

APPLICANT FEEDBACK SUMMARY

2014 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: Literacy Volunteers of America - Illinois

Application ID: 14AC157411

Program Name: VOCAL

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewers' Summary Comments:

Strengths:

The applicant clearly presents national and state results, as well as past program results, to support the clearly defined need that low literacy contributes to economic consequences.

The applicant cites reputable sources on U.S. literacy rates, connecting these rates to other national social problems.

The applicant cites reputable sources connecting low literacy rates to national economics such as lost business productivity, health care costs, public assistance needs, and prison costs.

The applicant identifies a gap between needed literacy services and services available.

Applicant references a 2007 Educational Testing Service (ETS) report and the 2008 National Committee on Adult Literacy report (NCAL) Reach Higher AMERICA in describing the disparity in literacy and numeracy skills among our school age population citing literacy as a national concern.

From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report, the applicant explained that half of the adult population failed to meet the standard literacy skills, with 32% having what would be considered "basic" skills and 20% having "below basic" skills.

The applicant references the need for both educational opportunities and economic opportunities using three reports: 2003 NAAL, 2007 ETS, and 1999 National Institute for Literacy. In these reports, the applicant explained that 43% of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty; 70% of people with the lowest literacy skills are either unemployed or work part-time; 44% of all births to women under age 30 in 2003-2004 were out of wedlock, among black women in this age group the proportion reached 77%--with the vast majority of the women lacking a high school diploma; 70% of prisoners fall into the lowest two levels of reading proficiency. Also, 55% of adults with low literacy levels voted in the past five years, compared to 89% of the most literate.

The applicant explained the economic consequences of illiteracy include \$60 billion lost in productivity each year by American businesses (National Institute for Literacy); \$73 billion placed each year on the national health care system (American Medical Association); \$5 billion a year in taxes to support public assistance recipients who are unemployable due to their low literacy (ProLiteracy 2003); and an average \$22,500 a year to house each prison inmate, 68% of whom do not have a high school diploma or GED (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007).

The applicant explained that in Illinois, there are 1.4 million adults who have less than 12 years of formal education; 531,000 have less than a ninth grade education. There are another 2.59 million adults who speak a language other than English as the primary language in their home.

The applicant stated that the Illinois State Literacy Office reported that there are at least 10,000 adults on program waiting lists demonstrating a need for literacy services.

The applicant states that there is a high incidence of low literacy among incarcerated teens in the Illinois Youth Centers (IYC), with School District 428 of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice reporting that over half of their juveniles test at or below a sixth grade level and that 60% are classified as "special education" students in their home school.

The applicant stated that the Brighton Park, Little Village, McKinley Park, New City, Pilsen, South Lawndale, the Near West and the Near South communities have 495,605 individuals residing in these communities. Of these residents, 375,525 (76%) are minority and 109,303 (25%) are living below the poverty level. There are also 114,308 (26%) individuals who are over age 25 and lack a high school diploma, and 20,593 who are age 16+ and are out-of-school and unemployed according to the City of Chicago website.

The application is well developed.

The applicant presents a logic model that is aligned with the narrative.

The applicant presents data that supports the need to improve literacy.

The applicant has a long and successful working relationship with the partner organizations working to increase the reading and math literacy of economically disadvantaged adults and youth.

The applicant provides data on a number of adults served in similar programs.

The applicant has a long and established history of providing resources and training to organizations in Illinois.

The applicant has experience with VISTA, VOCAL and AmeriCorps programs.

The applicant proposes to provide one-to-one, small group and classroom instruction to 1,400 adults in need of basic literacy services in reading, math and conversational English. The one-to-one and small group sessions will be conducted once a week for one to one-and-a-half hours, over a one year period.

The applicant will place AmeriCorps members at host sites to assist in providing job search and placement services to 250 economically disadvantaged adults. Each participant can be expected to receive at least 24 hours of formal training, and 12 hours of individual job search and placement counseling.

