

# Letter from the President and CEO, National 4-H Council

Building pathways to economic opportunity for America's youth has always been 4-H's focus—and that includes those young people growing up in rural communities. This has been the subject of our research over the past year: to understand the local factors that help young people in rural communities grow up to achieve a higher standard of living—factors that other rural communities might build on.

4-H is America's largest youth development organization, with roots that have grown deep and wide across rural communities in the last 100 years. 4-H was founded on the belief that when kids are empowered to pursue their passions and chart their own course, their skills grow and take shape, helping them to become true leaders in their lives, careers, and communities. With programs delivered by the Cooperative Extension System of our nation's land-grant universities, 4-H cultivates youth voice and nurtures youth leadership.

Because of our scale, our history, and our deep connection to rural communities, 4-H is uniquely positioned to examine rural social mobility and the critical role of youth in driving change. While there has, of late, been renewed interest in the health of rural communities, we do not consistently see the voices of young people themselves included as a critical part of these conversations. Through 4-H's experience, we have learned that each community's most powerful asset for growth and development is its young people. This important work with The Bridgespan Group starts from this premise, exploring social mobility from the perspectives of youth themselves, and the adults who support them.

Many of this report's findings echo Cooperative Extension's experience. A hundred years ago, the technologies that now drive our \$1 trillion agriculture industry (USDA estimate) were new—and farmers resisted them. But 4-H educators believed in the power of our nation's youth just as much as they believed in those new methods. They armed youth with the skills and knowledge to educate their parents, build their communities, and drive upward economic mobility.

We are gratified to see this philosophy reflected in the most successful communities of today's rural America. Cooperative Extension's approach to community and youth development has never been top-down—we know that all communities have strengths and assets to help their young people climb the income ladder. However, many communities have a longer, harder pathway due to deep-seated historical and environmental barriers.

Today's 4-H is more diverse than ever, reaching young people in every county, parish, and borough across America's urban, suburban, and rural communities. And when it comes to lifting youth voice and building upward economic mobility, rural and urban areas are more alike than they are different. By offering the highest quality programming and supportive environments, 4-H helps to ensure that ALL youth—regardless of race, gender, or residence—have the potential to become leaders.

We do this work not only on behalf of young people—but also to raise their voices through it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jennifer L. Lisangelo". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

President and CEO  
National 4-H Council