

## The Impact of Volunteering: A Multi-State Study of 4-H Youth Development Volunteers

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### Abstract

*Volunteers are vital to youth development programming as a key piece of the workforce. This evaluation measured the impact of volunteers in the 4-H youth development program and demonstrated the value volunteers bring to youth development environments. The North Central region 4-H volunteer impact study was conducted with volunteers in the 4-H Youth Development program across 12 states. The purpose of the study was to better understand the value of being a volunteer. Results showed that volunteers personally benefited from their involvement by becoming more experienced at working with youth and by learning skills that transferred to other settings. Volunteers also served as guides for youth as they gained leadership skills and gave back to their communities. In addition, the Extension organization benefitted through volunteer time, donations of money and supplies, and volunteers serving as ambassadors for youth development programs.*

Key words: volunteer, impact, 4-H youth development, organization

### The Value of Volunteering

What value do volunteers receive from volunteering in youth development organizations? What benefits can an organization reap from having a volunteer base? Many youth organizations rely on volunteers to help assist with the mission and vision of their programs. Often youth development organizations focus on recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers to serve the needs of youth. Volunteers build capacity and help organizations have greater community outreach. There is value in analyzing the impact volunteering has on the people who volunteer. Better understanding the benefits that both the individual and the youth development organization get from volunteers can help organizations to advocate for the need for volunteers as well as better recruit and support future volunteers.

This study was anchored in the 4-H youth development program in 12 states. The 4-H Youth Development Program is the youth outreach program from the land-grant institutions' Cooperative Extension services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NIFA, 2019). In 4-H, volunteers are a vital part of carrying out the program's mission and vision. The 4-H youth development program relies on our volunteers to provide expertise in educational project areas such as photography, rocketry, and rabbits; guide youth in project learning and exploration; engage youth in service opportunities in their communities; provide leadership for 4-H club management; and much more. Additionally, we rely on our volunteers to help build a safe, caring, and nurturing environment and relationships with youth who are part of our program. Volunteers are instrumental in the delivery of programs and are a vital link between the program and the outcomes (Arnold et al., 2009). Volunteers are a dynamic part of the organization to expand our reach and impact.

### ***What Are the Benefits to the Volunteer?***

Research on both 4-H youth development and other youth serving organizations supports the benefits that volunteers receive from volunteering. Borgonovi (2008) finds those who volunteer have better health and happiness than individuals who do not volunteer, donate money, or donate blood. The findings of Binder and Freytag (2013) are consistent with Borgonovi's, indicating those that volunteer consistently have a more significant positive well-being than those who do not volunteer. Additionally, individuals who volunteer up to 7 hours a week self-report having a higher level of life satisfaction and positive affect than those who do not volunteer (Pilkington et al., 2012).

Research also suggests individuals gain personal skills through volunteering. Meier and colleagues (2012) indicated volunteers learned leadership skills through their role as a volunteer. Volunteers in a study by Cook (2011) reported they were engaged in formal, informal, and/or self-directed learning while volunteering. Personal growth, being involved in youth learning, giving back to the organization, and social benefits were benefits identified in a 2008 4-H study conducted in the North Central Region (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012). Oregon volunteers within the 4-H program identified their volunteer experience as valuable and valued by the youth. They also had the opportunity to learn new things because of their leadership role (Arnold et al., 2009).

The skills learned through volunteer roles are used to better the communities in which the volunteer lives and improve the quality of life within and around the community. Haski-Leventhal et al. (2011) found paying it forward has an impact on future volunteerism, meaning those who were recipients of volunteer acts were more apt to "pay it forward" and volunteer in the future. Their study found 72.2% of those who used the services of the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House were interested in finding a way to help the house.

