

AmeriCorps VISTAs Against Hunger

Anisha Sinha and Kelly Cofrancisco 22 April 2015

Founded in 1996, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger strives to build a community in which all people have the food they need to lead healthy lives. The Coalition connects people with food assistance programs and nutrition education; provides resources to a network of food pantries; and educates the public and policymakers about responsible solutions that prevent people from going hungry. Today, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger operates in three major arenas to advocate for those dealing with food insecurity in the city. On the advocacy front, the Coalition has been tremendously influential, working at the national, state and local levels to ensure that programs like SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps) continue to support vulnerable families. In addition to advocacy, the Coalition provides direct services within the community. Most notable is the SNAP Hotline, which serves as a major resource for individuals and organizations seeking more information about the program. Finally, the Coalition also provides direct support to local food pantries to ensure that they have adequate food, training and supplies to feed neighbors in the community. Combined, these efforts

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Hunger in Philadelphia

Currently, one in four Philadelphians are at risk for hunger, and the impacts of hunger are far-reaching; studies have linked hunger to increased risk for disease, anxiety and inability to focus. Food insecurity in the Greater Philadelphia region is a pressing issue, and one that organizations, individuals and activists have been working to address for more than three decades.

In greater Philadelphia, a number of organizations are working to address food insecurity in the city's most vulnerable families, and many of these organizations found their roots decades ago. In the 1970s, a number of agencies and people began to meet informally to determine ways to assist the city's most vulnerable families. Over time, a coalition began to form that comprised food pantries, soup kitchens, concerned neighbors, political activists and other human service providers, all with the same concerns about hunger in Philadelphia. These informal meetings were a catalyst for some of Philadelphia's most innovative and effective organizations to take root and address food insecurity in the region. And finally, after nearly two decades of meeting, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger was formed, to continue these important dialogues and also to connect individuals and families to food resources throughout the city.

Meet the AmeriCorps VISTA

Volunteers

The Coalition's exciting work in Philadelphia is expansive, and the Coalition has successfully leveraged the talents of AmeriCorps VISTAs over the past decade to ensure that its programs remain successful. We had the opportunity to meet with the Coalition's three current AmeriCorps VISTAs to learn about their work and experiences as AmeriCorps volunteers:

<p>AmeriCorps VISTA Spotlight: Jennifer Saigal</p> <p>Jennifer began her AmeriCorps VISTA term in the summer of 2014, after completing her B.A. in psychology from Boston University. Jennifer is interested in pursuing a career in medicine, and she brings a wealth of experience to the Coalition in this area.</p>	<p>AmeriCorps VISTA Spotlight: Jessica Humphries</p> <p>Jessica studied biology at Boston College, and after working for a number of years in various roles—research, baking, and even farming—she relocated to Philadelphia to begin her AmeriCorps term in July 2014.</p>	<p>AmeriCorps VISTA Spotlight: Shannon Macika</p> <p>Shannon joined the Coalition as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in the summer of 2014, after receiving her B.A. in health and societies from the University of Pennsylvania.</p>
<p>What she's</p>	<p>What she's</p>	<p>What's she's</p>

working on:

Jennifer's AmeriCorps VISTA project focuses primarily on seniors, a particularly vulnerable population in terms of food insecurity. For many seniors, SNAP is a critical program for helping make ends meet. Jennifer does outreach to community members to raise awareness about SNAP and to also break down many of the myths and stigmas associated with the program. She also collaborates with other nonprofits and health organizations to build awareness around this issue.

working on:

Jessica currently assists with the Coalition's Green Light Pantries initiative, which aims to bring healthful, nutritious foods to Philadelphia families. In her role, Jessica creates training materials and compiles resources for current and future Green Light Pantries, and she has successfully collaborated with a number of community partners to recruit volunteers, promote health screenings in the community and host produce drives at local farmers markets.

working on:

Shannon is the Coalition's Child Hunger Outreach Coordinator, and she works to improve awareness about, and access to, child nutrition programs in Philadelphia. Shannon convenes community members and leaders to identify USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) program barriers, and develops plans to help improve food access at the community level. She also works with partner agencies to provide training and support regarding SNAP.

Describe the AmeriCorps VISTA

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experience in one word:

Humbling

How do you see your AmeriCorps VISTA experience playing a role in your future?

Since my interests are in medicine and public health, my AmeriCorps VISTA experience at the Coalition Against Hunger will have a great impact on my future work. The future of medicine is moving to involve a larger focus on prevention, holistic care and greater collaboration between hospitals and local community organizations. During my AmeriCorps VISTA

experience in one word:

Fulfilling

How do you see your AmeriCorps VISTA experience playing a role in your future?

My AmeriCorps VISTA experience has been the doorway to a new career for me. It has been my introduction to public service and has taught me new skills like outreach and direct service while building on skills that I brought with me like project coordination and data analysis. I see my service year as laying the groundwork for a career serving others through the nonprofit sector,

experience in one word:

Fulfilling

How do you see your AmeriCorps VISTA experience playing a role in your future?

For what my AmeriCorps VISTA experience may lack in pay, it more than makes up for in the experience I am gaining relevant to both "real life" and the workplace. This experience encompasses everything from the humility and budgeting skills gained by living on a federal poverty line stipend to the actual workforce skills that I am developing, including networking,

<p>year, I've learned how disconnected our health organizations can often be with community resources that are in their own neighborhoods. As a future physician, whether I'm in Philadelphia or elsewhere, I will always be cognizant of this disconnect and will make an effort to assess how a patient's access to healthy food, affordable housing, a proper education and health care all impact their overall mental, physical and emotional health.</p>	<p>government or even my own business. It is a unique experience to learn from experienced professionals and community members simultaneously—a strong foundation for any career!</p>	<p>community organization and presentation skills. I'd highly recommend AmeriCorps VISTA as a great program to prepare anyone interested in a career in nonprofit work or public service, and I can see myself going into these fields myself while staying on a public health track.</p>
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Author Biographies

Kelly Cofrancisco is currently the outreach and partnership manager at the Pennsylvania Small Business Development Center's lead office. She is earning her master of public administration degree from the Fels Institute of Government at the University

of Pennsylvania and holds a bachelor of arts in business from Mercyhurst University.

Anisha Sinha is the program director for Our Closet, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit. She is also pursuing her master of public administration degree from the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania, and she holds a bachelor of arts from the University of Michigan in English and psychology.