

Plan of Work Situations for 2025

Concentrations

Animal Production and Management (Adult)
Animal Production and Management (Youth)
Plant Production and Management (Adult)
Plant Production and Management (Youth)
Sustainability, Natural Resources and Wildlife Management, and Environment (Adult)
Sustainability, Natural Resources and Wildlife Management, and Environment (Youth)
Financial Security and Economic Well-Being (Adult)
Financial Security and Economic Well-Being (Youth)
Food Safety, Quality, and Access (Adult)
Food Safety, Quality, and Access: (Youth)
Connected & Resilient Communities (Adult)
Connected & Resilient Communities (Youth)
Building Leadership Capacity (Adult)
Building Leadership Capacity (Youth)
Work and Life Skill Development (Adult)
Work and Life Skill Development (Youth)
Health and Wellbeing (Adult)
Health and Wellbeing (Youth)
Family and Youth Development (Adult)
Small Farm Development
Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (Adult)
Substance Use Prevention (Youth)
Mental Health and Well-Being (Adult)
Mental Health and Well-Being (Youth)

Situations

Concentration: Animal Production and Management (Adult)

Kentucky's animal production and management strategies encompass sustainable practices, health-focused care, and economic viability across all species thus contributing significantly to the state's agricultural landscape. Beef cattle play a crucial role in converting Kentucky's vast 7 million acres of pasture and forage into valuable products. CES focuses on sustainable grazing practices and ensuring optimal use of natural resources like land and water.

Kentucky is renowned as the Horse Capital of the World and is home to a diverse equine population, including thoroughbreds, stock horses, standardbreds, and other breeds. Kentucky's horse industry focuses on breeding excellence. Many commercial swine farms operate in the state, focusing on efficient growth and high-quality pork. Swine farmers implement strict biosecurity protocols to prevent disease transmission and minimize stress. Kentucky's small ruminant producers raise various sheep and goat

breeds for meat, fiber, and dairy purposes. Small ruminants thrive on pasture-based systems, utilizing natural forage with a priority on health management, including vaccinations, parasite control, and nutrition.

Poultry is the number one agricultural industry in the state, contributing significantly to the economy. The poultry sector contains thriving broiler industry for meat production and laying hens for egg production. Many small flock owners raise chickens for personal consumption or local markets. Implementing conservation practices that protect soil and water resources will ensure the long-term sustainability of Kentucky farmland and improve resilience to climate variability.

To meet the needs of Kentucky animal producers CES Extension will create or expand its efforts to offer need-based education and producer-focused programming for all species. Current/future activities include introducing programs to address and improve specific management systems and introduce new and emerging techniques, technology, and production systems for increased efficiency and profitability.

Concentration: Animal Production and Management (Youth)

Kentucky's youth should have access to education and life-skills in animal production and management. According to the 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture, Kentucky has seen a decline in the number of farms and agricultural land, alongside a slight increase in the average age of producers and farm size. Successful operation of farms and ranches requires business skills, ongoing training and education, and safety awareness (USDA, 2024). The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Community Needs Assessment (2023) highlights key agricultural priorities, including youth life skill training, workforce readiness, access to affordable and nutritious food, support for the local agriculture industry, and promoting agricultural literacy among youth. 4-H projects in animal production and management can help young people develop life skills, learn about responsibility, and gain content knowledge about animals through breeding or market projects.

Concentration: Plant Production and Management (Adult)

Optimizing plant, crop and forage production is paramount as Kentucky producers navigate the challenges of economics, climate variability, and evolving consumer demands. Key challenges and strategies to enhance sustainable practices across various agricultural domains include:

- rising input costs (seeds, fertilizers, machinery),
- crop price fluctuations.
- knowledge of soil health, and
- water management to produce high yielding crops for long-term productivity.

Producers use data-driven approaches for efficient resource utilization while exploring new crop varieties for pest resistance and yield improvement. As technology advances, producers will need to adopt remote sensing technologies to monitor soil health,

moisture, and other parameters to increase efficiency. Implementing conservation practices that protect soil and water resources will ensure the long-term sustainability of Kentucky farmland and improve resilience to climate variability.

