

2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting Report

San Antonio, TX

February 23-25, 2026

Beyond Ready

2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting

Westin San Antonio Riverwalk, San Antonio, TX



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Executive Summary

The 2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting, held February 23–25 in San Antonio, Texas, convened 4-H program leaders, Extension professionals, foundation executives, and national partners from across the Cooperative Extension System to advance the shared work of preparing young people to be Beyond Ready for life and work.

Building on the foundation established during the first year of the Beyond Ready initiative, the 2026 meeting focused on implementation, mobilization, and leadership capacity across the national 4-H network. Participants engaged in collaborative sessions to strengthen system alignment, explore emerging workforce opportunities for youth, and identify practical strategies to expand the reach and impact of 4-H programs.

Throughout the three-day convening, discussions centered on how the Cooperative Extension System can continue to evolve to meet the needs of young people navigating a rapidly changing world of learning and work. Participants examined emerging technologies, new workforce pathways, and strategies for mobilizing partners and resources in support of the initiative's long-term goal of reaching 10 million youth annually by 2030.

Key Discussions & Outcomes

Advancing Implementation & System Alignment

Participants reflected on progress made during the first year of the Beyond Ready initiative and identified actions needed to support continued implementation across Land-Grant Universities (LGU).

- Program leaders emphasized the importance of aligning Beyond Ready efforts with institutional priorities and statewide strategies.
- The introduction of the Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy highlighted a commitment to strengthening leadership capacity through peer learning and applied practice.
- Discussions reinforced the need for consistent data collection, shared metrics, and clear reporting processes to track progress toward national goals.



Responding to a Changing Workforce & Learning Landscape

Across sessions, participants explored how shifts in education and workforce expectations are shaping youth development priorities.

- Leaders examined the growing importance of flexible learning pathways that combine technical skills and human-centered competencies.
- Emerging models highlighted opportunities to connect youth with career pathways in agriculture, skilled trades, and other high-demand industries.
- There was increased interest in credentialing, work-based learning, and partnerships that connect 4-H experiences to real-world opportunities.

Leveraging Innovation, Partnerships, and Technology

Participants explored strategies to expand program reach and improve efficiency through innovation and collaboration.

- Generative AI was identified as a tool to enhance program delivery, communications, fundraising, and administrative efficiency, but it requires clear guidance on ethics, data privacy, and youth use.
- Leaders discussed strategies to strengthen partnerships with industry, schools, and community organizations to expand access and scale impact.
- Alumni engagement and national “tentpole moments” were identified as key opportunities to mobilize the broader 4-H network and increase visibility.

Strengthening Storytelling, Fundraising, and Network Mobilization

The meeting reinforced the importance of clearly communicating 4-H’s value and aligning resources to support growth.

- Participants highlighted the need for stronger, more consistent storytelling that connects youth outcomes to workforce readiness and community impact.
- Fundraising discussions emphasized the importance of aligning donor interests with program priorities and building long-term, sustainable funding strategies.
- Leaders identified opportunities to activate alums, volunteers, and partners better to expand both reach and capacity.



Preparing for Next Steps

Participants identified several priorities to guide continued progress across the 4-H system:

- Advance Beyond Ready implementation by strengthening alignment across LGUs, including leadership engagement and staff capacity-building.
- Expand workforce-aligned programming, including credentialing exploration, career pathway development, and industry partnerships.
- Improve data systems and storytelling tools to communicate impact and support stakeholder engagement better.
- Strengthen fundraising strategies and development capacity to support long-term growth.
- Continue building national and regional collaboration through shared resources, peer learning, and leadership development opportunities.

Key Themes from the Meeting

Emerging Technology and AI in 4-H Programs

Participants identified artificial intelligence as an increasingly integrated tool across 4-H programming, communications, and operations.

- Leaders are already using AI to support content development, data analysis, and administrative efficiency.
- There is a growing need for AI literacy among staff and youth to ensure responsible and effective use of AI.
- Ongoing discussions emphasized the importance of establishing clear guardrails related to ethics, data privacy, and youth safety.



Evolving Workforce and Education Pathways

Discussions reinforced that youth are navigating a rapidly shifting education and workforce landscape, requiring new approaches to readiness.

- Leaders highlighted the importance of combining technical skills with human-centered competencies such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork.
- There is increasing interest in work-based learning, credentialing, and career-connected experiences.
- 4-H is well-positioned to help youth explore diverse pathways, including agriculture, skilled trades, and emerging industries.

Advancing the Beyond Ready Initiative

Participants focused on strengthening the implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative across the national 4-H system.

- Leaders shared progress from Year 1 and identified opportunities to better align efforts across LGUs.
- The Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy was introduced as a key strategy to build leadership capacity and support implementation.
- Continued emphasis was placed on defining measurable outcomes and aligning efforts with national growth goals.

Innovative Workforce-Aligned Program Models

Sessions highlighted scalable program models that connect youth to real-world career pathways through experiential learning.

- Examples included programs in agriculture, culinary arts, forestry, and technology that integrate hands-on learning with career exploration.
- Successful models emphasized partnerships with industry, schools, and community organizations.



- These approaches demonstrate how 4-H programs can create clear pathways from youth interests to workforce opportunities.

Communicating Impact and Mobilizing the 4-H Network

Participants emphasized the importance of strengthening how 4-H communicates its value and activates its network.

- Leaders discussed opportunities to align messaging across states better and elevate national storytelling efforts.
- The National 4-H Index Study was highlighted as a key tool for demonstrating impact and supporting public value messaging.
- National “tentpole moments” and alumni engagement were identified as opportunities to increase visibility and participation.

Collaboration and System Alignment

The meeting reinforced the importance of collaboration across the Cooperative Extension System.

- Participants engaged in regional discussions and peer learning to share strategies and address common challenges.
- Leaders identified opportunities to strengthen partnerships, align priorities, and improve coordination across the network.
- Continued collaboration will be critical to scaling impact and achieving long-term growth goals.

Meeting Overview

The 2026 National 4-H Leadership Meeting focused on advancing implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative, strengthening system alignment, and identifying strategies to expand the reach and impact of 4-H programs.



Through collaborative sessions and peer learning, the meeting emphasized leadership development, workforce readiness, and approaches to scale programming across the Cooperative Extension System.

Meeting Objectives

- Advance implementation of LGU Beyond Ready action plans and growth strategies
- Strengthen leadership capacity through the launch of the 4-H Beyond Ready Program Leadership Academy
- Identify measurable progress indicators and reporting processes for the Beyond Ready initiative and national KPIs
- Share scalable program models connecting youth to workforce pathways, skilled trades, and emerging career opportunities
- Explore strategies to leverage emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, to enhance 4-H programming, communications, and operations
- Strengthen collaboration across LGUs through peer learning, regional planning, and leadership networking
- Identify strategies to mobilize alumni, volunteers, and partners to expand the reach and impact of 4-H
- Advance storytelling and fundraising strategies that communicate the public value of 4-H and support growth toward the Beyond Ready Bold Goal of reaching 10 million youth by 2030.

Participants

Participants included 4-H Program Leaders and 4-H Foundation Executives from LGUs, along with representatives from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and staff from the National 4-H Council.

This cross-system group brought together program, partnership, and development perspectives to support alignment and implementation of the Beyond Ready initiative.

Meeting Resources

- Full Agenda
- Session Slides by day:
    - Monday



    - Tuesday
    - Wednesday
- Forms and handouts are linked in their respective sessions
    - Tuesday form
    - Wednesday form