

How Coalitions Are Strengthening AmeriCorps VISTA's Mission in Philadelphia: An Example from Philly Fellows and the Center for Literacy

Andrea Alcala and Sara Dolinger 22 April 2015

Philadelphia is a vibrant, thriving city that has many top-tier universities producing strong, capable graduates who have the ability to contribute to the large and booming nonprofit sector. Though Philadelphia is blessed with an advantageous pool of talent, the nonprofit sector has not been able to steadily attract substantial numbers of recent graduates, with most leaving the city for jobs in New York, Washington DC, Los Angeles and other major cities, creating a "brain drain". Tim Ifill saw this and tried to find a way to link recent graduates to the Philadelphia nonprofit sector in the hopes of getting them to stay. This is how he came to create the Philly Fellows Program. Philly Fellows offers year-long fellowships that connect college graduates with dynamic Philadelphia-based nonprofit organizations. The program allows these students to build leadership and professional skills while at the same time engaging them in the city's vibrant communities. Major

sponsorship of this program comes from the Corporation for National and Community Services' AmeriCorps VISTA program.

Through this partnership, Philly Fellows takes a small cohort of recent local graduates recruits them to join AmeriCorps VISTA and places them in nonprofit organizations in Philadelphia to help them build capacity and support their missions.

Philly Fellows is an AmeriCorps grantee, meaning they serve as a sponsoring organization that allows nonprofits to request VISTA volunteer support. Through an intensive recruitment process, potential volunteers are matched with local nonprofits according to their interests, abilities, values and required necessary skills. Once they are placed, volunteers begin their year of service working to help strengthen the missions of their organization by building the their capacity in areas such as volunteer recruitment, fundraising, outreach, program development, implementation and evaluation, just to name a few. All of these activities are done behind the scenes, through indirect service, where there is limited or no contact with clients, allowing the volunteers to learn about how nonprofits are run and seeing how their nonprofit organizations' missions are working towards the mission of AmeriCorps to reduce poverty.

VISTA volunteers' main purpose is to help local nonprofit organizations build capacity in a sustainable manner when

there is limited manpower to do so. Center for Literacy (CFL), one of the largest literacy organizations in the nation and Pennsylvania's first community-based nonprofit to focus on providing literacy services to the low-literate populations in Philadelphia, has partnered with Philly Fellows and as a result has been able to combat the adult literacy rate through the capacity building of AmeriCorps VISTA. In 2013–2014, Philly Fellows placed VISTA volunteer Mikecia Witherspoon, with Center for Literacy (CFL), with the hope of increasing their capacity to improve adult literacy. Mikecia's duties focused on strengthening social media, development, marketing and outreach, allowing the Center's social media platform to become more developed, consistent and user-friendly. In today's technological world, social media has become a key marketing and fundraising tool for any enterprise and is especially helpful in the nonprofit sector. Another main deliverable that supported CFL's fundraising sustainability was a report on best fundraising practices and donor engagement for the staff's ongoing use. The report supported CFL's current fundraising practices and informed the staff of more efficient strategies, making the techniques less arbitrary and more purposeful. This is one of many examples where VISTA volunteers prove to be a valuable asset in the sustainability and capacity building in the nonprofit sector.

As a sponsor of Philly Fellows, the AmeriCorps VISTA program can continue providing skillful, high-quality

volunteers to local nonprofits without limiting themselves to larger nonprofits that can take multiple volunteers. Philly Fellows has become an advocate of the smaller organizations, like Center for Literacy, which can now rely on VISTA volunteer support. AmeriCorps VISTA, Philly Fellows, and small nonprofits together form an effective coalition that empowers a variety of local nonprofits, creating a balance throughout the sector.

The volunteers also benefit from the sponsorship of AmeriCorps VISTA and placement by Philly Fellows because many university graduates struggle to find adequate jobs without previous work experience. VISTA volunteers gain a multitude of professional experiences while working to benefit local communities. In many cases, the AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer experience shapes the volunteers' future career paths. Many former Philly Fellows have chosen to enter the nonprofit sector, while others have decided to go into public health, education, public administration or social services. When students are deciding which direction their future will lead, VISTA, Philly Fellows and the local nonprofits serve as a great support network.

The future of AmeriCorps VISTA relies on the allocation of federal funds, and therefore relies on public and government support. VISTA's mission resonates nationally, and it is still very much needed, leading to a strong, future trajectory of service for those who choose to volunteer. Mikecia stated that she will most certainly support

AmeriCorps VISTA once she completes her graduate studies, and it can be assumed that she is not the only volunteer who feels that way. AmeriCorps VISTA has created a vast network of talented former volunteers all across the country. To ensure this support, VISTA can further strengthen volunteers' post-service transitions and broaden the job opportunities and government job pipelines. Coalitions such as Philly Fellows and AmeriCorps VISTA could be enhanced to support the transition from volunteer to full-time employee.

AmeriCorps' mission to reduce poverty would be impossible to accomplish without the support of AmeriCorps VISTA's purpose of capacity building in nonprofit organizations. The ability of local nonprofits to receive VISTA volunteer support is possible because of the partnerships through umbrella organizations such as Philly Fellows that allow smaller nonprofits to receive qualified, local graduates to help strengthen their capacity and deliver their mission. Philly Fellows and AmeriCorps VISTA can offer sustainable deliverables to the organization, just as Mikecia was able to produce with her social media platform and fundraising strategies for Center for Literacy. The coalition between organizations benefits the volunteers as well, opening up job opportunities, a support network and, more importantly, possible career paths. VISTA volunteers are great advocates for the work of the local nonprofits they work for, and in turn these organizations can support VISTA's

efforts after they have concluded their year of service. Collaborations between Philly Fellows, AmeriCorps VISTA and local nonprofits are examples of how the continued investment in these types of projects and programs also leads to continued investment in Philadelphia.

Author Biographies

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