



# 4-H

## MISSOURI

### WASHINGTON COUNTY

CHILDREN DO WELL WHEN THEIR FAMILIES  
DO WELL, AND FAMILIES DO BETTER WHEN  
THEY LIVE IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

2005 FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

## CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

When Lynna Lawson hired a new staff person, Paula Barr, in 1999 for the Washington County, Missouri 4-H, she unexpectedly learned that her new hire's husband was on death row at Potosi Correctional Center, a nearby maximum security prison. Stories of the family's painfully brief, carefully monitored visits—representing their only opportunity to connect—inspired Lawson, a youth development specialist, and Barr to work with Potosi Correctional Center staff and offenders to bring 4-H behind bars.

In the succeeding years, the 4-H Living Interactive Family Extension (LIFE) program has involved 119 youth and their incarcerated fathers, uncles and grandfathers in every imaginable activity—from puppet shows to water relay races—injecting unimaginable laughter and children's voices into a grim setting. Families share transformative experiences that help them rebuild fractured pasts and look ahead together, as a family, an especially meaningful process for young people who might otherwise face challenging decisions without a positive male presence.



THE KIDS COME IN SEPARATED FROM  
THEIR DADS BY WIRE AND FENCES, BUT  
AFTER THEIR TIME TOGETHER, BOTH SIDES  
SAY THEY FEEL LIKE A REAL FAMILY.

Linda Jo Turner, Ph.D., Director, University of Missouri 4-H Center for Youth Development

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

“Offenders join the 4-H LIFE program because they see their kids repeating their own destructive behaviors and they want to help break that pattern before it’s too late,” said Wilkerson, a 4-H youth extension associate.

Both Wilkerson and Lawson credit the Missouri Department of Corrections with paving the way for 4-H LIFE’s design and implementation. The results are impressive, both in the short term—as offenders and their families recapture lost time and learn to trust one another again—and in its potential for the long term. Wilkerson and Lawson see young people choosing to change patterns of behavior, and offenders see that they can still be role models for their children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces. The Department of Corrections is now considering using the 4-H LIFE model in three minimum-security institutions and making it a key component in its re-entry program.

Despite initial concerns within the tight-knit Potosi community, 4-H LIFE has earned the town’s respect. “It came down to a question of who deserves 4-H extension services,” comments Lawson. “We simply showed residents that these families need their Saturday mornings more than anyone. We are in the business of strengthening every family we can.”

## FAMILIES COUNT FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

Through a joint venture of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the National 4-H Council, the FAMILIES COUNT Family Strengthening Awards recognize outstanding 4-H programs that work to give children in rural communities what they need most—strong, capable and economically successful families. Responding to the varied needs of the families they serve, these organizations improve the economic prospects of working men and women and create the services and networks of support that all families need to realize their aspirations for themselves and their children.

4-H is a community of more than 7 million diverse young people across America learning leadership, citizenship and life skills. Through clubs, camps, school-based and after-school programs, 4-H makes a positive impact on the lives of urban, suburban and rural youth and their families. Youth learn and grow through participation in fun, hands-on learning experiences in areas including science, engineering, technology, healthy lifestyles and citizenship. “4-H connects families to programs and resources to help them succeed and grow stronger,” says National 4-H Council President and CEO Donald T. Floyd, Jr. “With the FAMILIES COUNT Family Strengthening Awards 4-H is able to reach rural families who often find themselves isolated from opportunities and supports to help secure their children's futures.”

## WASHINGTON COUNTY, MISSOURI 4-H

Award-winning Program: 4-H Living Interactive Family Extension (LIFE)

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