement in the area of leadership. Due to the positive experiences teens have with Project GIFT, they have become involved in the County 4-H Ambassador (outreach) program, and have enrolled in the annual Teen Leader Training Program in order to become registered teen leaders in other 4-H clubs. Enrollment in both areas has increased by 33% in the past 2 years, and 90% of new participants in both areas were active participants in the planning and implementing of the Project GIFT event.

Over 90% of the EFNEP clients from the 2004 event indicated that the event met or exceeded their expectations. Clients attending the event reported:

"Thank you for making it possible for my kids to have a happy and merry Christmas."

"Everyone was so nice and I appreciate everything the program did for me and my children."

"Now my kids know that someone besides mommy cares about them."

Reports from agency staff include the following statements:

"Our families were very grateful that they were able to give their children gifts on Christmas Day due to your generosity."

"These services are crucial to the population of our community; therefore, we would like to continue to collaborate as partners with you."

Communication to Stakeholders

A Project GIFT Annual Report is prepared following the event and shared with local legislators, state legislators, university administration and program supporters. Press releases are prepared prior to and following the event. Project GIFT has received much media attention, including features by local and regional newspapers and a local cable station. Results of the program are also shared with 4-H clientele through the county 4-H newsletter and through reports to the County 4-H Leader's Association.

Program Sustainability

Since 1997, the Project GIFT program has grown in participation by 4-H youth and adult volunteers by over 50%, and through increased involvement of local agencies and clientele each year. Teen Council members are committed to continue to support this event financially as it has become their primary service project during the year.

Replication

A Project GIFT program can be replicated in other settings and with other 4-H programs. In order for this project to be successful, there needs to be a core group of 4-H youth and adult members dedicated to working toward an effective Youth-Adult Partnership. Appropriate training needs to be provided by 4-H staff. 4-H youth, adult volunteers, and 4-H staff need to make a commitment to provide funding for the program, whether through fund raising or through solicitation of grants or donations. An opportunity for collaboration with local agencies serving limited resource families is key. A network of agencies can be developed through contacts with the EFNEP program, through County Social Services, or Youth Services Division. Support from local media can help with solicitation of funding, and can provide much needed publicity and promotion.

Rationale and Importance of the Program

The Project GIFT program provides a strong sense of value to members of the community. Many teens are unaware of the needs of others, and through Project GIFT, teens have the opportunity to learn about the hardships faced by those in need. It also gives them the experience and satisfaction of giving back to the community. Involvement in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the project helps them develop valuable life skills such as organization, planning, critical thinking, leadership, responsibility, empathy, civic engagement, and teamwork. Reinforcement of these skills will give them the abilities they need to be functional members of society. The Project GIFT program gives youth the opportunity to participate in all four components of service learning as defined by the NJ Department of Education: preparation, action, reflection and recognition. The youth-adult partnership developed through the event provides an opportunity for youth to learn how to interact and work cooperatively with adults and gives adults a sense of respect for the positive contributions that youth can provide. It also demonstrates that not all projects need to be adult-driven.

Although some families with limited resources do receive some charitable contributions during the holiday season, they rarely have the opportunity to select gifts themselves that they can give to their children. The Project GIFT event provides a sense of empowerment and a sense of satisfaction for parents from low socio-economic families by enabling them to give gifts to their children themselves during the holidays, something many other parents take for granted.

References

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