The applicant reported that AmeriCorps members have also been effective tutor recruiters and have provided invaluable assistance in tutor retention activities, initial and in-service tutor training, organizing tutor and student recognition events, securing in-kind donations from area businesses, and developing newsletters and public information materials.

The applicant proposes to provide tutoring services in reading and math to 300 IYC youth and another 50 at-risk youth each year. The tutoring to the youth will be one-to-one for the incarcerated youth and will be offered twice a week for one to one-and-a half hours. The duration will likely be three months, as that is the average stay of an incarcerated juvenile.

Based on standardized testing, the applicant proposes that 180 of the youth will increase their academic performance in literacy or math by at least one grade. Beyond grade level increases, they expect to see the youth participating more in their academic classes, less "tickets" being written for negative or aggressive behavior, fewer youth making return "visits" to the Youth Centers and seeing them develop a greater sense of personal responsibility, which will be measured through specialized surveys.

The applicant reports outcomes that exceeded targets by a minimum of 133%.

The applicant has a long history of providing resources and training to organizations providing literacy programs to adults and out-of-school teens.

The applicant exhibits a strong and positive relationship with the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice and the adult correctional centers in Illinois.

The applicant reported that the program had one performance measure in the 2010-2013 program cycle which was to provide one-to-one, small group and classroom instruction annually to 1,500 economically disadvantaged adults and 4,500 incarcerated teens (over the course of three years) and that 6,693 individuals were served.

The goal was that in three years 2,700 of the individuals served would raise their literacy level by at least one grade and post-testing revealed that in the three years of the program, 3,491 raised their literacy level by at least one grade as measured by the Slosson Oral Reading Test or Test of Adult Basic Education for basic literacy students, or the Best Literacy Test for English as a Second Language Learners.

The applicant also reported that 221 of their learners earned a GED when a GED was not stated as a goal by the applicant.

The applicant has leveraged additional volunteers by creating partnerships with other agencies including Head Start to offer additional literacy tutoring than what was planned.

Weaknesses:

The Applicant does not provide sufficient data on literacy levels within the communities it has targeted to receive services.

The Applicant, being a coordinating center for volunteer literacy programs, does not provide data from the community, school, and faith-based agencies for which it is requesting AmeriCorps members.

The applicant did not provide literacy data for the specific areas they propose to serve.

Applicant does not cite county specific data or local data to explain how each site or location in Illinois was chosen over others. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if AmeriCorps members will serve in communities with the highest prevalence and severity.

The applicant did not cite the date of each report and/or data source supporting its need in the application. The applicant does not provide sufficient data on literacy levels within the communities it has targeted to receive services.

The applicant, being a coordinating center for volunteer literacy programs, does not provide data from the community, school, and faith-based agencies for which it is requesting AmeriCorps members.

The evaluation plan was not possible to assess as this information continued beyond page 15 of the application narrative.

The applicant did not include any experimental, quasi-experimental or non-experimental research studies to support the success its partner organizations have had improving literacy levels of disadvantaged adults or incarcerated youth.

Without data/evidence from the Applicant's partner organizations, it is difficult to determine consistency of program design across cities/organizations, or the level of success each partner organization has had with its literacy programs.

The applicant has no stated plan to collect data separately for AmeriCorps volunteers and community volunteers. This has been cited as a need in evaluation of its previous programs.

The applicant expects the literacy level of incarcerated youth to increase by one grade level in a 3-month time period. However, the Applicant provides no evidence that this is a realistic time frame for the outcome stated.

The applicant does not explain how past performance measures have provided data supporting short-term or long-term outcomes for the families and volunteers involved.

It was not possible to fully assess this Criterion, as some of this information was presented on or after page 16 of the application narrative. As stated in the Notice, Reviewers were instructed not to consider material in the application (for applicable sections) that exceeded the page limit restrictions.