The 4-H Tech Wizards engineered some magic this summer when they built a wheelchair ramp for a disabled Broome County resident. The Tech Wizards club at the George F. Johnson Dream Center in Johnson City, NY hosted the project, where six youth volunteered over three days to build a 37 foot-long ramp for a homebound senior. Each young person was paired with an adult mentor from either Cornell Cooperative Extension of Broome County, Sarah Jane Johnson United Methodist Memorial Church, or the Broome County Council of Churches.

Youth and mentors were led by Ron Wenzinger of the Broome County Council of Churches “Ramp It Up” program. Wenzinger, an experienced carpenter, made sure that the youth not only learned carpentry skills, but understood the engineering principles that go into construction. While the youth and their adult mentors spent the mornings and afternoons measuring, drilling, and building, lunchtimes and breaks were used to ask and answer questions about slope, weight bearing, turning radiuses, and more.

At the end of the project, youth said that they enjoyed working with the power tools, seeing the finished product, and using their time to help someone else. One young woman said she plans to show the ramp to her mother, while one of the young men said he wanted to learn more about careers in carpentry.

To wrap up their summer projects, the Dream Center 4-H Tech Wizards youth traveled to Syracuse with their mentors for the New York State Fair, where they were proud to present a display about what they learned through the wheelchair ramp project. All of the youth enjoyed the project and summed up their feelings with a simple question: “Wait…can we do this again?” As Tech Wizards transitions into fall, the mentors are looking for more hands-on service projects that incorporate STEM learning for the coming year.
4-H sites nationwide have been improving and enhancing their mentoring programs to increase positive youth development outcomes for their mentees. Part of those improvements comes from successful recruitment strategies to reach higher numbers of mentees and mentors. But how did these 4-H sites successfully grow their programs? Below we bring you tips from four participating National Mentoring Program sites on the key components that helped expand their programs from the first to second quarter of this year’s National Mentoring Program and advice on how you can make it work in your program. Expanding the program to serve more mentees means recruiting mentors to maintain effective mentoring ratios.

1. Essential Support Staff

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, Elko County | Youth and Families with Promise
Growth Percentage: 16% in mentees

THE OVERVIEW:
This 4-H club credits their expansion to using their National Mentoring Program subaward to hire a recruitment specialist who focused solely on recruiting mentees and mentors. Marilyn Smith, Project Director of the University of Nevada’s YFP mentoring program, said the recruitment assistant increased advertising efforts in order to gain more interest in the Elko County 4-H program from local members of the community. Having this additional staff person allowed the county’s mentoring coordinator to focus on strengthening other aspects, such as program implementation, match support, and reporting. This 4-H site was also diligent in their accounting to ensure they only recruited mentoring matches if they had the adequate budget to support those participants.

THE TAKEAWAY:
“I would recommend that others hire a recruitment specialist and ensure that they will have the funding to support all of the extra participants they expect to recruit.” – Marilyn Smith, Project Director

2. Working in Youth Centers

University of Massachusetts, Berkshire County | Tech Wizards
Growth Percentage: 39% more mentees

THE OVERVIEW:
The marketing plan for the Berkshire County Tech Wizards mentoring program is simple: when parents see mentees and mentors having fun while learning STEM, they sign their kids up for the program. This 4-H site has such an organic growth plan because the program is hosted at Youth Center Inc., a facility that houses youth programs. Because of this location, the 4-H Club is inherently advertising as parents come to pick up their children from the center. 4-H Program Educator Angelica Paredes said when her 4-H site was considering a location for their National Mentoring Program, they targeted communities where there was a decreased 4-H presence and higher pockets of poverty to make the biggest impact with 4-H mentoring. Once staff discovered this local youth center, they reached out and explained how a partnership would be beneficial to both parties to serve more youth. The plan worked. Community interest increased for both organizations in the building. “When parents come to pick up their kids from the youth center, they notice the 4-H club members and find themselves asking, ‘Hey, why isn’t my kid doing that?’” Paredes said. Youth Center, Inc. is local to Berkshire County, but Paredes recommended other 4-H sites contact their United Way affiliate to locate a youth center in their area as many of these organizations receive funding from United Way. Community and neighborhood coalitions are also dependable resources that can make referrals.

