

What Works...

FEDERAL STATE LOCAL

Alabama's AmeriCorps Project

Leveraging resources to support increased community outreach and enrollment

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Overview

AmeriCorps' primary objective is to "get things done" in local communities nationwide. The Alabama Department of Senior Services (ADSS) successfully harnessed the energy of AmeriCorps by integrating State AmeriCorps Members into its State Health Insurance Assistance Program (SHIP) and Senior Medicare Patrol (SMP) Program. Through this and other pioneering innovations, Alabama SHIP has been able to increase its benefits assistance and enrollment, and now ranks fourth in the nation for assisting and enrolling beneficiaries in both

the Low Income-Subsidy (LIS) and Medicare Savings Programs (MSP).

Partnering with Alabama's 13 Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), ADSS applied and received a 3-year grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS); this grant secured one full-time AmeriCorps Member for each of the 13 local SHIP/SMP Programs. The Members started their service in October and immediately began working to assist the 13 SHIP Coordinators with the Annual Enrollment Period (AEP). Beginning January 2010, Members have shifted their focus to expanding outreach and education on SHIP, LIS, and MSP programs across their local service areas.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is a national service program that engages individuals in intensive, results-driven service. The AmeriCorps programs address the needs of communities in education, the environment, public safety, disaster relief, and other human needs. Specifically, the AmeriCorps programs increase the capacity of government and non-profit organizations to serve their communities by mobilizing volunteers, expanding services, raising funds, and creating sustainable programs. Since 1994, more than 540,000 Americans have served AmeriCorps with tens of thousands of non-profit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based organizations nationwide.

Promoting Civic Service

On September 21, 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (NCST) (P. L. 103-82). NCST established the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and brought the full range of domestic community service programs under CNCS's direction. Moreover, NCST formally launched the AmeriCorps programs, incorporating Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC).

There is bipartisan support for AmeriCorps. President George W. Bush signed the Strengthen AmeriCorps Program Act (P.L. 108-46), which nearly doubled the number of AmeriCorps Members. Likewise, President Obama in 2009 signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Serve America Act) (P.L. 111-13), which reauthorized and will grow the AmeriCorps Program from 75,000 to 250,000 positions over the next eight years. In addition to the Serve America Act, in 2009, Congress appropriated, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, \$200 million to support up to 13,000 additional AmeriCorps Members to serve in distressed communities. These legislative enactments and appropriations demonstrate the immense support for the AmeriCorps programs.

“Service is a spark to rekindle the spirit of democracy in an age of uncertainty.”

— *President Bill Clinton, upon swearing in the first class of AmeriCorps Members*

Benefits to Serving in AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps provides its Members with invaluable training and experience. Members have the opportunity to explore different career paths, gain job related skills, develop leadership capabilities, and network with community leaders.

AmeriCorps Members receive tangible benefits as well. Upon successful completion, eligible Members receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award; this award may pay education costs at qualified institutions of higher education or repay qualified student loans. Members also receive a student loan deferment, and in some cases, health insurance and childcare as well. In addition, about half the Members receive a modest annual living allowance.

AmeriCorps Programs

AmeriCorps is a network of three programs: AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), and AmeriCorps NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps). AmeriCorps Membership is open to U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents age 17 and older, and Members serve full or part-time positions over a 10-12 month period.

AmeriCorps*State and National

AmeriCorps State and National is the largest of the three programs, with more than 75,000 Members serving every year. AmeriCorps State Members serve through a network of community-based service organizations receiving NCST funding through Governor-appointed State Service Commissions. AmeriCorps National provides grants directly to public and non-profit organizations that sponsor service programs across two or more states.

AmeriCorps*VISTA

Founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 and incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993, VISTA has been on the front lines in the fight against poverty in America for more than 40 years. VISTA Members commit to serve full-time for a year at a non-profit organization or local government agency, working to fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, strengthen community groups, and much more. To apply to host AmeriCorps VISTA Members, a potential sponsor must contact the NCST State Office covering the area in which the proposed project would be located to discuss application requirements and procedures. Most importantly, the sponsors must be able to direct the project, supervise the AmeriCorps VISTA Member, and provide necessary administrative support to complete the goals and objectives of the project. The goals and objectives must be clearly defined and directed toward alleviating problems of low-income communities.