### ***What Motivates an Individual to Volunteer?***

Understanding what motivates individuals to volunteer can help to support recruitment and retention of volunteers. According to Pearce (1983), volunteers who conduct similar work as paid employees, are more apt to self-report volunteering for the recognition, social interaction, and the opportunity to serve others. Because of this, volunteers are less likely to stop volunteering and are more satisfied with the organization (Pearce, 1983). Nencini et al. (2016)

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found the tasks, the amount of autonomy, and the significance and flexibility of the volunteer role as perceived by the volunteer did not affect satisfaction or motivation of the individual. This indicates the volunteer's perception of the relationship they have with others in the organization and the individual motivational factors, play a role in the volunteer's decision to leave the organization.

Bae et al. (2016) found motivational differences between male and female volunteers. Males had a higher mean score for self-determination, volunteering abroad, and work experience. Helms and McKenzie (2014) determined females volunteered more frequently than males in formal and informal ways. Females also exhibit a higher level of motivation for personal development, adapting new skills, expressing values, and eliminating negative feelings when compared to males (Burns et al., 2008; Helms & McKenzie, 2014). A study conducted in New York found the individual's favorite aspects of volunteering for the master forest owner program included social, stewardship, and informational benefits (Allred et al., 2011).

#### ***How Do We Understand the Benefits of Volunteers?***

Volunteers can help increase an organization's advocacy, awareness, diversity, and marketing (Andrews & Lockett, 2013). An indirect result of this increased awareness is volunteer recruitment and an expanded network. Although we know organizations benefit from their volunteers as indicated above, there is a limited amount of published literature in this area.

The majority of studies on the impact of volunteerism have focused on either individual benefits or on organizational benefits, primarily in the counting of volunteer hours. In our current study, we knew it was important to focus on both levels to better understand the intersectional connection between volunteers and organizations. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) bioecological model, an individual's environment and the interaction between the individual and their environment are important ways to understand development. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model includes five systems: the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono systems. As we broadly think about the value of volunteering, it is important to look more closely at the individual volunteer and the influence the environment has on them.

While Bronfenbrenner's model (1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) focuses on the environment of the individual and the interactions that occur, Baltes et al. (1998) identify fundamental factors which focus on individual development in the life-span theory of human

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development. These factors, as they relate to development, include inter-individual differences, intra-individual development as it relates to plasticity, and commonalities. Plasticity is variable for individual development and behavior (Lerner, 1998) and varies across the lifespan (Baltes, 1987, 1997; Baltes et al., 1998; Lerner et al., 2003). From Bronfenbrenner (1986) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), we know there are many aspects of an individual's environment that influence their decisions and values.

The purpose of our study was to identify the personal benefits and organizational benefits of those who volunteer in the 4-H youth development program. There were 12,000 volunteers invited to participate in an online survey from the 12 states in the North Central region of the Extension service. Our hypothesis was that volunteering has an impact on both the individual and organizational levels.

## Methods

An online survey was developed specifically for the study that measured the following types of information: (a) personal benefits that volunteers have gained from their volunteer service, such as learning to lead youth programs and learning new facilitation skills; (b) organizational benefits that volunteers have given to 4-H and Extension programs through activities such as program planning, recruiting new members, and charitable donations; and (c) the public value to communities due to 4-H volunteering. Public value was operationalized in four main ways: stronger communities, connected communities, improved health of communities, and increased civic involvement.

The survey items included multiple choice, yes/no, and Likert scale responses and open-ended questions. For Likert scale responses, volunteers were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 1 to 4 scale: 1 (*not true*), 2 (*somewhat true*), 3 (*true*) or 4 (*very true*). Cronbach's alpha for scaled items was 0.95.

For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the questions pertaining to personal benefits, youth benefits, and organizational benefits. The public value information will not be discussed.

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### ***Procedure***

Extension 4-H volunteers were sent an electronic survey through Qualtrics. All state emails for the participating 12 states were sent from a University of Minnesota Qualtrics account. Minnesota served as the point of contact and was the only state that had access to identifiable data.

