LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
FROM A DISTANCE

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The current climate has forced community leaders, youth-serving organizations and educators to rethink how they can continue to meet the needs of young people in the absence of the face-to-face environment. It is encouraging to know that tangible strategies exist to keep youth engaged and connected, even from a distance.

A team of Georgia 4-H professionals has created a fully online "Digital Leadership" program for youth across the state. They have worked to modify modules from the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development's Youth Leadership in Action curriculum as the foundation for this educational experience. Since March 2020, 24 youth have participated in engaging, experiential learning sessions - all while staying safe and protected.

CHOOSE THE BEST PLATFORM:

• Platforms such as "Zoom" or "Google Classroom" allow for audio and visual components so the participants can see and hear each other during the entire session. For homework or reflection assignments, consider setting up a centralized place for students to post their work, such as "Canvas."

• Incorporate additional tools like "Mentimeter", "Slido", "Kahoot!", and/or "Poll Everywhere" to provide additional opportunities to engage.

• If possible, do a trial run with a small audience prior to sessions to ensure that content and interactive tools are working.

• If possible, at least two adults should be present to co-facilitate and manage the learning environment. If breakout rooms are used, there should be a minimum of one adult in each room to help students stay on task. As with face-to-face programs, adults should never be alone with one young person.

• Co-facilitators can work together by dividing up the logistics of an online classroom. For example, one facilitator can monitor the technology components – setting up breakout rooms, making sure that audio and video are working, and monitoring the chat box – while the other facilitator is delivering content.

PROVIDE CLEAR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS:

• Offer an "orientation" prior to the first session for students to become familiar with any tools or platforms that will be used.

• Session format will be different than classroom instruction. Break modules down into more than one session or limit information from a module to 45 minutes to an hour.

• Begin each session with housekeeping rules including: keeping the microphone muted when not speaking, typing questions/comments in chat box, or selecting "raise hand" when wanting to join in conversation.

• If you have participation requirements for face-to-face programs, the same should apply in the virtual space. Make those expectations clear at the beginning. If students have to miss a session, consider recording the sessions to share in the case of technical difficulties or scheduling conflicts.

EMPHASIZE PERSONAL INTERACTIONS:

• Building trust online will take longer than if meeting face-to-face. Be strategic about building active engagement into the learning environment. It is recommended to provide some type of engagement every 3-5 minutes, such as asking questions about framework, understanding of concepts, or reflection on application.

• Set aside time at the beginning of each meeting for "small talk." Ask for students to provide updates or thoughts about current and past events.

• Encourage students to share video as well as audio; it helps to humanize the communication. At the same time, be sensitive to students who may not want to share video and be intentional about keeping them engaged in the conversations.

• Facilitators need to be prepared to encourage and support participants' engagement and interaction during virtual sessions with tools like games, online surveys, and opportunities to respond in writing as well as verbally.