Keeping Kids Safe!

Frequently Asked Questions About the Youth-Adult Housing Policy

General Questions

What’s the definition of a 4-H-sponsored overnight event?
A “Michigan 4-H-sponsored event” is defined as any event that has an affiliation with 4-H through the use of the name or emblem and that involves a representative of 4-H (either a 4-H staff member or a 4-H volunteer who has been through the Michigan State University Extension Volunteer Selection Process or VSP). An overnight event involves sleeping arrangements for those attending.

What’s the definition of a 4-H-sponsored camp?
A “Michigan 4-H-sponsored camp” is defined as any camp (day camp or overnight camp) that has an affiliation with 4-H through the use of the name or emblem and that involves a representative of 4-H (either a 4-H staff member or a 4-H volunteer who has been through the VSP).

How does the Michigan 4-H policy affect the way we work with partners? Whose overnight policy rules apply?
The Michigan 4-H overnight housing policy applies to any Michigan 4-H-sponsored state-, regional-, multi-county-, county- or club-level overnight whenever adults are housed with or share bathrooms with unrelated youth. For purposes of this policy, a “Michigan 4-H-sponsored event” is defined as any event that has an affiliation with 4-H through the use of the name or emblem. If 4-H staff or volunteers are doing an overnight event with a partnering organization, the policy would apply since there is a 4-H affiliation involved. The only exception would be cases where a partnering organization’s policy is more stringent than the 4-H policy.

What prompted Michigan 4-H Youth Development to create this policy?
This policy was developed to help ensure the safety and well-being of both youth and adults involved with Michigan 4-H Youth Development programs and is in alignment with our second Guiding Principle: Youth are physically and emotionally safe. The policy reflects recommendations from the MSU Office of General Counsel, the MSU Office of Risk Management and Insurance, the MSU Agriculture and Natural Resources Office of Human Resources, and the Long-Term 4-H Use of Kettunen Center Committee. The policy is also in alignment with recommendations from research on child sexual abuse that youth organizations should institute policies designed to deter opportunities for child sexual abuse.

Does Michigan 4-H Youth Development provide similar protection for youth involved in non-overnight 4-H activities?
Michigan 4-H uses the MSU Extension VSP to help us carefully select and match appropriate adults with the youth-related efforts that best meet the needs of everyone involved. The VSP is for volunteers who desire to work directly with youth and for volunteers who work with adults who have severe mental, physical or emotional handicapping conditions. The VSP must be completed by volunteers aged 19 and over who have ongoing, unsupervised access to children aged 19 and under and/or to adults who have severe mental, physical or emotional handicapping conditions. “Ongoing” is defined as more than four meetings or gathering times and/or in-depth contact (such as overnight events, out-of-state trips, exchange trips). “Unsupervised” means that the person is alone with children for significant periods of time. For more information on the VSP, go to: http://web1.msue.msu.edu/msue/cyf/youth/cwbvsp.html.

What is the distinction between parent or guardian responsibility and the responsibility of 4-H as an organization in keeping kids safe at overnight events?
The responsibility for the well-being of children lies with each and every one of us. If an event involving young people overnight is identified as a 4-H event (that is, if it has affiliation with the 4-H name or emblem), the 4-H staff and volunteers having responsibility always retain the authority to exercise their best judgment to ensure the safety of the young people involved. They must ensure that:

- The event is carried out in accordance with the Michigan 4-H Youth Development Youth-Adult Housing Policy for Overnight Events. It is the responsibility of Michigan 4-H to do all we can to ensure that the young people involved with 4-H programs are treated with respect and dignity, and are provided with safe, caring environments in which to learn and have fun.

- Parents and guardians are fully informed of the policy and the event arrangements. They indicate this by signing the 4-H Overnight Housing Parent/Guardian Permission Form.

The policy says that adults should be housed with youth whenever possible and if this is not possible, they should be within hearing distance. How do I define “whenever possible”?
4-H staff and volunteers should exercise their best judgment to follow the policy to ensure the safety of young people.
I know that at least two youth can be housed with an unrelated adult who has been through the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process. What’s the maximum number of youth that can be housed with one adult?