Dillman's tailored design method (2007) was used for the electronic survey in an attempt to increase survey responses. Specifically, we used an introductory email message to alert volunteers to their selection into the survey and the importance of the evaluation. We also sent a personalized survey message with the first survey link and two personalized reminder emails over a 4-week period for volunteers that had not completed the survey.

### ***Sample***

Each volunteer specialist from the 12 participating states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) sent a complete file of their adult volunteers for the 2017-2018 4-H year from their 4HOnline enrollment database. State volunteer counts ranged from 1,300 to 7,000. A sample of 1,000 adult volunteers were randomly selected from each state by the Principal Investigator. This sample size was calculated to create a 95% confidence level for avoiding sampling error (Reisman, 2000). Diverse volunteers, those choosing Hispanic ethnicity or racial categories other than white, were oversampled. This was done to attempt to gather feedback from diverse 4-H volunteers. For most states, the diverse volunteer sample was not more than 100 volunteers, so in sum, racially or ethnically diverse volunteers made up about 10% of the sample.

### ***Participants***

Of the 12,000 volunteers who were invited to take part in the study, 2,978 volunteers completed the electronic survey, yielding a response rate of 25%. Most of the volunteers (93%) described their race as White, with 3% more than one race, 1% Black, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 2% undetermined. Volunteers described their ethnicity as non-Hispanic (96%) and Hispanic (4%). Volunteer roles were widely variable, as each state categorized volunteer roles in a different way. The most common responses were 4-H club leader and project/activity volunteer. Volunteer length of service varied; 7% were in their first year as 4-H volunteers,

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32% had volunteered from 2 to 5 years, 24% from 6 to 10 years, and 37% had been volunteering for 11 or more years.

### Results

The purpose of this evaluation was to understand the impact volunteers have on the 4-H youth development program. Specifically, we wanted to know what individuals feel they gain from their experiences as a 4-H volunteer. In addition, we wanted to investigate the organizational benefits the 4-H program gains from volunteers. Analysis focused on investigating responses to quantitative scaled items regarding personal and organizational benefits. Data were analyzed using frequency analyses.

To better understand motivations for volunteering, participants were asked why they volunteer with 4-H youth development. Top reasons individuals sought out volunteer roles were to support their child in the program (75%), to help others (74%), and to make a difference (69%).

### *Personal Benefits*

Individuals personally benefited from their involvement as a youth development volunteer. These benefits can be grouped in three ways: youth relationship benefits, positive youth development design benefits, and personal skills benefits.

### *Youth Relationship Benefits*

The top-rated items on the entire evaluation all related to the positive relationships volunteers built with youth (see Table 1). Volunteers noted they were a caring adult for youth and they built new relationships with youth. They also helped youth to build leadership skills, thought about how to include all youth, and made a difference in the lives of youth. The ultimate value that volunteers indicated attaining from their experience in a positive youth development setting was a deeper engagement with youth.

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**Table 1. Youth Relationship Benefits**

	<b>Not true</b>	<b>Somewhat true</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>Very true</b>
I was a caring adult for youth.	0%	3%	39%	57%
I built new relationships with youth.	0%	7%	36%	56%
I helped youth develop leadership skills.	1%	10%	45%	44%
I thought about how to include all youth in 4-H.	2%	11%	44%	43%
I made a difference in the lives of youth.	0%	12%	47%	40%
I worked with youth who were different from me.	3%	16%	43%	38%

*Positive Youth Development Design Benefits*

Volunteers were more knowledgeable about designing and developing positive youth development programs (see Table 2). Volunteers learned more about establishing effective partnerships with youth that focused on sharing decision making and allowing youth to lead. They also gained skills to design quality learning environments.



