

Innovative Leadership Allows For Unique Service Model In City Government

Samantha Harclerode 22 April 2015

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the VISTA national service program in the United States[1], and it is with such celebration that we are called to look to Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, as a model for engaging VISTAs in the important work of fighting the root causes of poverty. The city of Philadelphia would not be home to so many currently serving VISTAs without strong support from the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service (MOCEVS), and those volunteer-service-minded leaders working in government who foster a culture of volunteer engagement across all City departments. It is through these leaders, and the volunteer service ripple effect they embody and must continue to perpetuate, that the city of Philadelphia, its VISTA members and its volunteer service programs are able to thrive. And it is only by continuing to cultivate and engage such leaders that MOCEVS and VISTA members will continue with such success.

VISTA members' service is different in comparison to short-term volunteers for a variety of reasons, and it is for these reasons that their service is so invaluable to the

hosting organizations, the City, and our country. VISTA is a competitive program, and applicants must have the right set of skills and experience for project site where they wish to serve. Because VISTA volunteers serve in full-time yearlong positions, and receive living stipends of only \$12,312, the volunteer experience is additionally distinctive in its ability to create strong and humble leaders. As MOCEVS Deputy Director of National Service Programs Pranshu Verma says, "VISTA members are deeply affected. Not only is this experience humbling for all of them, but it gives them the space, and empowers them to use their skills ...VISTAs are tried and tested [civic] leaders." VISTA members have been helping to cultivate change throughout the city for years, and it is because of the ability VISTA members have to create such an impact that MOCEVS and SERVE Philly was born.

MOCEVS was established after the City of Philadelphia received the prestigious "Cities of Service Leadership Award" in 2010 from Cities of Service and the Rockefeller Foundation. The City gained national recognition for the leadership Mayor Michael A. Nutter demonstrated in promoting volunteer service, and this well-regarded award enabled the mayor to further leverage national service resources to address pressing city challenges. His innovative vision regarding volunteer service programs took shape in 2010 when he created MOCEVS and launched the SERVE Philadelphia VISTA Corps. Recognizing the power volunteers have to make a

positive impact on Philadelphia's parks, schools, homeless shelters, food pantries and community youth programs, the mayor issued an executive order to establish MOCEVS "as the hub for impact volunteering and national service resources in City government" (SERVE Philadelphia, 2013), and it has continued to be this hub for impact since its inception.

MOCEVS is the "first [office] of its kind in Philadelphia, dedicated to dramatically increasing the City's capacity to capitalize on our homegrown volunteer spirit," said Mayor Nutter in his 2013 letter to Philadelphia (SERVE Philadelphia, 2013). To be clear, the SERVE Philly VISTA program does not embody all the VISTA members in the city of Philadelphia, but specifically and strategically focuses on those projects and initiatives within City government. There are many fantastic VISTA programs running in the city of Philadelphia through nonprofit organizations, but what makes SERVE Philly VISTA and MOCEVS so innovative is incorporating government to be involved. MOCEVS allows city government to use volunteers more strategically to not only do good, but be effective in priorities areas outlined by Mayor Nutter to help address poverty: education, food security, community vitality, and youth engagement.

What makes MOCEVS even more unique is that the people driving the specific government-hosted VISTA programs are people who have a volunteer service orientation. Those serving in MOCEVS believe in the

power city government has to impact people in the community, and believe in the power of using VISTAS through the MOCEVS initiative. "We chose to do this in city government because this is a very important place for it to happen" said Catherine Wolfgang Chief Service Officer. It must be recognized that using long-term volunteers such as VISTAs is not altruistic, but practical and cost effective. Of course, those who have served or those who have been impacted by service know the positive vibes created through service in a community are invaluable and special, but all too often what goes unrecognized is the practicality behind using a volunteer-service model. Using volunteers is a strategic way to use city resources, as well as educate those VISTAs serving through MOCEVS in ways government projects impact such vital issues as poverty. Current national service members, those who have previously completed a term of service and those who were impacted by national service members are having an impressive impact on MOCEVS leadership and their SERVE Philadelphia VISTA Corps. Working together, they are helping the office develop an increasing number of VISTA project sites, grow community volunteer support for those projects and strengthen the support for SERVE Philadelphia VISTA alumni.

Pranshu Verma himself did not begin his relationship with national volunteer service upon taking his current role of Deputy Director of National Service Programs. His

relationship began years before he even knew what it meant to be a VISTA volunteer. Verma grew up in what he identified as a low-income, poorly educated area with little access to healthy foods, where he recalled being a young participant in a program that helped shape his life. "In my youth, I took part in this golf mentorship program where LPGA golf instructors worked with low-income kids through giving us equipment, coaching, and free buckets of balls to practice." Verma was careful to note, that he would not have had this opportunity without access to the program. "They gave us tutoring services as well, and provided mentorship for us boys." It was not until Verma was much older that he realized that this had been a VISTA program. "I am a product of what a VISTA program and project can do" he said. "I have been helped by people who care. I wanted to give back to those who are motivated and help them strengthen their skills to better help the communities that need it most."