Michigan 4-H Youth Development recommends the following adult-to-youth ratios when planning and implementing programs. When involving youth between the ages of 5 and 12 (of the same gender), follow a ratio of one adult to six youth. Supervision of young people aged 13 and up (of the same gender) requires a ratio of one adult to ten youth. 4-H staff and volunteers should also consider the needs of the group (such as age and maturity levels) and use their best judgment to keep the young people safe and not put adults in unreasonable situations.

What is the policy for young people sharing beds at overnight events or on trips?

Youth attending state-level 4-H events do not share beds. Where possible, youth attending overnight regional-, multi-county-, county- and club-level events should not be assigned to share a bed. Exceptions at these events would be when youth of the same gender have a prior relationship and choose to share beds. The comfort and safety of the youth involved should be the primary consideration. An unrelated youth and adult must never share a bed.

Parts of the policy refer to “shared bathrooms.” What is meant by this?

Shared bathrooms – also referred to as community or common bathrooms – are facilities used by groups of people in lodging that does not include private bathrooms. These bathroom facilities usually include multiple toilets, sinks and showers.

What if a parent refuses to sign the “Required Parent/Guardian Permission for 4-H Overnight Events” form because he or she does not want his or her child to be in a room with an adult he or she doesn’t know?

If any child is attending a 4-H-sponsored overnight event where he or she may be housed with an unrelated adult, the form must be signed by the child’s parent or guardian. A concerned parent who does not want to sign the form should be presented with options. The parent could accompany the child to the overnight event and share a room with him or her, or the 4-H staff member could attempt to help the parent connect with the person who will be serving in the chaperone role.

What happens if someone chooses not to follow the policy?

Individuals representing MSU Extension and Michigan 4-H Youth Development Programs are expected to follow all of the policies and procedures of the organization. Staff or volunteers who intentionally decide to not follow policies, such as the Youth-Adult Housing Policy for 4-H Overnight Events, are not covered by MSU liability coverage and are at risk for dismissal from their position within the organization. Activities coordinated by 4-H staff and volunteers as a part of their roles are considered “4-H events” whether the events are labeled that way or not. If staff and/or volunteers organize and coordinate an event that requires lodging and do not follow the Youth-Adult Housing Policy for 4-H Overnight Events, they will not be covered by MSU liability insurance and will be dismissed from their position within the organization.

What do I do if a child tells me he or she is being neglected or abused, or if I suspect this is happening? Am I mandated to do something?

Because of the nature of their jobs and the licensure they maintain for those jobs, some people are required by Michigan law to report suspected child abuse or neglect. In their roles, MSU Extension staff members may determine that it is appropriate to report suspected child abuse and/or neglect even though they are not required to do so. A person making a report in good faith will be supported, as their actions are to protect the welfare of the children in our care. The identity of a reporting person is confidential, subject to disclosure only with the consent of that person or by judicial process. 4-H volunteers who would like more information on the reporting process should contact their county 4-H staff and the local Child Protective Services staff.

We have several 4-H members who are aged 18 and over who have severe mental, physical or emotional disabilities. How does this policy relate to their participation in overnight events?

There are two things to consider. First, when housing a person with special needs, one-on-one lodging with an unrelated adult is permitted if the adult is serving in the capacity of health aide or caregiver. Second, if the 4-H member is 18 and over at the time of the event and is going to be housed with or share a bathroom with younger youth, he or she would need to go through a background check.

Chaperones

Are all adults involved with an overnight event with youth considered to be chaperones?

All adults aged 21 and over who are present at an overnight 4-H event and who will be housed in the same area as young people and/or will share bathrooms with youth are considered to be chaperones and must have gone through the Michigan State University Extension Volunteer Selection Process (VSP). Adults who are present who have not gone through the VSP must not be housed in the same area or share bathrooms with youth. Examples of these adults include resource people at workshops or events or caregivers providing special needs for a young person attending an event. It is recommended that the “4-H Event Chaperone Responsibility” handout be shared with all adults attending an overnight event so they are all familiar with the expectations for young people and for adults.

There’s a very mature 19-year-old in my county who would make a great chaperone for the 12- and 13-year-olds who are attending a state workshop. Can he serve as a chaperone even though he’s not 21?