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**Table 2. Positive Youth Development Benefits**

	<b>Not true</b>	<b>Somewhat true</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>Very true</b>
I improved my skills at planning experiences for youth.	3%	17%	42%	38%
I learned how to share decision making with youth.	2%	13%	50%	35%
I know more about working with youth	3%	15%	48%	35%
I learned how to step back and let youth lead.	2%	16%	48%	34%
I learned how to design quality learning environments for youth.	5%	23%	47%	25%
I improved my skills in recruiting new youth and families.	7%	29%	40%	24%

*Personal Skill Benefits*

Volunteers noted they built skills through their volunteer involvement. When asked about their motivations for volunteering with 4-H, only 22% of volunteers shared they volunteered to develop new skills; however, the majority of volunteers did build skills in their volunteer tenure. Many of these skills have the ability to transfer to other work and life settings. Volunteers increased their confidence in being a leader and in leading meetings; they gained skills in speaking in front of others, in problem solving, and in managing difficult situations.

Volunteers increased their specific project content knowledge. In the 4-H program, our youth program is organized around project topic exploration that challenges youth to learn deeply about a project area of interest such as photography, robotics, or animal science topics. It is not surprising that adult volunteers grew in their knowledge as they worked with youth to master a topic of interest, as teaching others is a core volunteer competency and a strong way to deepen personal learning (Ohnoutka et al., 2005).

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**Table 3. Personal Skill Benefits**

	<b>Not true</b>	<b>Somewhat true</b>	<b>True</b>	<b>Very true</b>
I increased my knowledge in a specific content area(s).	3%	14%	43%	40%
I gained skills I can use when I volunteer in other settings.	2%	12%	48%	38%
I increased my confidence as a leader.	5%	16%	42%	37%
I increased my ability to lead meetings.	6%	19%	38%	37%
I became better at speaking in front of others.	7%	21%	39%	33%
I increased my problem-solving skills.	5%	21%	43%	32%
I built skills to manage difficult situations.	5%	20%	43%	32%
I learned how to think from diverse perspectives.	4%	20%	48%	28%
I have volunteered for other organizations because of the skills I gained volunteering in 4-H.	17%	23%	33%	26%

***Organizational Benefits***

Youth development organizations benefit from volunteer involvement. Volunteers gave their time, talents, and energy to the 4-H Youth Development program by working directly with youth and in planning for educational experiences. Planning included activities such as searching for curriculum or lesson ideas, meeting with youth leaders to plan for future events, coordinating guest speakers, and working with other volunteers in the program. Time was divided with 59% of time spent working directly with youth and 41% spent planning. On average, volunteers reported giving 9 hours to the 4-H organization per month. This is an increase of hours reported from a past study of North Central volunteers (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012). Using the Independent Sector's (2018) hourly rate of \$24.69 for each hour of volunteer service nationally, each volunteer's time is annually worth \$2,600.

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When volunteers were asked specifically about money and supplies, 96% reported contributing supplies and 89% contributed money to the program. An open-ended response allowed volunteers to add other ways they gave back to the program, and responses included transportation for youth, access to community networks and connections, and physical space for project learning.

Volunteers also shared the ways they served as ambassadors of the 4-H youth development program (see Table 4). They recruited new youth and volunteers, taught other volunteers, and built community partnerships on behalf of 4-H.

**Table 4. Organizational Impacts**

	Yes	No
I made connections in the community on behalf of 4-H.	85%	15%
I spoke about the value of the 4-H program.	83%	17%
I recruited new youth to 4-H.	82%	18%
I taught other volunteers.	76%	24%
I recruited new volunteers to 4-H.	68%	32%
I solicited donations on behalf of 4-H.	65%	35%
I partnered with other community organizations on behalf of 4-H.	63%	37%

### **Youth Benefits**

Volunteers are often the frontline youth workers in youth development organizations. They work directly with youth and are primary leaders of programs, and as such, play a vital role in the organization's ability to promote positive youth development. Volunteers were asked to reflect on how they helped youth gain positive life skills. Specifically, we asked them to think about how they impact youth in four main ways: helping youth prepare for future careers, helping youth improve their decision making skills, helping youth to serve their communities,

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and helping youth to gain leadership skills. Volunteers overwhelmingly agreed they served an important role in supporting youth growth and development, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Volunteers Support Youth Development**

Statement	Percentage answering "true" or "very true"
Volunteers help youth gain leadership skills.	98%
Volunteers help youth to serve their communities.	98%
Volunteers help youth improve their decision-making skills.	97%
Volunteers help make youth ready for future careers.	96%

It was clear from the study that volunteers, organizations, and youth benefit from volunteering.