AmeriCorps*NCCC

The AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) is a team-based, full-time 10-month residential program for individuals aged 18-24. Members are based out of five regional campuses across the country and are organized by teams of 10-14. Members take on a series of 6-8 week projects throughout their respective regions. Service activities are diverse and include environmental preservation, youth development, building and renovating low-income housing, and disaster response and relief. Sponsoring organizations request the assistance of AmeriCorps NCCC teams by submitting a project application to the NCST regional campus that covers that organization's state.

Alabama's AmeriCorps Project

Increased demand for benefits outreach coupled with reduced local funding levels led the Alabama Department of Senior Services (ADSS) to develop innovative strategies to utilize and leverage existing resources. Working with the Alabama Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, ADSS secured a federal grant for 14 AmeriCorps State Members to serve as community educators, partnership builders, volunteer recruiters, and Medicare Part D Low Income Subsidy (LIS) outreach coordinators at each Area Agency on Aging (AAA). The project began October 1, 2009, and will last for three years.

The AmeriCorps grant has allowed SHIP/Senior Medicare Patrol (SMP) Program staff to double in size, from 14 to 28 full-time

staff. Working in partnership, each AAA office is given Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act (MIPPA) funds to manage their individual AmeriCorps project; however, the funding is conditioned on each AAA office recruiting, training, and maintaining a minimum of one AmeriCorps Member for the duration of the AmeriCorps project. Also, each AAA is responsible for the day-to-day activities of the Members. In addition to the Members at each AAA, ADSS hosts one Member to coordinate and develop statewide strategies to maximize the Members' efforts.

The Members work exclusively under the SHIP/SMP Coordinators who serve as the Project Supervisors. They focus on LIS and Medicare Savings Program (MSP) outreach activities and enrollment, and assist the Project Supervisors as needed. Just as important, each Member provides "boots on the ground" service, which allows AAAs more opportunity to find eligible beneficiaries and increase both SHIP and SMP services to a greater number of beneficiaries. In practical terms, the Members allow the full-time SHIP/SMP Coordinators the opportunity to handle multiple tasks and not be bogged down with the demands of their local programs.

Why did Alabama apply to be part of the AmeriCorps*State program?

Given fiscal and staffing constraints, SHIPs are able to augment their outreach and counseling activities with dedicated AmeriCorps Members. Members of Alabama's AmeriCorps program "hit the pavement" and provide increased community outreach and enrollment for eligible beneficiaries, said Robyn James, Alabama

ADSS SHIP/SMP Director. Also, through “on the ground activities,” Members work to establish new community partnerships, placing a special focus on highly rural and underserved areas of the state—thus being an invaluable resource to each SHIP in Alabama.

Alabama’s ADSS has had experience coordinating both AmeriCorps VISTA and State programs. According to Robyn James, the State AmeriCorps project fits best with ADSS objectives because its Members can provide both direct and indirect services to beneficiaries, whereas VISTA Members cannot. Also, with regard to the AmeriCorps NCCC program, the short series of 6 to 8 week projects does not allow Members the opportunity to learn the skills required of them to serve SHIP/SMP programs.

Each of the AmeriCorps Programs can produce meaningful results for SHIPs. Needless to say, any organization considering an AmeriCorps project should first determine the goals of the program, and if and how they could be achieved through applying and receiving a grant from CNCS.

How to Apply to be an AmeriCorps State Project

AmeriCorps State works with Governor-appointed State Service Commissions to provide grants to non-government and government entities that sponsor service programs. For Alabama, the State Service Commission is the Governor’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

ADSS staff began meeting with their State Service Commissioner at least six months prior to applying for the three-year grant. Applying for and securing a State AmeriCorps grant requires an intense level of

The AmeriCorps Pledge

I will get things done for America
to make our people safer,
smarter, and healthier.

I will bring Americans together
to strengthen our communities.

Faced with apathy,
I will take action.

Faced with conflict,
I will seek common ground.

Faced with adversity,
I will persevere.