Current and continuing practices involve cover crops to reduce erosion resulting in enhanced soil health as well as rotating crops to break pest cycles, improve soil fertility, and reduce disease pressure. Extension programming will encourage diverse crops and horticulture species to reduce risk and explore specialty crops, such as berries, herbs, and ornamental plants. Extension Specialists continue to educate farmers on forage species selection for hay production and livestock nutrition, advise on implementing integrated pest management and organic production practices (to minimize chemical inputs while still effectively managing pests), select climate-adapted crop varieties, and prepare for extreme weather events through adaptation and disaster readiness programs.

To meet the needs of producers, agents and specialists will continue to disseminate research-based information, offer workshops, field days, online resources, support local farmer's markets, community gardens, community supported agriculture, and urban horticulture initiatives.

Concentration: Plant Production and Management (Youth)

Educating youth about plant production and soil science is crucial for the future of agriculture, empowering them to innovate and address current and future agricultural challenges. The National 4-H Council's 2024 Index Survey revealed that 83% of youth enjoy science, 66% view it as a tool for problem-solving, and 62% are interested in science-related careers. The 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture highlights trends in Kentucky, such as a decrease in the number of farms, reduced agricultural land, an aging producer population, and larger farm sizes. Key priority issues identified by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension System Community Needs Assessment (2023) include youth life skill training opportunities, youth workforce readiness, access to affordable, nutritious food, support for the local agriculture industry, and promoting youth agriculture literacy. 4-H projects in plant production and soil science can help young people develop life skills, learn responsibility, and gain knowledge about these fields through horticulture, plant science, and soil science projects and programs.

Concentration: Sustainability, Natural Resources and Wildlife Management, and Environment (Adult)

Ensuring the sustainability of Kentucky woodlands and natural resources, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, faces many challenges. Many landowners struggle to implement sustainable practices due to economic pressures, lack of access to technology, and workforce. The situation is exacerbated by development and the increasing demand for food, which often leads to the overuse of land and water resources, contributing to soil degradation, deforestation, and water scarcity.

Kentucky is blessed with a rich array of natural resources, including vast forests, abundant waterways, and wildlife. With woodlands in each of the 120 counties and forest industries in 110 counties, Kentuckians in both rural and urban areas all derive benefits from woodlands. Hardwood forests cover 50% of Kentucky and 473,000 individuals own 88% of the 12.4 million forested acres in the state. Forests stimulate the Kentucky economy through employment and production to the tune of \$13 billion annually and there are over 28,000 jobs in Kentucky's forest sector. Forests provide recreational opportunities and are a powerful tool in efforts to promote sustainability and support native diversity. Wildlife management programs assist landowners through both urban and rural wildlife management and damage control initiatives.

However, Kentucky's forests and natural areas face growing risks. Threats from climate change are increasing as evidenced by some of the warmest and wettest years on record during the past decade and Kentucky is ranked as the ninth most vulnerable state in the country by long-term climate change impacts. Extreme weather events, such as the December 2021 tornado in Western Kentucky and the 2022 flooding in Eastern Kentucky are becoming more frequent and severe. In addition, a wide range of invasive species (including insects, pathogens, animals, and plants) can cause problems in woodlands, forests and other natural areas, threatening management and long-term sustainability.

Kentucky's Extension remains committed to developing adaptive management strategies for the critical issues facing the sustainability of farms, natural areas, and forests for today and in the future. Implementing soil and water conservation practices in both urban and rural watersheds is critical to the long-term sustainability of Kentucky's natural resources.

Concentration: Sustainability, Natural Resources and Wildlife Management, and Environment (Youth)

Educating youth about natural resources and environmental sciences is crucial for our future, as it empowers them to become proactive stewards of our planet. The Kentucky 4-H Youth Development Program aims to boost environmental literacy among youth, addressing a significant gap in environmental knowledge revealed by surveys from the Kentucky Environmental Education Council. America's prosperity is inseparably linked to the health of our environment. A healthy environment is an essential component of the quality of life of humans and all living organisms (USDA, 2024). Optimistically, the National 4-H Council's 2024 Index Survey found that 83% of youth enjoy science, 66% see it as a problem-solving tool, and 62% are interested in science-related careers. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension System's 2023 assessment identified key priorities such as youth life skill training, workforce readiness, and promoting natural resource literacy. Through 4-H projects in natural resources and environmental sciences, young people develop life skills, learn responsibility, and gain knowledge about sustaining our natural resources through various projects and programs.