## Discussion and Program Implications

Volunteers are a major part of youth development programs. These results point to the benefits of volunteering on multiple levels. From this evaluation, we learned volunteers personally benefit from their experiences volunteering and organizations thrive because of volunteers.

### *Personal Benefits*

Volunteers in our study shared the greatest value they gained was from the positive relationships built with youth. We know from this evaluation that volunteers come into youth development programs in order to support their own children and also with the desire to positively impact and help others. Recruitment for volunteers should highlight how volunteer roles will allow volunteers to have a meaningful contribution in the lives of youth.

Volunteers grew in their knowledge of positive youth development in addition to building tangible skills and community connections. This transfer from person to community benefit is an example of the exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's (1986) model. Research supports the individual learning benefits that volunteers gain from their involvement in 4-H settings (Arnold et al.,

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2009). A past study of volunteers in the 4-H program showed that volunteers grew as individuals, developing self-confidence and other personal skills (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012).

In this study, volunteers spoke to the ways personal skills they learned were transferred to other settings. One volunteer shared, "Volunteering with 4-H has expanded my knowledge of working with youth which has helped me with my job as a teacher's aide." Skills transferred to other settings in which they volunteered and into their work roles. Another volunteer noted, "I think my experience with 4-H volunteering has made me a better person in all other settings." Due to the transfer of skills to other settings, volunteers had the opportunity to share a ripple effect in their community (Haskell, 2001). For example, a volunteer who learns more about public speaking might apply that learning by becoming active in a community task force and may also support other volunteers to build similar skills.

We learned that volunteers engaged in the 4-H youth development program with the desire to support their own children, make an impact, and help others. Volunteer recruitment should advertise ways that volunteers can have a meaningful connection with youth, and volunteers should have opportunities to build relationships with youth in their role. Volunteer skill development may be more important to staff who support volunteer development. Our evaluation showed that although skill development is not the top reason that volunteers join our program, they do gain skills in areas like public speaking and program planning. It may be the case that volunteers are not fully aware of all of the benefits they could receive from their experiences. Youth development staff should more clearly articulate the outcomes and benefits of volunteer experiences when creating position descriptions to recruit volunteers with the aim to increase reflection about volunteers skill development. The skills that volunteers gain are critical, as youth development organizations rely on volunteers to be primary delivers and connectors in our programs.

### ***Organizational Benefits***

Many youth organizations could not exist without volunteers. Volunteers in our study shared how they gave back over 9 hours per month to our organization—an annual financial value of over \$2,600 per volunteer. Multiple research studies have looked at the value of time spent volunteering. "Many studies use volunteer hours as a proxy for impact; they assume a positive correlation with the hours contributed by volunteers with the impact on the organization, the clients (recipients), the society and the community, and the volunteers themselves" (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011, p.139). In our study, we looked beyond a simple time calculation to

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better understand the ways that volunteers impact our organization. In addition to their time, volunteers also gave supplies and money in support of youth learning. Volunteers also provided transportation for youth, access to community networks, and physical space for project learning. Future efforts should continue to uphold the many ways that volunteers benefit organizations by looking beyond hours served to more holistic measures.

In addition, volunteers should be viewed as important program ambassadors. Volunteers supported youth development programs by making them accessible and welcoming for new participants. They did this by reaching out to new youth as well as recruiting new volunteers. Volunteers in our study also spoke about the value of youth development to potential youth participants, volunteers, and community partners.