No. This young person is welcome to attend the workshop but the policy states that those serving as chaperones must be aged 21 and up.
Can 4-H staff waive the criminal history check for staff and volunteers from other agencies and groups who are involved with 4-H overnight events?

4-H staff members may decide to waive the criminal history check if they can document that the individual has successfully gone through the selection process of another youth-serving agency within the past year that is at least as rigorous as the MSU Extension process. More information on the procedure involved with this can be found at: http://web1.msue.msu.edu/msue/cyf/youth/cwbvsp.html.

**Chaperones are asked to model behavior that reflects the six pillars of character. What are these?**

The six pillars of character come from the Josephson Institute of Ethics CHARACTER COUNTS! program, which has been widely used in 4-H. The pillars include trustworthiness (being honest, reliable and loyal), respect (treating others with respect, being considerate, dealing peacefully with disagreements), responsibility (following through, being accountable and self-disciplined), fairness (being open-minded, listening to others, taking turns and sharing), caring (being kind, compassionate and helpful), and citizenship (doing your share to improve your community, cooperating and being a good neighbor).

I’m planning an overnight event that will include adults from partnering organizations, and they’ve already gone through a background check with their agency. Do I need to put them through the MSU Extension Volunteer Process as well?

As outlined in the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process, volunteers who have been screened and accepted by other nonprofit organizations may not have to complete the MSU Extension selection process. They will not have to complete the process if:

1. They have been screened and accepted, and have references on file with another nonprofit organization; and
2. This process has been completed within the past year; and
3. The nonprofit organization has as vigorous a selection process for volunteers as MSU Extension.

I’ve run into situations where I’ve had to use a last-minute sub to an overnight event for a volunteer chaperone who had an emergency. What would the event coordinator need to know about this person?

It’s imperative that the person has been through the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process if they are to be housed with youth or in a lodging area with shared bathrooms. The event coordinator must contact a 4-H staff member from the person’s county to verify the person has been through the process. If the person has not been through the process, the event coordinator can determine if there are enough other chaperones to accommodate the young people who came with the person. If this is not feasible, the person and the youth coming with him or her will not be able to stay at the event.

**Overnights With Older and Younger Youth**

**Why must 18-, 19- and 20-year-old 4-H members go through a background check?**

Any youth aged 18, 19 or 20 (at the time of the event) who attends an event as a participant and who is housed with younger, unrelated youth must not be housed with or share bathrooms with younger, unrelated youth unless he or she has completed a background check including one reference check and a criminal history check. This is for the protection of both older youth and younger youth who may be rooming together.

Our county is having an overnight event involving several 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds. We do not plan to house them with younger youth. Do we still need to complete a background check on these youth?

As long as the older youth are housed separately from younger youth and do not share common bathrooms with them, you do not need to complete a background check. However, keeping in mind that you could encounter last-minute housing changes that might involve housing older youth with younger youth, it may be prudent to do the background checks routinely.

I have a 12-year-old and an 18-year-old (both are the same gender) attending a state 4-H workshop from my county. Is it best to house them together or with youth from other counties who are in the same age groups?

MSU 4-H must make every attempt to house unrelated youth of similar age together whenever possible. Sometimes this may not be possible; for example, a younger youth may be very uncomfortable with the idea of sharing a room with other youth he or she doesn’t know or there may be limited rooms and sharing configurations available. In cases like these, keep in mind that (as stated above) the older youth must complete a background check.

I’m having an overnight event that will include adult volunteers and 4-H members who are 18, 19 and 20. Do they need to have chaperones?

Yes, any 4-H members attending an overnight should have adult chaperones. In the situation you describe, however, these 4-H members who are 18, 19 and 20 would not need to go through a background check since they will not be housed with younger youth. Also keep in mind that any adults housed with or sharing bathrooms with these youth need to have gone through the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process.

I was doing a background check on an 18-year-old 4-H member and her reference suggested that I
check out the member’s MySpace page. I found some disturbing information, including bragging about using alcohol and lots of foul language. How should I respond to this?