I will carry this commitment
with me this year and beyond.

I am an AmeriCorps Member,
and I will get things done.

up-front work to build a solid infrastructure to effectively manage the program. In the case of Alabama, a lot of negotiation and collaboration took place among the 13 AAA offices, ADSS, and the State Service Commission. It is worth noting that any potential applicant for an AmeriCorps program should begin the process months in advance of the April deadline for the grant application as it takes a substantial amount of time and resources to build the infrastructure and gain local buy-in. The effective start date for the program is October 1 of each year.

Each State AmeriCorps grant requires the designation of a Project Director, Project Coordinator, and Fiscal Officer. In addition,

a project applicant must demonstrate concise, measurable goals and activities in their grant application. Accordingly, extensive monitoring is required of the grant. In spite of the administrative burden, “the payoff is well worth the amount of time required,” said Robyn James, Alabama SHIP Director.

Program Activities

Members of the AmeriCorps program in Alabama are able to exponentially increase education, counseling and outreach activities. Following an analysis of past education event and outreach locations, Members have devised specific plans to target their outreach efforts to reach geographical “gap” areas. In addition, the Members serve as SHIP/SMP “foot soldiers” by promoting SHIP/SMP services throughout the community, especially among the underserved.

AmeriCorps activities have increased the number of SHIP Community Resource Centers across the state. Alabama SHIP has created and established over 200 SHIP Community Resource Centers, which the Members manage and visit regularly to replenish the variety of SHIP and Medicare-related resources, including LIS and MSP materials housed at each location. The centers are strategically placed in the underserved and rural areas of the state, and include those geographic Tier 1 and Tier 2 zip code target areas which have a large concentration of individuals potentially eligible for LIS and MSP programs. By devoting time and energy to developing community partnerships, Members are able to successfully identify, propose, and establish new SHIP Community Resource Centers.

Furthermore, by engaging the community, Members are able to more effectively promote the SHIP Community Resource Centers at a local level.

Members of AmeriCorps work to build and sustain SHIP programs for the long-term. In addition to assisting with the day-to-day administrative duties required of the SHIP programs, AmeriCorps Members work to increase the number of community partners and strengthen existing partnerships. Moreover, Members play a pivotal role in identifying underserved communities and looking for innovative ways to help partners to support outreach activities.

Members strengthen the SHIP volunteer program and expand recruitment efforts by targeting and recruiting new counselors. Members develop recruitment materials and engage with potential volunteers by highlighting volunteerism and the important work of SHIPs. Indeed, by targeting their efforts towards Baby Boomers, professionals, and retirees, Members are able to successfully increase the number of volunteers and counselors. In addition to attracting new volunteers, Members also coordinate, support, and increase the retention of existing volunteers by developing communication strategies to recognize and promote the work of volunteers.

Results

ADSS regularly monitors the 13 local AAA offices that administer SHIP/SMP programs locally. Since the start of the MIPPA grant work in June 2009, Alabama SHIP has submitted over 5,600 LIS and MSP applications on behalf of beneficiaries across the state. The total value of benefits

is estimated to be \$16,590,000. Specifically, Alabama SHIP saw an increase of over 2,600 clients served during the first three quarters of the 2009/2010 grant year (April 1 – December 31), compared to the same time frame for the previous grant year.

The service that each of the 14 Members provides to their local AAA offices and communities is exemplary. As a direct result

for each AAA office, totaling 24 Members statewide.

What are the project's hurdles—costs

Without a doubt the AmeriCorps program is administratively heavy and requires a great amount of work, especially during the first year of the three-year grant period.

As a direct result of the AmeriCorps Members, ADSS has seen a large increase in the numbers of clients served, enrollment events, educational presentations, and volunteers recruited.

of the AmeriCorps Members, ADSS has seen a large increase in the numbers of clients served, enrollment events, educational presentations, and volunteers recruited. Also, having a full-time Member available for each AAA office has provided coordinators with the time to strategically plan their targeted outreach. As one Coordinator put it, “I don’t know how we ever got by without an AmeriCorps Member.”

