

## Virginia Cooperative Extension Innovates to Foster Resiliency in the Community Leaders in Challenging Times

The circumstances and needs of the last two years have pulled on leaders in unprecedented ways. The demands to pivot quickly, make decisions and manage amidst uncertainty and ongoing changes, and disruptions in systems and routines have been straining as a leader, along with, being able to communicate, encourage and support those they are charged. Often peer networks that may exist in other ranks provide a means of social support, but leaders rarely have the chance to “not be in the leadership role” and to receive support. In response, Virginia Cooperative Extension launched a 6-week, “Building Resilience” virtual program and engaged a cohort-model of leaders representing a wide range of professionals in the fields of: public schools, community colleges, county governments, center for sexual assault survivors, human resources, social services, state department of corrections, mental health, and several areas of VCE and NC Cooperative Extension (FCS, FNP, 4-H, and Master Food Volunteers). With a mental health services provider from Virginia Department of Behavioral Health (Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services) serving as the expert presenter and co-facilitator, participants learned skills and built relationships throughout six weekly sessions. Each session consisted of 30 minutes of content, viewed asynchronously, and a one-hour facilitated discussion on the specific topic, such as Effective Communication in Challenging Times, Decision-Making, and Self-Care While Helping Others.

Two distinct cohorts of 25 leaders have completed a 6-week series. Comments throughout the series and post-evaluations revealed that their participation served as a means of professional development to positively impact their workspaces. One leader noted, “I’ve taken for granted how much my staff feels I appreciate them; I have had to make more intentional efforts now remotely – not only do I need to be resilient, but I need to build that in my staff.” Another remarked, “I have already started doing quick individual check-ins with my team based on what we discuss here. I know these sessions have helped me be able to empathize and lead in the area of support for my team.”

During focus groups when asked about the benefits of their participation, there were many common response themes around building confidence, making new connections, and gaining support in a group atmosphere that helped participants feel connected in the face of challenges and building resiliency skills to carry forward. Participants cited examples of how this has helped them start resilience support teams in their own spaces and learned the importance of taking these lessons back to their community, especially low-income audiences with challenges that deepened during the pandemic. “I’d been discussing this series with my supervisor, and she didn’t know what it was. I said it was being adaptable and bouncing back. Taking what I’ve learned here and sharing it with her felt so good, to be able to educate others about resilience especially in a leadership role.” Another remarked “I’ve been truly humbled by this experience and being in the midst of so many professionals. I questioned ‘who am I’ to teach someone else when I have all of my own issues. I heard everything through this series that encouraged me to think “who am I not to” help others. Thank you for providing this platform for those who have spoken our hearts and I appreciate it greatly.”

Notably, the cohort’s connection was such that there were overwhelming requests to continue meeting. The Resilience groups continued to hold monthly check-ins. By providing this support to leaders at the individual level provides greater opportunity to effect positive change at the community levels where they lead and serve. As one leader noted “The higher up in my leadership role, the less space I have to be vulnerable – so many others in the Resilience group are leaders and use this space to get their energy. This is making us better so we can show up and pass it forward beyond our traditional responsibilities as leaders.” One final quote from a participant sums this up: “I am still in awe about how much our Wednesday morning group has evolved into a support group for mental health providers and other client-serving personnel! Thank you for initiating this group. Its impact will go a long way.”