

# State 4-H officers reflect on leadership, service

BY LEXI FELLOWS  
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

LEXINGTON — Each year, Kentucky 4-H members complete a rigorous application and interview process and are selected to serve in officer roles by a committee made up of youth and adults vested in the future of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension 4-H Program. The state officers represent over 200,000 4-H members across the Commonwealth, all while finishing high school or starting college. These 4-Hers interact with legislators, board members, alumni, volunteers, Extension leadership and other youth to highlight the impact of Kentucky 4-H.

Having reached the end of their term, the 2025-2026 Kentucky State Officers shared what led them to their state leadership role.

Case Shirrell, Kentucky 4-H president, first learned about 4-H when an Oldham County 4-H program assistant visited his fourth-grade classroom. From there, he was encouraged to join his county's shooting sports program, which lead him to 4-H camp, Teen Conference, State Teen Council and a state officer position.

"Looking back now, those were just small stepping stones on what has been almost a 10-year journey, ending with me hanging up my jacket," Shirrell said.

His position as a state officer allowed him to serve the organization that did so much for him, giving him the skills to be beyond ready for a future career in agricultural policy.

Case will be attending the University of Kentucky,



Kristopher Chappel/UK

**The 2025-26 state officers for Kentucky 4-H, Emme Lynch, Creighton Smith, Bethany Barber, Harper Ritchey and Case Shirrell, pose with the Bowman sculpture on the University of Kentucky's campus last week.**

majoring in Agricultural Economics in the UK Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment and minoring in Public Policy.

"Extension agents and university leadership have been a huge part of the journey — a lot of the time, the reason for the journey," Shirrell said. "I wouldn't be anywhere without my agent's and my program assistant's encouragement to continue being involved and helping me prepare for any and every event."

While Shirrell's involvement in 4-H started in the classroom, Vice President Harper Ritchey's years of connection to Extension helped her embrace her year as a state officer.

Ritchey is from Caldwell County, where members of her family work at the UK Research and Education Center in Princeton, Ken-

tucky. Her father, Edwin Ritchey, is an Extension associate professor and soil specialist who strongly encouraged her to enter her first 4-H activity, the Country Ham Project.

"My first real memory of 4-H was at Broadbent's B & B Food Products in Kuttawa, where I shadowed my older sister who was participating in the Country Ham Project," Ritchey said. "I joined the program when I was officially old enough, and I loved the project and going to the Kentucky State Fair."

From there, Ritchey was a frequent 4-H member, attending a wide variety of clubs like cooking, photography, communications and crafting. Her desire to become a better leader brought her to county, area and state teen council and the 4-H Capitol Experience Day, which motivated her to run for state office.

Ritchey just finished her first year at UK Martin-Gatton CAFE, majoring in Natural Resources and Environmental Science and Agricultural Economics, minoring in Public Policy and earning the Agricultural Leadership certificate. She plans to have a career in environmental or agricultural law, policy or legislation.

"4-H has helped achieve the goals I had to get to UK because of the Capitol Experience Day. I learned that I could make impacts regarding agriculture through policies and legislation," Ritchey said. "I also got to meet legislators that represent me. This impact meant a lot to me and gave me the spark for my career, but it was the skills and experiences that 4-H gave throughout my 10-plus years in the program that helped me actually get to UK on a full-ride scholarship."

4-H helped Ritchey develop skills for her future, just as it did for Bethany Barber, who served as state secretary.

Barber has been a 4-H member in Monroe County for over nine years. She started in her county's babysitting club, where she found her spark for mentoring youth, leading her into Teen Club, Teen Council and various 4-H projects.

"4-H has helped me develop leadership, communication and teamwork skills that I will use throughout my career," Barber said. "Through the opportunities and experiences 4-H has given me, I have gained confidence and learned the importance of serving others, which will help me both in college and in the healthcare field."

Barber will be attending UK and majoring in Pharmaceutical Sciences. After earning her bachelor's degree, she plans to attend pharmacy school and pursue her PharmD to become a pharmacist.

On February 17, 2018, as a nine-year-old 4-H'er from Scott County, Creighton Smith waited after his first 4-H Livestock Skillathon contest. The second he heard his name, he rushed to the stage to claim his ribbon, marking the start of his 4-H journey that culminated in his position as state treasurer this past year.

"That was my first spark. From then on, I was hooked on 4-H," Smith said. "I participated in every livestock competition I could, including showing pigs and cattle. I discovered shooting sports and sewing, then came cooking club, outdoor adventure club and 4-H Summit. But that was just the beginning."

Smith was encouraged by his 4-H agent to apply for a state officer position. It was a leadership opportunity he wasn't even aware was possible for him, but it led to a year filled with opportunity and connections.