There are two distinct areas of concern here: illegal use of substances and use of questionable language. Because there are well-known concerns related to alcohol use or abuse, you may want to share your findings and your concerns directly with the young person. In addition to talking about the legal and health aspects of using alcohol (or any other substance that might be included on a personal web page), you can also speak to how easy it is for people to access this information on the web, including potential employers or college personnel. The second area of concern is the language. It is not legitimate for 4-H staff to respond to anyone’s use of language unless it is truly threatening or otherwise gives rise to concern about abhorrent behavior. For example, language that intimated a repugnant attitude related to children, in terms of sex or otherwise, should be acted on. General foul-mouthed language should not prompt action. One way to avoid claims that the screening process is in any way discriminatory or arbitrary would be to ensure that before anyone is rejected for participation, the assessment would entail participation by a psychologist, social worker or developmental specialist.

Club Overnights

How does this policy affect 4-H club overnights?

Are these considered 4-H-sponsored events?

If a 4-H club is having an overnight activity as a 4-H club, it is considered to be a 4-H-sponsored event since it is affiliated with the 4-H name or emblem. This means that those involved must abide by the Youth-Adult Housing Policy for 4-H Overnight Events by obtaining a copy of the “4-H Overnight Housing Parent/Guardian Permission Form” from county 4-H staff and returning the completed, signed form to the county MSU Extension office before the overnight event takes place. More information on how the policy applies to club overnights is available in the following handout:

Volunteer Handout for 4-H Club Overnight Activities: The Michigan 4-H Youth Development Youth-Adult Overnight Housing Policy.

Is it going to be the responsibility of our 4-H club leaders to have each child's parent or guardian fill out the “4-H Overnight Housing Parent/Guardian Permission Form” for every overnight club trip they take? If so, who is responsible for collecting and retaining the signed forms? Who is responsible for contacting parents or guardians who do not complete the form?

If the trip is a 4-H-sponsored event and if youth will be housed with unrelated adult chaperones, the forms must be completed and signed for each event. County 4-H staff should work with club leaders to ensure the forms are signed, and the forms should be kept on file at the county MSU Extension office. County 4-H staff should work with club leaders to determine how follow-up should be made with parents or guardians who don’t complete the form. The form must be signed and submitted in order for youth to participate.

Trips Out of Town, County, State or Country

How should we handle overnight trips involving one adult and one youth who are unrelated?

The youth and adult should be housed in separate rooms, with the adult housed within hearing distance of the youth’s room – preferably in the room next door. When booking hotel rooms for this kind of scenario, check with the hotel staff to ensure that they allow young people to stay alone in a room. Some hotels allow this as long as the accompanying adult is housed next door; others do not. 4-H staff should make the safety and well-being of a young person in this kind of situation the highest priority and take into consideration the age and maturity level of any young person participating in overnight trips.

How should we handle housing on overnight trips with multiple youth and adults (such as an out-of-state judging competition or an exchange trip)?

As the policy states, youth can be housed with unrelated adult chaperones aged 21 and over as long as the youth-adult ratio is at least two youth to one adult and the adults have been through the Michigan State University Extension Volunteer Selection Process (VSP). It is recommended that youth be housed with adults whenever possible and if this is not possible in a trip situation, adults must be housed with hearing distance – preferably in the room next door. See the question above for more information on checking with hotels ahead of time about their policies.

How do we handle housing at national 4-H events where Michigan 4-H has little or no control, such as National 4-H Conference and National 4-H Congress?

Michigan youth and adults visiting the National 4-H Conference Center in Chevy Chase, Maryland, must abide by the Center’s policy that the only adults who are permitted to share a room with youth are parents or guardians who are accompanying their own children. Michigan youth and adults visiting other kinds of centers or facilities should abide by the housing policy of the center or facility provided it is at least as stringent as the Michigan 4-H policy. If it is not, the Michigan policy should be used.

How does this policy affect families that are hosting youth from other counties, states or countries?

Michigan 4-H county-to-county hosting: The current practice in Michigan 4-H is that anyone in the hosting family who is aged 18 and over must go through the MSU Extension VSP. State exchanges involving host families: When Michigan 4-H youth participate in an out-of-state exchange, MSU Extension 4-H staff should determine how host families have been
would be if local 4-H staff members ask volunteers to house overnight visits in partnership with the county 4-H program. The exception to those events are if a fair is operated through the local fair board, any overnight activity falls under the responsibility, control and policies of the fair board. Consequently, the 4-H Youth-Adult Housing Policy for Overnight Events is in effect. The Youth-Adult Housing Policy for Overnight Events is in effect.