Moving forward, the Members’ primary tasks will be to continue to develop new partnerships, recruit and coordinate volunteers, increase LIS and MSP awareness, and establish more resource centers targeting the LIS and MSP zip code areas. Also, Members in certain areas will be responsible for transforming resource centers into new SHIP counseling sites. In year two, ADSS will be adding more positions to the project to include an additional half-time Member

As the grantee, ADSS handles all of the administrative requirements, which includes running background checks; maintaining Member service logs, personnel files, and supervisor timesheets; and entering workforce data into the federal website for reporting purposes. This project requires close monitoring at the local level to make sure ADSS remains compliant with the grant requirements. According to the State AmeriCorps Coordinator, Tammy Holman, she spends a minimum of 20 percent of her time dedicated to the AmeriCorps project, handling administrative tasks.

The greatest challenge for the AmeriCorps program is putting the systems into place to effectively manage the statewide program. For example, before the program starts, you must try to establish seamless reporting processes so that members are not weighed down with administrative tasks. Likewise,

recruiting Members may prove to be difficult, especially in rural, isolated communities. Also, CNCS encourages new projects to have seed money to start the program because it is a reimbursable grant. Another challenge for Alabama was that, as a state agency, ADSS could not pay the Members' monthly stipend or healthcare premiums because the Members could not be added to the state employee payment system. Fortunately, one of the local AAA offices, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, accepted this task and ADSS contracts this portion of the project to that particular AAA to manage.

The total amount of grant funds available for the statewide project is \$265,090 a year; of this CNCS contributes 76 percent and ADSS 24 percent. However, the majority of the ADSS match is a non-cash contribution in time spent by the Supervisors in managing their project and Member. The hard costs contributed by ADSS are primarily to pay for the Members' healthcare; however, this is for full-time Members only.

Keys to Success

Partnerships are crucial to a successful outreach and enrollment campaign. The importance of gaining the support of each of the AAA Directors and SHIP staff cannot be emphasized enough; their strong

and continued partnership with ADSS has been integral to the success of the ADSS AmeriCorps program.

ADSS approached each AAA with the project idea and would not have proceeded with this project without their support. At the initial pitch, the AmeriCorps project was couched as a way for AAAs to substantially increase their SHIP staff with only incidental associated costs to the AAA. Also, importantly, each AAA office was permitted to utilize a proportion of its MIPPA funds to manage their individual AmeriCorps projects; permitted expenses include mileage reimbursement, training, and personal development.

The AmeriCorps project demands results. Although the State AmeriCorps program has more flexibility than other AmeriCorps projects, it still requires grantees to establish project benchmarks; as a result of this requirement, ADSS set strict objective goals, targets, and indicators for the Members and AAAs. Accordingly, each of the 13 AAA offices, when accepting an AmeriCorps Member, contracts with ADSS to increase its benefits outreach and enrollment—AAAs are bound to this growth. This goal-driven atmosphere allows a collegial environment to foster and drive success, as demonstrated by Alabama's outstanding enrollment rates.

Conclusion

AmeriCorps Members enhance the visibility of an organization and increase the number of people it can serve. Also, like Alabama, Members may exponentially increase an organization's staff by recruiting additional volunteers to help serve its target population. Moreover, considering that 72 percent of AmeriCorps Members continue to volunteer in their communities after their term of service ends, organizations may continue to work with their AmeriCorps Members long into the future after their service.¹

The AmeriCorps grant creates additional staff. Given the financial challenges many states are in, this innovative solution provides the ideal opportunity to leverage existing resources to create new staff persons. Moreover, the AmeriCorps program and its principles attract dedicated Members willing and able to help build and sustain programs that serve older Americans and individuals with disabilities. The most outstanding feature of the AmeriCorps project is the high-caliber Member—their commitment and spirit of giving back to their community is unprecedented.

¹ Corporation for National and Community Service 2008, 5.

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About This Report

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The **National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities (NASUAD)**, founded in 1964, represents the nation's 56 officially designated state and territorial agencies on aging. The Association's principal mission is to support visionary state leadership, advance state systems innovation and articulate a national policy on elder rights and home and community based services for older adults and individuals with disabilities and their families.

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