Concentration: Financial Security and Economic Well-Being (Adult)

A disproportionate number of Kentuckians live in economically distressed communities (39% of Kentuckians, compared to 15% nationally). Further, most Kentucky households are concerned with financially sustaining a quality of life that allows them to survive and thrive in an economically challenged society. From housing to grocery expenses, the cost of living continues to rise, and households are ill-equipped to adjust. Securing financial stability is vital for the well-being of state constituents. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is committed to improving the financial security and economic well-being of families across the Commonwealth. Related CES programming is designed to help Kentuckians become more economically resilient by promoting financial literacy education, comprehensive family resource management skills, and small business engagement and support.

In a 2023 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Community Needs Assessment, with nearly 28,000 responses from across the state, Building Financial Literacy and/or Resource Management Skills was among the top 10 state-identified priority issues reported by Kentuckians, and Efforts that Support Local & Small businesses was among the top 10 Community & Economic Development needs in the state.

Concentration: Financial Security and Economic Well-Being (Adult)

In Kentucky, economic uncertainty due to job market fluctuations and agricultural shifts impacts youth through unstable family environments and limited resources. Hospitality, retail, and tourism generated over \$10 billion in 2023, with job growth in culinary arts, tourism, and hobby industries. The unemployment rate increased by 4.7% from July 2023 to July 2024. According to the Kentucky Cooperative Extension System Community Needs Assessment (2023), priorities include building financial literacy and resource management skills, youth life skill training (e.g., leadership and communication), strengthening youth workforce readiness (e.g., entrepreneurship, business development), and engaging diverse and non-traditional youth audiences. America's future relies on a ready workforce and engaged communities to tackle major challenges. Kentucky 4-H develops youth potential for lifelong success through essential skills in communication, leadership, and civic engagement. 80% of 4-Hers reported that 4-H helped them explore career options and 95% reported 4-H helped them identify things they were good at, and 50% reported 4-H helped them with college decision-making. 4-H programs equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to thrive in their personal lives, family lives, and communities.

Concentration: Food Safety, Quality, and Access (Adult)

It is proven that people who have access to and consume their daily dietary requirements of fresh fruits and vegetables are less likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease and have an increased quality of life. Having the knowledge and skills to prepare or preserve fresh fruits and vegetables presents an additional barrier beyond obtaining fresh food access.

With the goal of increasing the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service (CES) aims to increase access to fresh food, as well as increase knowledge and awareness of how to select, store, safely prepare, process, and preserve these foods. CES prioritizes statewide partnership development that helps us meet our goals and objectives. We collaborate with statewide agencies including Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Community Farm Alliance, KY Farm to School Network, Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife and others to help build statewide systems that increase access and usage of fresh fruits and vegetables. These programs benefit Kentuckians because they support food access policy, systems and environmental changes in communities and across the state. They increase knowledge of how to grow, prepare, and preserve fresh fruits and vegetables.

Concentration: Food Safety, Quality, and Access: (Youth)

Kentucky faces significant health and economic challenges, with five of the top ten causes of death being nutrition-related. According to the Obesity Action Coalition the cost of obesity reached \$36.31 billion. The rapidly changing social and economic landscape underscores the need for a healthy, productive, and engaged young people to contribute to a prepared workforce and engaged community to tackle these challenges. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension System's 2023 Community Needs Assessment identifies critical priorities, including access to affordable nutritious food, reducing youth obesity through improved nutrition and exercise, and enhancing youth wellbeing through effective coping strategies. Kentucky 4-H plays a crucial role in addressing these needs by equipping young people with essential skills in nutrition, culinary arts, financial education, and entrepreneurship. 69% of youth reported that they learned about healthy food choices in 4-H. 4-H youth report an increase in preparing meals together as a family, increase in meals eaten as a family, and confidence in the kitchen. These programs not only foster healthier, more resilient individuals, but also contribute to the development of engaged citizens prepared to navigate and thrive in a rapidly evolving world.

Concentration: Connected & Resilient Communities (Adult)

Kentucky's communities face unique challenges that require enhancing connectivity and resilience through digital access, social cohesion, and well-designed public spaces. Broadband access remains critical, particularly in rural areas where digital connectivity gaps hinder economic and educational opportunities. The 2023 Community Needs Assessment identified improved broadband and digital literacy as top priorities for enhancing community resilience.

