Starting a New Job with Extension during the COVID 19 Pandemic: Overcoming Challenges

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Beginning a career as an Extension agent is always challenging but to begin in a rural county, where the position was vacant over a year, the decline in Master Gardener participation, maintaining compliance from pandemic conditions, made the task of learning the job, extraordinarily challenging. Adaptation for this position required quick planning, flexibility, and creativity. This case study seeks to share experiences, trials, and tribulations, 1) performing a needs assessment, 2) developing community relations, and 3) retaining Master Gardener Volunteers. Because of statewide shutdowns, my first day was establishing a home office, using a personal computer. Given the timely popularity, I created my own backyard Victory Garden and promoted its benefits through a series of videos (2861 views), during a global pandemic. The virtual “Let’s Walk Florida 2020” program, a 10-week journey of health and wellness, setting goals, and reporting activities, I treated as required work task. Assisted in the development of A-Maize-ing Corn Camp for the first virtual 4-H statewide summer camp. Motivation to learn virtual programing was crucial for my success under pandemic conditions. Integration of new technology with old, enhanced my communications with the community. Nick Place, Dean for Extension, complimented how he learned of this new agent, not in person, but from a video on Extension’s Facebook page (over 600 viewers). Victory Garden videos raised my awareness for the need of horticulture outreach. The Let’s Walk Florida program gave me a sense of self-confidence, both personally and professionally. Weekly e-newsletters, newspaper articles about Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, and 12 new Master Gardener graduates all happened despite the Covid19 pandemic.

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