Smith will be attending Kansas State University, where he will major in Agricultural Economics with a minor in Agribusiness Management. He plans to return to the farm and hopefully raise the next generation of 4-H'ers.

Although he will not be in Kentucky for college, Smith believes Kentucky 4-H will always be with him.

"While I won't be able to just stop at the Extension office and chat with my agent, I know that the skills and

connections 4-H has given me will always stay with me," Smith said. "The people that I have met at every single event are really what 4-H is all about."

4-H Camp in West Kentucky was the spark that led Emme Lynch to her green jacket as Kentucky 4-H reporter.

Lynch's summer at 4-H Camp made her fall in love with the organization. She found opportunity in Crittenden County 4-H, creating projects to enter in her county fair and joining State Teen Council.

"Working with Extension agents and university leadership has impacted my experience by giving me insight into potential career opportunities," Lynch said.

Lynch will be attending South Carolina State University, where she will major in Family and Consumer Sciences with a track in Child Development. She plans to become a 4-H agent, bringing her experience and education back to Kentucky 4-H.

"I am taking every part of Kentucky 4-H with me as I move into my next chapter," Lynch said.

As these officers hang up their green jackets, Kentucky 4-H welcomes the newly elected 2026-2027 Kentucky 4-H State Officer team: State President Jeremiah Jury of Owen County, Vice President Jefferson Oldfield of Montgomery County, Secretary Ella Yazell of Harrison County, Treasurer Rachel Wilson of Hickman County, and Reporter Liberty Proffit of Monroe County. This new team is ready to accept their own green jackets and inspire the next generation of 4-H youth in Kentucky.

## Report: Child poverty improving in Kentucky

Youth Advocates call for continued vigilance for kids

BY SARAH LADD  
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Fewer Kentucky children were living in poverty in 2024 than 2019, right before the COVID-19 pandemic, but nearly one in five kids still lack the resources they need to thrive.

That's according to the latest Kids Count Data Book, released Monday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The annual report looks at indicators of wellbeing including education, health, economic success and community and family measures.

The data in the 2026 report primarily compares 2019 and 2024. The foundation gave each state a score between 0 and 1,000. Kentucky received a score of 498, which is worse than the national score of 547 but better than 2019, when it received a 465.

Kentucky is still the 36th state in the nation when it comes to child welfare, making it one of the worst places to be a child.

The commonwealth's neighbors are a mixed bag. Kentucky is doing better by its children than West Virginia and Tennessee but worse than Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.

Shannon Moody, the incoming executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, said fewer "kids living in homes that are in poverty is always a great thing

for Kentucky."

"What we're continuing to keep an eye on is how families are being impacted now, right now, with affordability of basic needs: Groceries, gas, housing and childcare continue to be something that we'll be watching," she said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing what continues to arise when it comes to that, whether or not we'll see things trend back downward."

The data, though it was just released, is still two years old, and much has

changed. In 2025, Congress cut Medicaid spending over 10 years by \$880 billion as part of the sweeping One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

That same budget package made recent foster care youth, among others, no longer exempt from work requirements to receive food benefits for themselves and their families through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Nearly half of the people who receive SNAP assistance in Kentucky are under age 18.

"It's 2024 data. We did not begin to see the impacts of the pandemic

funding being reduced — We're seeing that now in our biennial budget," Moody said. "I'm glad to see in 2024 less kids were living in homes in poverty, and we need to continue being vigilant about how we are supporting kids and families ... whether it's safety net programs or ensuring that there is affordability among those basic needs."

Other takeaways in the report include:

- About 67% of fourth-grade students in Kentucky were not proficient in reading from 2020-2024. That's worse than the four years prior, when it averaged at 59%.

- About 67% of eighth-grade students lacked math proficiency in 2024, worse than 2019, when about 65% lacked proficiency. The national average was about 70% in 2024.

- Kentucky's rate of high school students graduating on time improved in the 2023-2024 school year. About 8% of students didn't graduate on time, down from 9%. In this, Kentucky is better than the national average, which was at 13% in '23-'24.

- Childhood poverty has decreased, but is still worse than national averages. In 2024, 19% of children in

Kentucky lived in poverty, compared with 15% nationally. That's a decline from 22% in Kentucky and 17% nationally in 2022.

- The number of children without health insurance was at 5% in 2024, worse than 4% in 2019.

- About 63% of Kentucky children ages 3 and 4 weren't in school between 2020-2024. The four years prior, 2015-2019, that number was at 59%.

- Teen births declined in 2024 to about 3,000.

- The number of babies born underweight increased to nearly 9% (8.8%) in 2024, slightly worse than 8.7% in 2019.

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