

Shaping the Future through Service

Featuring Youth United groups from HFH of Summit County, OH, and HFH of Coastal Fairfield, CT

BACKYARD BUILD



Youth United HFH of Summit County, OH

January 17, 2011, the annual MLK Day of Service, marked the launch of Backyard Build, a new collaboration between Youth United of Summit County and the nonprofit, UGIVE.org. The monthly event will give youths the opportunity to assemble picnic tables for Habitat families. “The community has been really responsive to Habitat, and we wanted to give kids opportunities, too” said Cyrus Weigland, the affiliate’s youth programs coordinator and AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. The Backyard Build is a wonderful solution for engaging those who are too young to volunteer on the construction site. “We are planting the seeds so the kids will want to be involved for the rest of their lives,” Weigland said. “We also have the full support of the affiliate, and that is always a key to sustaining Youth United groups.”

Action steps for this project:

Plan

Start with the steering committee. As the leaders of the group, they need to take ownership of the project. We discussed the project and received input from various members for a diverse youth perspective.

Propose

To meet the Youth United goal of developing new leaders and fostering teamwork, work with the members to draft a project proposal that provides a step-by-step plan.

Publicize

If you don’t put time in marketing and publicizing events, you will have problems. We wanted ample time to get the word out, so we wrote a press release and placed it on our website.

Project Update

The youth will have the opportunity to present their finished picnic tables at a Habitat home dedication, which Cyrus feels is the best part of the project. “Seeing the youths gathered around and taking pride in their completed project will be a cool feeling,” he said. “The kids signed the bottom of the tables like we sign studs in the house. Twenty years from now, the signatures will still be there. Where else can you leave that kind of mark other than Habitat?”

“Simple service opportunities can propel youth to meaningful service. We often get caught up in elaborate events. YU members are full of ideas. They just need an outlet to act on those ideas.” –Cyrus Weigland, Youth Programs Coordinator/AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer.

“Having two adults co-lead the YU team will keep down adult burnout. Communication is the key so everyone knows what is going on.” –Phyllis Machledt

Neighborhood Park Cleanup

YU of HFH of Coastal Fairfield, CT

In July, a historic building in the city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, was destroyed by a tornado. Damage from the tornado also impacted William Street Park, located across the street, taking away the only place the neighborhood children could play. The Youth United members of HFH of Coastal Fairfield, lead by the affiliate’s staff, collaborated with the city and other volunteers to clean up William Street Park.

This service project mobilized a diverse team of more than 60 people from the community, including Habitat homeowner children, students from area schools, an AmeriCorps member—even the mayor, who showed the younger kids how to plant. Eileen Bankos, the affiliate’s volunteer services manager, always has children interested in volunteering with Habitat. “Service projects are a natural fit to get them involved,” she said. “And we have a lot of families in this neighborhood who often suggest projects that will help beautify the area.”

This was a service opportunity that exemplifies Habitat’s efforts to build community. For Phyllis Machledt, the affiliate’s Youth United advisor, the best part of this project was seeing the kids coming out and taking ownership, and seeing the residents taking responsibility for the upkeep. “Nothing can replace that,” she said.

Action steps for this project:

Contact the city

The affiliate and the Youth United members obtained permission for the project from the city’s parks and recreation department. The city also provided the bulbs, so funding was a not a challenge. If the city is unable to provide landscaping materials, Youth United members can ask a local nursery to donate shrubs or bulbs.

Remember the weather

You’ll be working outdoors, so set up an alternate day in case the weather forces you to reschedule. Make sure you set clear guidelines about who will make the call and under what circumstances.

Branch out

Notify other youth organizations, not just Youth United members, so you have kids from diverse backgrounds working together. Also, pair up older kids with younger ones. It will give the older youths the chance to act as leaders and mentors.

Special Advice for other affiliates:

“The biggest thing is to realize is that Habitat isn’t just about building houses. Where there is an affiliate, there is a need to build community. When community councils, block-watch groups, and other neighborhood organizations know they can count on Youth United members, it gives Habitat a good solid foot in the neighborhood. Fifteen years ago, this area was a gang-infested war zone. Service days make people want to learn more; they do spread the word.” –Beth Rafferty, Youth United co-advisor, HFH of Coastal Fairfield.