



Illinois 4-H Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

For over a century, the 4-H mission has been to help young people reach their fullest potential, or, as our motto states, "To make the best better." This was true in the early 1900s when Land Grant Universities around the country were disseminating a growing body of research on soil testing, seed variety selection, improved hygiene for livestock, and a variety of other farming practices that we now associate with modern agriculture. At the outset of the 4-H program, the majority of the country was dependent upon agriculture for their livelihood. In its earliest stages, 4-H was designed to improve the quality of life and open doors to educational opportunities for rural populations.

During this time period, a common strategy for promoting progressive farming methods within rural communities was to target youth audiences directly through partnerships between higher education institutions and local school systems. In conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1914, these partnerships became an essential piece of what we now know as the Cooperative Extension System. With the backing of Land Grant Universities, the 4-H model of positive youth development has left an indelible mark on much of the rural landscape.

The 4-H program has continued to evolve in response to changes in agricultural practice, advances in research, the emergence of new technologies, and changes in community needs. Beginning in the 1920s, resulting from the increased concentration of populations in urban centers, the 4-H program shifted to position itself on the cutting edge of progressive education techniques in a broad variety of contexts and project areas, from civic engagement to photography to the performing arts. 4-H has left an indelible mark on the lives of millions of young people. We are proud to celebrate its many great achievements and innovations.

Yet this is not the full story, as 4-H programs were not always accessible by all youth, particularly those from predominantly black and brown communities. We must recognize this marginalization in order to appreciate where we've come from and where we are going as an institution. We are challenged by our current moment to recognize that the story of Illinois 4-H is inseparable from the history of agriculture in the U.S., which is itself a history connected to the violent removal of indigenous people from land which they occupied, stewarded, and relied upon for hundreds of generations. It is a history based in plantocracy; the capture, dehumanization, and enslavement of ~4,000,000 people of African descent as a primary model of political order and wealth for certain privileged classes.

It is a history that is impacted by the Reconstruction and Jim Crow era; the systemic disinvestment and dismantling of institutions designed to serve the African American community and the subsequent economic, social, and legal marginalization of people socially constructed to be outside the category of 'white'.

As education professionals committed to encouraging the best in all young people, it is past time that we align ourselves with the ongoing work of addressing injustice within our own institutions. We believe that a significant portion of this work must take the shape of racial justice, equity, and belonging for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth as a central tenet of positive youth development. These issues were not created overnight. This will require a willingness to think critically about our organization while being self-reflective on our own personal practices over the long term. We will need a culture of honesty about the history of systemic racism within the 4-H organization. To the extent that we have remained silent or have silenced others, each of us has been complicit in the continuation of racist policies and practices. We need achievable action steps aimed at the deconstruction of any barriers to the realization of the full potential of all young people. Perhaps most of all, we need hope, which is the product of action towards a shared vision of the future.

In the words of the late Representative John Lewis "When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something. To do something. Our children and their children will ask us, 'What did you do? What did you say?'" To this end, we offer our heart, hand, head, and health in the service of eliminating structural racism from every aspect of our organization.

We are excited to invite you to join us in this process of self-reflection and transformation. We are honored to continue to play a role in the continual evolution of the 4-H program through programs, relationships, and community partnerships that promote racial justice and equity.

The University of Illinois Extension and Illinois 4-H are committed to ensuring equity, inclusion, diversity and access for both our staff and the youth we serve. With your participation, we will create the organizational changes needed to eliminate any instance of racism and inequality that exist in our programs.

We **must** do better. We **must** act now.

Dr. Lisa Bouillion Diaz

Illinois 4-H Director

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