

PHENND Continues to Build Community Engagement Through the Use of AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers

Danielle G. Flitter 22 April 2015

When President John F. Kennedy conceptualized AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), a program through which Americans dedicate a year of volunteer service to the country in a capacity-building role, he understood the importance of community collaborations. The core values of the AmeriCorps VISTA program are overcoming poverty, community empowerment, and sustainable solutions. Through VISTA's 7,000+ service volunteers and sites across the country, Americans are working together to make a tangible difference in their communities

(<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>). Social change is made by partnering with

existing institutions, and the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development's (PHENND) utilization of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers brings together an innovative idea for addressing poverty through community engagement and service. Schools and the education system are a driving element behind

eliminating poverty. By bringing the energy and creativity of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers to the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), PHENND is able to work toward community revitalization and foster civic engagement.

PHENND represents the ultimate in community engagement among higher education institutions in the Philadelphia area; a consortium of over 30 colleges and universities that work together to strengthen the region's service and service-learning activities. The organization acts as a liaison for all member schools to help address needs of the local community, ultimately seeking to revitalize communities and foster civic responsibility. PHENND has universities across the region working in local neighborhoods and sharing with the consortium network the effectiveness of programs, what worked and what did not work. Each member school is chartered with working in their immediate neighborhood but as a collective, impacting the city as a whole. Through this network, PHENND is working on improving education, reducing poverty and creating a more sustainable Philadelphia.

"AmeriCorps VISTA enables nonprofits to prove a concept," PHENND's executive director, Hillary Kane, poignantly stated. While most nonprofit organizations do not have the resources to hire full-time staff to implement a new initiative, hosting AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers brings an ambitious, energetic and passionate workforce to the organization. Place someone in the role and then

see what happens: Is there a quantifiable value to the project? Is there positive impact from the work? Is there greater demand for the services of the organization? If so, the programs can grow, serving the broader community and in turn solving social problems. This perspective on AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers enables PHENND to be innovative in their approach to addressing community problems. For nonprofits and volunteers, this is a mutually beneficial arrangement that "connects two groups in a nationally visible way through a positive program to create civic engagement with organizations that are doing good work all in an affordable way to the organization" shared Rita Hodges, assistant director of the Netter Center, which oversees PHENND.

PHENND first hosted AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers in 2002 and has been using them ever since in a variety of diverse projects. PHENND's current project using AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers is called Community Partnership Coordinators (CPCs), and it works to increase schools' capacities by leveraging community engagement. This particular idea was initiated by an individual donor who wanted to see work done in public schools through community engagement of the universities. He knew PHENND was the right organization to make it happen. PHENND did the background research to see what schools needed most, and the Community Partnership program was born. While there is an existing need for schools to facilitate out-of-classroom

programming, none have the financial capacity to create and sustain it. PHENND established the program and teamed with AmeriCorps VISTA to implement this project—a symbiotic relationship for both organizations. This strategic partnership created complementary programming, greater influence, potential to scale, capacity building and networking while utilizing shared resources. This new opportunity enabled PHENND to do something new and creative while allowing AmeriCorps VISTAs to gain experience, give back to the community and learn from a capacity-building role that holds great responsibility.

The program is now in its third year, and CPCs are placed in 13 different schools across SDP. Each coordinator works to integrate the needs of the students and the school with local organizations. Programming such as afterschool workshops, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) clubs, enrichment, anti-dating violence seminars and mentoring and tutoring in literacy and math are arranged by the AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers. Other responsibilities include convening monthly community partner meetings at the schools that facilitate communication between the schools and their partners, creating or improving the schools' websites, newsletters and other social media platforms that are made widely available to the entire school community including community partners, staff, students and their families. They also work with school leadership regularly

to discuss school needs and then cultivate existing or new partnerships to better address those needs. The responsibility for managing external partners with the school provides a service that the school district itself cannot.

The long-term goal of this project is to better align external partners' services with the needs of the schools and their students. PHENND's goal is to increase the capacity of schools to leverage community partnerships while also helping them develop systems and policies that will foster better community partnership development at the district level (<http://phennd.org/grant/community-partnerships-vista-project/>). With the best practices learned from this program, PHENND is developing a replicable strategy for which there has already been considerable interest from school district leadership to bring to scale.

PHENND provides relationship building, professional development workshops and transportation passes to its AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers. The commitment is mutual, and the success of this partnership is apparent as the program has grown from eight AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers in 2011 to 16 in 2014; 13 AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers serve as CPCs in various schools, two serve at SDP and one fulfills organizational capacity needs at PHENND's office. AmeriCorps VISTA's work is well-integrated into the PHENND environment. The monetary value of the program is nearly one-third of PHENND's

budget.

The continued growth and success of this program is contingent upon the continued support that AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers give PHENND for this project as well as securing operational funding to meet the costs of a growing program. PHENND does not currently have the organizational capacity or resources to staff coordinators in the schools and neither does the school district. So in essence, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers enable this program to happen. The nature of this relationship—using AmeriCorps VISTAs in public schools and at the school district—is unique. “AmeriCorps VISTAs tend to serve in nonprofits; I think we are the first intermediary to provide AmeriCorps VISTAs to schools at this level” noted Hillary Kane. PHENND views schools as neighborhood hubs, and also that by connecting communities with these education hubs, real impactful change can be made in those communities, and it is evident that this partnership between AmeriCorps VISTA and PHENND is having great social impact. The potential for mapping this concept across schools in Philadelphia, the state and even the country is where PHENND’s innovation in creating this partnership and implementing the concept will be most evident.

Community and social engagement may be the key to solving social ills. The impact of AmeriCorps VISTAs as Community Partnership Coordinators has not only developed PHENND as an organization but has brought

value to the AmeriCorps VISTA initiative, and the combination has enhanced networks that have been impacted by the program. The growth of the partnership between AmeriCorps VISTA and PHENND over the past three years has enabled Hillary Kane and PHENND to prove their concept that community engagement has a valuable impact. For Hillary, AmeriCorps VISTA and its volunteers are tools in the toolbox to help solve problems and spark a bigger conversation about the issues.

Resources

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>

<http://phennd.org/grant/community-partnerships-vista-project/>

Author Biography

Danielle Flitter, CPA, is an employee and graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. Bringing her business background to the nonprofit sector drives her graduate studies.