March 1, 2010

Dear Rural Community Leader:

I am writing to invite you to join a cadre of rural community leaders of all ages across the state in a special initiative funded by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Rural Youth Development Program (Engaging Youth, Serving Communities), and sponsored by the University of Missouri Extension 4-H Center for Youth Development.

The Missouri 4-H Homegrown Community Leadership Project (or MoHoCoLa) is kicking off this spring across our Show Me State. Five regional communities have self-selected to develop national demonstration projects using youth-adult partnerships that engage the broader community in impacting one issue of local relevance to rural youth.

If you are reading this letter, you have been identified as a rural community leader in one of the participating communities, and are considered a candidate for your community’s core team! So, how will the initiative work?

Right now, the five regional communities are assembling a core team of 20-30 youth and adult leaders who will meet approx. once a month to guide the process. Core teams will receive two days of initial training at a location in your region this spring. Teams will then plan and conduct at least one community forum or town hall meeting to involve the broader community in picking an issue of importance to local rural youth. With the results of their meeting(s), core teams will then select the issue to focus on and develop an action plan for how to address it.

Throughout the process, core teams will involve youth and adults working together and sharing ownership for the plans, actions, and results. Core teams will each have $2,000 with which to leverage other funds and to implement their initial plans in 2010. As projects expand and deepen, funding is expected to continue for the next 2-5 years.

The 4-H Youth Specialist for your county, who is serving as the local project coordinator for the MoHoCoLa project, has identified you as a candidate for the core team, along with other adult and youth leaders from your community. What do you need to become a core team member? Several hours a month to share your passion for your community, your leadership experience, and your desire to work with young people as they gain leadership skills and exercise voice in this community-building process.

What can you expect from your involvement? The satisfaction of cultivating new civic and entrepreneurial leaders for your community, as well as stronger connections with other adult leaders in your community. Oh, and did we mention concrete results? In other states, the USDA Rural Youth Development Program has accomplished impressive things, such as starting after school programs, forming farmers markets, even raising funds for a community center! We are planning for equal or even greater results from MoHoCoLa demonstration projects!

The vision of the Missouri 4-H Homegrown Community Leadership Project is ultimately about giving youth co-ownership as leaders now, so that they are empowered to either stay in the community and remain involved as adult leaders, or to come back and give back as leaders in the community later. We hope you will join us on this exciting journey!

Sincerely,

Steven Henness
MoHoCoLa State Project Coordinator
Extension Associate, MU 4-H Center for Youth Development
Engaging Youth, Serving Community
Talking Points

KEY MESSAGE:
EYS coolest 4-H program that helps strengthen rural communities across America by providing leadership, service and educational opportunities and resources to rural youth in partnership with adults, especially those from underserved and diverse populations.

SUPPORT MESSAGES:
EYS C provides land-grant universities with funding to implement Youth in Governance programs in at least five communities, directly serving youth and adults in rural communities.

Through involvement in EYS C, youth participate in experiences that: develop their life and leadership skills; improve their understanding of cultural and socio-economic diversity; and give them a sense of belonging, purpose and accountability for the success of their rural communities.

Youth work together in partnership with adults to identify social, cultural, economic, or environmental issues affecting their rural communities, to deliberate solutions on a community level, and to develop and implement action plans which help to resolve their issues.

Establishing youth as an integral part of the civic governance and decision-making processes in rural communities will revitalize the concept of citizenship and help maintain stable, vibrant, and sustainable communities.

Youth have the capacity to positively affect community issues, fostering change in human, social, civic, cultural, natural, financial, and built (infrastructure) community capitals.

Background:
• There are more than 13 million youth in America living in rural areas.
• Rural youth often spend more time alone than urban or suburban youth because their parents are working and commute long distances to jobs. Seventy-three percent of rural women work outside the home, compared with 53 percent of the general population.
• Many young people in rural areas feel isolated because there are few places for them to go in their free time and few opportunities to participate in programs that will guide their positive growth and development. Lack of connections with other youth and adults can result in negative behavior like crime and substance abuse.
• Rural youth are directly affected by public policy decisions and community hardships, but typically are barred from decision-making processes and community improvement opportunities.
• Rural youth who do not see a positive role for themselves within the community often migrate from their hometowns as adults instead of continuing to contribute to their community’s success.
• Youth who participate in youth development programs are more likely to develop positive attributes in intellectual, social, emotional and physical domains.