We have an overnight outdoor event in our county that involves some kids bringing one-person tents and others building open shelters to sleep in. We require adults to be sleeping in tents (or open shelters) within hearing distance of the youth. Is it okay for these youth to sleep in their own tents or in open shelters?

At overnight outdoor events involving young people sleeping in multiple kinds of transportable tents or shelters, adults who have been through the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process (VSP) should be available at all times within hearing distance, and the ratio of youth to adults should follow the guidelines listed in the policy. If there are adults within the group who have not been through the VSP, arrangements should be made to have their tents or shelters in an area away from the youth. It is highly recommended that all adults on these kinds of overnight outings be put through the VSP.

Fairs

How does this policy apply to overnights at fairs?
Fairs are considered to be a local activity – that is, a youth can travel to and from the event each day and stay overnight at home. Staying overnight at a fair is not required by 4-H. A fair board (not 4-H) provides the camping space. In these instances, 4-H staff may not collect camp fees; however, any fees collected go to the fair board and not 4-H. Because fairs fall under the auspices of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and are governed through the local fair board, any overnight activity falls under the responsibility, control and policies of the fair board. Consequently, the 4-H Youth-Adult Housing Policy for Overnight Events would not apply, even if a fair is operated in partnership with the county 4-H program. The exception would be if local 4-H staff members ask volunteers to house youth within their own trailer, camper, tent or other structure or to coordinate youth housing. These instances would be considered 4-H-sponsored activities and the policy would apply.

If 4-H is involved with those last two instances described above, how should we deal with shared bathrooms being used by other campers who have not been through the MSU Extension Volunteer Selection Process?
As stated in the policy, 4-H staff and volunteers should always use their best judgment to ensure the safety of young people. This includes taking a critical look at places – such as shared bathrooms – where kids might be vulnerable. Consider setting up a buddy system, so that young people are accompanied by a peer or related adult when using showers or toilets that are shared with others who are camping in the same camping area.

Family Camps

How does the policy apply to 4-H family camps?
If young people are attending a family overnight camp, the policy applies, which means that youth can be housed with related adults (19 and over) who are their parents, legal guardians or other family members.

How does the policy apply to a family that wants to come to the camp and bring another member of their 4-H club (unrelated) who would miss out on this camping experience otherwise?
The policy still applies; however, 4-H staff should make every attempt to find alternate housing for the child that meets the policy stipulations. For example, if two or more unrelated youth are attending the family camp, they could be housed in another area with a staff member or volunteer who has been through the Michigan State University Extension Volunteer Selection Process (VSP) (as long as the young people and the adult are the same gender). During daytime activities, the unrelated youth could participate with the family they came with.

How should we deal with shared bathrooms at a 4-H family camp, especially since some of the adults attending may not have been through the VSP?
The policy still applies; however, 4-H staff should make every attempt to find alternate housing for the child that meets the policy stipulations. For example, if two or more unrelated youth are attending the family camp, they could be housed in another area with a staff member or volunteer who has been through the Michigan State University Extension Volunteer Selection Process (VSP) (as long as the young people and the adult are the same gender). During daytime activities, the unrelated youth could participate with the family they came with.

Lock Ins

How does this policy apply to lock-ins?
Lock-ins should follow the Michigan 4-H Youth Development recommendations for adult-to-youth ratios, which include the following: for youth aged 5 to 12 (of the same gender):
For more information on the Michigan 4-H Youth Development
Youth-Adult Housing Policy for 4-H Overnight Events, contact:

Betsy Knox, Program Leader
4-H Youth Development
Michigan State University Extension
160 Agriculture Hall
East Lansing, MI
48824-1039
Email: knoxe@msu.edu
Phone: 517-432-7603

Janet Olsen, Program Leader
4-H Youth Development
Michigan State University Extension
160 Agriculture Hall
East Lansing, MI
48824-1039
Email: olsenj@msu.edu
Phone: 517-432-7630