THE TAKEAWAY:
“If you have a youth center, go there! When the traffic flow is highest with parents picking up kids, that’s the best time to promote the programming and showcase what you’re doing.” – Angelica Paredes, 4-H Program Educator
3. Dedicated Volunteers

Clemson University, York County | Youth and Families with Promise
Growth Percentage: 21% more mentors

THE OVERVIEW:
If Faith Isreal, 4-H Youth & Development Agent, could use two words to describe her mentoring program, they would be “volunteer strong.” This program has seen an increase in participants due to volunteers continued and unending optimism and dependability. Mentors have worked hard to balance their own personal workload and prioritize their involvement in the mentoring program to educate youth and expose them to new experiences. Many of the volunteers are involved in other aspects of the community, sitting on neighborhood committees and local advisory boards, while others are simply parents who wish to be more involved in 4-H.

THE TAKEAWAY:
“When screening for volunteers, find out their connection [to 4-H]. Most of our volunteers are active members of the community or have been 4-H’ers themselves, so they understand the value of this organization.”
– Faith Isreal, 4-H Youth & Development Agent

4. Strong School Partnerships

Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, Ulster County | Tech Wizards
Growth Percentage: 45% more mentees

THE OVERVIEW:
There are three reasons why this mentoring program nearly doubled their numbers in three months: online advertising, face-to-face meetings with interested volunteers, and strong school partnerships. But according to Melanie Forstrom, a 4-H Issue Leader for Ulster County, their relationships with the local schools are the most significant. The Tech Wizards mentoring program was new to Ulster County beginning in February 2014, so county staff relied on referrals from guidance counselors and other school staff for recommendations on prospective mentees for the program. This referral system has helped Ulster County create excitement in the community for Tech Wizards, and Forstrom is excited for the program to continue to grow.

THE TAKEAWAY:
“Partnering with schools that have engaging guidance counselors has proved to be a crucial component for mentee recruitment.”
– Melanie Forstrom, 4-H Issue Leader

4-H National Youth Science Day: Countdown to Lift-Off

4-H National Youth Science Day (NYSD) is quickly approaching on October 8. Join fellow 4-H sites across the country to increase youth awareness of STEM education and careers by participating in this year’s experiment, Rockets to the Rescue. 4-H National Mentoring Program sites can organize a NYSD event as part of their mentoring program and use their subaward to purchase the experiment kit. First launched in 2008, more than 5 million youth have completed 4-H NYSD experiments combining robotics, agriculture, science, rocketry, wind power, environmental science and alternative energy. This year, National 4-H Council anticipates record-breaking numbers will conduct the NYSD experiment created by the University of Arizona that explores the field of aerospace engineering. National 4-H Council will be hosting a national NYSD event in Washington, D.C., but if you can’t make it, you can still be involved by hosting a local event. The featured experiment will serve as a great bonding activity for mentors and mentees applying concepts such as engineering and math to solve worldwide issues. To learn more about this 4-H learning experience, purchase a 4-H NYSD Experiment Kit, and register your NYSD community event, go to http://www.4-h.org/nysd/.
Tech Wizard mentees became radio producers this summer when they were featured on KFAI, a Minneapolis and St. Paul community radio station. As part of the University of Minnesota Ramsey County’s National Mentoring Program, mentees and mentors produced four hours of radio programming as part of “The Fresh Air Institute—A Young Voices Collaboration,” a partnership with KFAI, and other local youth-serving nonprofit organizations. KFAI broadcast mentees’ stories on August 12, International Youth Day.

For this project, Ramsey County 4-H mentees worked alongside youth served by YouthCARE, a Minneapolis-based multicultural organization with a mission to teach urban youth useful life skills they need to transition from adolescence to adulthood. 4-H mentees, mentors and YouthCARE participants were introduced to the studio employees who helped mentors set up the participating youth with microphones so they could record and listen to their own voices. The youth adopted creative DJ names and split up into three to four person teams. The different teams produced programs that combined music and conversation, relevant to International Youth Day and appropriate for any audience. Originally created by the United Nations General Assembly in 1999, this year’s International Youth Day focused on youth and mental health. The mentees’ radio programs raised awareness on this topic and highlighted individuals in the club and YouthCARE who were brave enough to speak out about the issue at hand. Youth also appeared as guests on the KFAI radio show, “Conversations with Al McFarlane” before the broadcast of their programs to discuss their experience and the segments they created.

“This experiential learning program in the KFAI studios increased the quality and quantity of opportunities available to these young people for full, effective and constructive participation in society,” Community Program Specialist Brittany Lynch said.

To hear the stories produced by Ramsey County 4-H Tech Wizards, go to http://www.kfai.org/fresh-air-institute-2014.