Extension's connectivity and resilience efforts focus on supporting local economies and helping communities recover from economic shifts and natural disasters (CEDIK, 2024). By promoting digital literacy, educating on safe and vibrant outdoor spaces, and implementing place-based disaster preparedness programs, Extension strengthens community connections and economic sustainability. These initiatives benefit residents,

businesses, and local governments, fostering stronger, more resilient communities equipped to face future challenges.

Concentration: Connected & Resilient Communities (Youth)

In today's rapidly evolving world, youth are and can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of connected and resilient communities. Young people are leveraging technology and social networks to foster strong, supportive relationships that transcend geographical boundaries. They are actively engaged in community-building activities, promoting access to opportunity, and driving change. By participating in local and global initiatives, they are not only enhancing their own resilience but also contributing to the overall strength and adaptability of their communities. Their innovative approaches to problem-solving and their commitment to sustainability are essential in addressing the complex challenges of the 21st century. As they continue to collaborate and share knowledge, youth are laying the foundation for a more connected and resilient world. 4-H is committed to providing the resources necessary to promote youth connection in their communities. Thriving youth are healthy, productive, and engaged (Arnold, 2024). Communities that promote the indicators of youth thriving will have more connected, capable, and committed citizens that can critically think through addressing the needs and priorities of their community.

Concentration: Building Leadership Capacity (Adult)

Leadership is critical at several levels, from elected officials and internal management structure of organizations to project managers, team leaders, and those who inspire throughout a community. Thriving communities may require many leaders willing to take on leadership roles. And yet, it can be a challenge to identify new leaders or to encourage leaders to step up to the role without first building leadership capacity (CEDIK 2024). Respondents participating in the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Community Needs Assessment identified the need to build leadership capacity to enhance individual and family development and community and economic development. Kentucky has a statewide need to "prepare community members for formal/informal leadership and/or volunteer roles" and to build "capacity of local nonprofits and community leaders," according to the survey. UK Extension aims to work on strengthening critical leadership skills and confidence for new and emerging leaders so that the pool of willing and capable leaders can rise to match local needs. Volunteer training can have motivational benefits ranging from inspiring volunteers to get more involved to keeping them in the program (Fox, Hebert, Martin & Bairnsfather, 2009).

Concentration: Building Leadership Capacity (Youth)

4-H opportunities profoundly impact individuals and communities in Kentucky by equipping youth with essential skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, fostering personal leadership, and community engagement. Skills like analytical thinking, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, and adaptability are key to future employment (World Economic Forum, 2023). 77% of employers say that there should

be less focus on traditional school subjects and more focus on real-world skills (Kauffman Foundation, 2021). In the 2023 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Needs Assessment youth life skill training opportunities (such as leadership and communication skill opportunities), strengthening youth workforce readiness, and strengthening youth-adult or mentorship relationships were top priorities across Kentucky. According to the National 4-H Annual Index Survey (2024), 95% of youth identified their strengths through 4-H, 80% explored career options, and 50% received guidance for college decisions. Additionally, 75% enjoyed helping their community, and 93% felt inspired by 4-H, with 42% being inspired “a lot” to volunteer. These experiences build leadership capacity, promote civic engagement, and create connected, resilient communities by encouraging critical thinking and empathy. Furthermore, 4-H offers life skill training, strengthens youth workforce readiness, fosters mentorship, maximizes youth voice in important issues, and enhances peer-peer relationships.

Concentration: Work and Life Skill Development (Adult)

Kentucky household income statistics are concerning, with the median household income in Kentucky on a downward trend (i.e., approximately \$55,100, which is 74% of the U.S. median income). Most alarming, it is estimated that nearly 62% of Kentucky households do not generate sufficient income to meet living wage standards given the state’s average cost of living. The Kentucky Center for Business and Economic Research (2024) projects that, “a key for Kentucky’s future economic growth is to identify and successfully implement programs that increase the employment-population ratio, particularly for working-age adults.” The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is committed to improving the work and life skill development of adults across the Commonwealth by offering programming designed to increase the human capital of constituents. This includes providing education and training on topics such as workforce preparation, job readiness, financial literacy, soft skills, and professionalism, among others.

In a 2023 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Community Needs Assessment, with nearly 28,000 responses from across the state, Building Employee Soft Skills (e.g., communication, productivity, and teamwork skills) and Building Life Skills of Community Members were among the top ten Individual and Family Development Needs reported by Kentuckians.