What makes Verma's story even more inspiring is that it is not the exception, but what can be found as a norm among those in capacity-building volunteer service programs. Among those who currently serve or have served as VISTA members, many have personal experiences with poverty that inspired them to enter the service field, which they have found to be fulfilling. Now they help to change systemic problems in areas such as education, homelessness, food access, youth engagement and community vitality.

Hannah Tran, a current VISTA member who also serves at MOCEVS as the SERVE Philadelphia VISTA Team Leader and Outreach Manager, had a similar personal testimony as to why she believes in the power of volunteer service. "I came from a neighborhood with low access; I grew up on the low-income list, always being identified as needy. I remember every year receiving a Thanksgiving basket...I will never forget that," said Tran. To this day, Tran is "very cognizant of those who were committed to helping my family." Tran completed two years of AmeriCorps service as a Community Projects Coordinator at YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School. Here, she cultivated a passion for education and then went on to a fulfilling teaching career with the School District of Philadelphia. After seven years of teaching, Tran pursued her current VISTA role as a means to return to her original AmeriCorps roots and focus more intently on civic engagement within Philadelphia.

When searching for more examples of leaders who believe in the power volunteer service holds, look no further than those who recently served or are current VISTA members with the SERVE Philadelphia VISTA Corps. Mubarak Lawrence served with City Year, a volunteer service program, before becoming a SERVE Philadelphia VISTA member. Lawrence now spends his time dedicated to his own nonprofit, Rising Sons. Kiera Westfall first served with AmeriCorps NCCC before beginning her SERVE Philadelphia VISTA year with the Greater Philadelphia

Coalition Against Hunger. Melanie Johnson joined the SERVE Philadelphia VISTA team after serving with City Year of Greater Philadelphia. During Johnson's term of service, she helped bring a team of AmeriCorps NCCC members to Philadelphia who completed over 3,200 hours of service.

Catherine Wolfgang's personal experience echoes this volunteer service ripple effect tune. Wolfgang served for a year with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) in 1995 and states: "My early experience in the JVC taught me the power of volunteer service and inspired me to bring that to City government. Government is made up of people; human energy creates things and shuts things down; we have to make sure government generates the kind of energy that supports citizen volunteers to solve problems, especially in the face of skepticism about the power of government to combat challenges."

With Philadelphia standing as the city with the largest cohort of VISTA members, the next question is: how can the city of Philadelphia continue to support VISTA members, and use this ripple effect of volunteer service to continue to spread so that there is strategic thinking around the continued success of MOCEVS and the SERVE Philadelphia VISTA Corps? The tremendous impact of VISTAs is evident not only in the capacity-building they accomplish in their host organizations, but in the transformation that happens in the VISTAs themselves. In many cases, they become leaders who go on to

leadership positions in similar organizations. A program established by those who believe in service, were served and now serve, MOCEVS can set an example by engaging SERVE Philadelphia VISTA alumni, and continue to show the positive ripple effect volunteer service can have in strengthening communities. "This year marks the 20th year anniversary of AmeriCorps and 50th anniversary of the VISTA program. We must continue to think strategically because many of the city's leadership positions will be filled by alumni of national service. They can have a powerful impact all across Philadelphia through public, private and non-profit institutions," - Wolfgang commented. A few of Philadelphia's notable VISTA alumni who continue to lead the City of Brotherly Love are: Carlton Williams, Commissioner of Licenses & Inspections, Samantha Phillips, Director of Emergency Management, Stephanie Tipton, Deputy Integrity Officer and Kenneth Manns, Director of Volunteer Service with the Free Library of Philadelphia.

With such impressive indications of the impact of national service on developing powerful leaders, MOCEVS must gather support from all agents—both alumni and others—and all stakeholders, regardless of political position, to continue engaging citizens, in both the private and public sectors, in supporting the expansion of national service in city government programs of Philadelphia. The continuation of MOCEVS help to ensure that the ripple effect of positive, humbling, empowering service

continues to thrive, and an innovative and unique opportunity for both these volunteers and the city of Philadelphia continues to develop in creating strategic and effective change for the city as a whole.

It was our great President John F Kennedy who first imagined VISTA, which emerged from his anti-poverty plans and was signed into law via the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." It seems evident that the City of Philadelphia must continue to tap into what Mayor Nutter has labeled the "homegrown volunteer spirit." Through MOCVES, and those volunteer-service-minded leaders who are fostering an ever stronger culture of volunteer engagement across the city, we can ensure people of every generations have the opportunity to serve and experience the power and impact of volunteer service.

Reference

SERVE Philadelphia. (2013, October). Message from Mayor Michael A. Nutter. Philadelphia, PA: Cities of Service. Retrieved from <http://volunteer.phila.gov/message>

Author Bio

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[1] VISTA was founded in 1965 as a national service program to fight poverty in America. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs funded by the Corporation for National and Community service. See:

[http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista](http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/americorps/ameri-corps-vista)