The value of volunteers to our youth development organizations cannot be minimized. It is important to share the organizational benefits of volunteers with stakeholders and decision-makers. Doing so helps them to understand the value of volunteers and the reason youth organizations need to build staffing and structure to effectively support volunteers.

### ***Youth Benefits***

Youth also benefitted from engagement with volunteers, as youth are the primary recipients in youth development programs. Volunteers served as positive adults in the lives of youth. Volunteers assisted youth in building leadership skills and decision-making skills, becoming a valuable part of the youth's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). They also helped to prepare youth for future careers. Other studies give support to the role volunteers play in impacting the lives of youth by helping youth learn new things and gain self-confidence (Larson Nippolt et al., 2012). Volunteers have a positive influence in the areas of school, work, behavior management, and physical and mental health (DeBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Organizations should celebrate and recognize the ways that volunteers support youth to build positive youth development skills (Arnold et al., 2009). A study with Ronald McDonald House volunteers found the top benefit that volunteers received from their service was receiving acknowledgment and appreciation from clients served (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011).

Finally, a major component of the 4-H program is engagement in community service. Past studies of 4-H have shown that 4-H youth are four times more likely to contribute to their communities (Lerner et al., 2013). An evaluation of 4-H youth in Minnesota showed that three

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out of four youth took part in community service during the 4-H program year (Grant, 2019). Volunteers in our study continued to support the role that community service has in youth development organizations, and nearly 98% of volunteers said that they help youth to give back to their communities. Volunteers, therefore, serve as a major connector between youth and their communities. When youth become engaged in the community, they gain skills and are seen by community members as positive change agents.

### ***Limitations***

This evaluation focused specifically on 4-H volunteers. The 12 states sampled in this evaluation give us confidence in generalizing findings in the 4-H organization. We see a strong tie to other youth serving organizations but realize that these organizations have different program models that might not be aligned with 4-H youth development. Future research is needed to cut across different youth development organizations to see if these results hold across youth development settings.

For this project, we wanted to gather a wide range of feedback from volunteers in 12 states. Response rates for electronic surveys tend to be low (Dillman, 2007). Our team planned for this and set a sample for each state at 1,000 in order to obtain at least 100 surveys from each state. To help sustain a program and maintain long-term connections within a community, the recruitment and retention of younger and/or more diverse participants in evaluation should not be overlooked (Takle et al., 2017). Although our respondents were diverse in terms of years of service, age, and geographic area, response bias is always a concern. The volunteers who did respond might have had more positive experiences with 4-H, which would lead to bias in the survey. We did see responses from volunteers that raised critique and concerns.

### ***Conclusion***

The findings from this evaluation give support for youth development organizations to share the value of volunteers. This study was one of the first in 4-H youth development in which multiple states worked together to view the impact of the volunteer experience on multiple levels. The findings also have implications for the way that we recruit, support, and retain youth development volunteers.

The need for volunteers is essential for organizations, and it is imperative that 4-H and other youth development organizations provide support and training, develop ways to sustain

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volunteers, recognize volunteers for their accomplishments and service, and monitor and evaluate volunteer efforts (Arnold et al., 2009).

Volunteers are vital to youth development programming and are a key piece of the workforce for youth development organizations. This evaluation measured the impact of volunteers and demonstrated the value volunteers bring to youth development environments. Volunteers personally benefitted from their involvement in youth settings by becoming more experienced at working with youth and by learning skills that could transfer to other settings. Volunteers also served as guides for youth as they gain leadership skills and give back to their communities. In addition, organizational benefits included volunteer time, donations of money and supplies, and volunteers serving as ambassadors for youth development programs.

Volunteers matter. In the famous, wise words of Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Youth development volunteers make an impact—an impact that will have lasting effects on youth and communities.

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