Concentration: Work and Life Skill Development (Youth)

America’s future hinges on a prepared workforce and engaged communities collaborating to tackle society’s most pressing challenges. As of 2024, there are 2,465,949 job openings in Kentucky and nationwide there are 10 million unfilled jobs. Fastest growing jobs are in the fields of vocational education and higher education teachers, agriculture professionals, and digitally enabled roles: ecommerce specialists, digital transformation specialists, and digital marketing professionals (World Economic Forum, 2023). 85% of the jobs that will exist in 2030 haven’t been invented yet (Dell

Technologies, 2019). 77% of employers say focus less on traditional school subjects, more on real-world skills (Kauffman Foundation, 2021). Skills like analytical thinking, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, adaptability are key (World Economic Forum, 2023). According to the National 4-H Index Study 2024, 80% explored career options, 50% received guidance for college decisions, and 95% reported 4-H helped them identify things they were good at. To ensure a sustainable society, it is crucial that our youth are equipped to fill these positions. The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension System Community Needs Assessment (2023) has identified key priority issues related to life skill development for young people. These priorities include youth life skill training opportunities, youth workforce readiness, and maximizing youth voice in matters that directly impact them¹. Empowering our youth to actively participate in addressing societal issues is essential for a thriving future.

Concentration: Health and Wellbeing (Adult)

The opportunities and resources available to support the health and well-being of adults and families in Kentucky vary widely. Disparities in health-promoting knowledge, resources, and infrastructure contribute to higher rates of chronic health conditions and lower quality of life. Prevention, early detection, and care are essential to maintain and/or improve quality of life. Yet, this burden is often placed on individuals to navigate the healthcare system and traditional public health entities. Additionally, for decades, little attention has been given to the external factors that undoubtedly affect health such as access to care, education, nutritious foods, and safe physical spaces. These same issues and concerns were echoed throughout the 2023 UK Cooperative Extension Community Assessment. Within the top 15 priority issues identified by Kentuckians, “ensuring individuals and families have access to affordable nutritious foods” was #4 and “reducing youth obesity through nutrition education and/or exercise” was #8. Guided by the Cooperative Extension’s National Framework for Health Equity and Well-being, UK Extension aims to become a critical public health partner for addressing disparities in health-promoting knowledge, resources, and infrastructure through comprehensive health, nutrition, and wellness programming that supports adult physical health and well-being.

Concentration: Health and Wellbeing (Youth)

Thriving youth are healthy, productive, and engaged (Arnold, 2024). According to Kentucky Kids Count Database (AECF, 2023) 41% of Kentucky teenagers are obese or overweight. Youth are also experiencing alarming levels of negativity about themselves, their confidence in the future, and their ability to find contentment in life (McKinsey & Company, 2022). 30% of youth are chronically absent (United States Department of Education, 2024). The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Needs Assessment (2024) identified key priorities issues related to health and wellbeing as need for improved access to mental health and wellbeing resources, reducing youth obesity through nutrition education and/or exercise, minimizing bullying and/or school violence. To address these issues, Kentucky 4-H creates opportunities for youth in the

five domains of physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health and well-being.

Concentration: Family and Youth Development (Adult)

Family and Youth Development programming is essential for fostering healthy, supportive environments where both children and adults can thrive. By offering structured activities and educational workshops, UK Extension aims to build strong family bonds equipping young people and older adults with critical life skills. Guided by the Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health Equity and Well-being, our programming also addresses social and emotional needs throughout the lifespan, promoting resilience and positive relationships which are two of the key concerns identified in the top 15 needs of Kentucky's statewide needs assessment. Investing in such programs can prevent future challenges by supporting early intervention and personal growth. Ultimately, these initiatives contribute to the well-being of individuals and the stability of communities, making them a vital component of social development.

Concentration: Small Farm Development

Small farm development is a crucial aspect of the Kentucky agricultural sector, especially in the context of supporting rural economies and ensuring food security. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) defines a small farm as an operation with a gross cash farm income of \$250,000 or less. These farms are typically family-owned and operated, and they represent more than 90 percent of farms in the U.S. These farms face challenges such as urbanization, an aging farmer population, farm consolidation, new and beginning farmers, and changing climate patterns.

Small farms play a vital role in the competitiveness and sustainability of rural and farm economies, protecting and enhancing natural resources and the environment, and maintaining rural populations. Urban small scale farm production is an emerging and fast grow segment of farm economies. The development and sustainability of small farms is important in providing a nursery for new enterprises and marketing systems, which is crucial for innovation and diversification in agriculture. Small farm development can be hindered by access to capital, markets, and technology. Additionally, owners of small farms may lack the knowledge or resources to implement sustainable practices that could improve their economic viability and environmental stewardship.

Kentucky Cooperative Extension will continue to aid small farm owners by providing educational opportunities and increasing awareness of resources offered through various programs and online platforms. This includes developing new and improved practices to reduce production costs, protect and improve soil and water resources, and offer options for specialty crop production. Extension personnel will also promote whole farm plans, estate planning, farm transitions, risk management, and market opportunities.

The development of small farms is imperative for the health of Kentucky's agricultural sector, rural communities and emerge urban agriculture.

Concentration: Substance Use Prevention and Recovery (Adult)

Though substance use and substance use disorder have been pressing social problems for decades, the public health burden and consequence associated with substance use has rapidly worsened in recent years. Drug overdoses have surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of accidental death and overdoses have contributed to a reduction in average life expectancy in the US. Much of the substance use-related morbidity and mortality is a result of a persistent treatment gap. Each year, about 90% of people who need treatment for SUD in Kentucky do not receive it. To address this gap in service provision, more community-level programming is required to meet the complex needs of Kentuckians who use drugs. Cooperative Extension is uniquely positioned, both with deep connections to each Kentucky county and with its transdisciplinary team of specialists, to address the holistic needs of Kentuckians who use drugs including mental health, fair housing, second-chance employment, nutrition and physical health, and much more

Concentration: Substance Use Prevention (Youth)

Substance use and substance use disorder are persistent public health problems in Kentucky. Kentucky youth fare worse than their US counterparts in terms of numerous indicators of drug use and drug-related harm including cigarette and smokeless tobacco use, vaping, alcohol use, and illicit drug use such as opioid and methamphetamine use. Accordingly, the recent University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service Needs Assessment (2023) indicated substance use prevention is the primary concern among most Kentucky counties. Nevertheless, few Kentucky communities support prevention efforts that are informed by research. Cooperative Extension is well-positioned with deep collaborative community ties to support evidence-based prevention programming. Such programs may target substance use directly or indirectly by focusing on pertinent risk and protective factors and promoting overall well-being for Kentucky youth.

Concentration: Mental Health and Well-Being (Adult)

More than ever before, people are feeling the burden of stress on their wellbeing. More than 1 in 5 adults in the United States lives with a mental illness; in Kentucky, 43% of adults report signs or symptoms of anxiety or depression across their lifespan. At the same time, suicide is a leading cause of preventable death in Kentucky for individuals aged 10-34, and those over the age of 59.

Concern over the state of mental health and access to care was echoed in the Cooperative Extension Community Needs Assessment, where respondents listed "improved access to mental health and wellbeing resources" as one of the top 6 priority issues. Kentuckians are aware of their need for knowledge and skills to recognize and respond to a mental health challenge, whether it be their own or to help someone else, and the ability to advocate for more mental health resources in all areas of the state.

Cooperative Extension is poised with the research and evidence-based resources needed to serve as a beacon of hope in times of distress through our ability to help overcome stigma, connect people to care, and amplify the voices of many to advocate for better quality of life for all.

Concentration: Mental Health and Well-Being (Youth)

Kentucky's youth population deserves safe and nurturing environments that foster their growth and wellbeing. Unfortunately, mental health challenges affect a significant portion of our youth, with 17% of those aged 6-17 experiencing mental health disorders, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2023), and only 50% receiving treatment. The impact is profound, with one person in the U.S. dying by suicide every 11 minutes, and in Kentucky alone, 800 lives were lost to suicide in 2022. Recognizing the urgency, the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service's 2019 and 2023 statewide programming issue surveys highlighted mental health and wellbeing as priority areas. Nationally, 45% of 4-H participants reported high stress in a 2023 survey by 4-H.org. The University of Kentucky Community Needs Assessment (2023) indicates priorities of improve access to mental health and wellbeing resources, minimizing bullying and/or school violence, stronger parenting and relationship-building skills, and social, emotional, and/or behavioral education for adults working with youth. To address these concerns, the 4-H Program provides evidence-based educational programs focused on positive mental health and self-care, aiming to empower youth with decision-making and critical thinking skills, fostering resilience and overall wellbeing. By emphasizing mental health and offering targeted educational initiatives, we can create a brighter future for Kentucky's youth.