

State Commission

The Connecticut Commission on Community Service manages a portfolio of 10 AmeriCorps State programs with more than 630 AmeriCorps members, serving 143 community-based organizations and schools, addressing critical needs in the areas of education, health, economic opportunity, and capacity building. Housed within the Office of Higher Education, the Commission's vision is keenly focused on supporting programs that bolster the skills and motivation necessary to graduate from high school, then enter and succeed in a program of postsecondary education. In the 2014-2015 program year, more than 14,611 disadvantaged youth were tutored, mentored, counseled and coached by Connecticut's AmeriCorps State members. Connecticut's programs boast a 122% success rate of students with improved academic performance in literacy and/or math. The Commission also leads Connecticut's largest recognition program based exclusively on community service done on college campuses. The annual Connecticut Higher Education Community Service Awards applaud the efforts of students that are making a positive difference in their institutions through service and leadership.

AmeriCorps State

In the past year, Connecticut had the largest number of FoodCorps AmeriCorps members placed in one state nationwide. Its 15 members served in high-need school districts throughout Connecticut to implement FoodCorps' three-ingredient recipe for healthy kids: 1) hands-on food and nutrition education, 2) experiential education in school gardens and through cooking lessons, and 3) healthy food access in cafeterias. AmeriCorps members worked side-by-side with committed teachers, school administrators, and food service directors to improve school food environments. FoodCorps members served almost 1,400 students and helped almost 700 students have an improved attitudes toward eating fruits and vegetables. These results exceeded targets set by the program.

The STEM Education Ambassador (SEA) program operated by the New England Science & Sailing (NESS) Foundation is a new, locally-generated AmeriCorps program poised for growth and replicability. NESS SEA AmeriCorps, which had its first 15 members this past year, has quickly shown promise in its mission to improve attendance in New London public schools. The AmeriCorps members invite students out of their comfort zones through STEM-based adventure learning that draws students out of the traditional classroom to make learning relevant and exciting. Students increase their self-confidence and develop life and citizenship skills. The members give them adventure-based field experiences including sailing, kayaking, snorkeling, and exploring tide pools, marshes, and beaches to complement STEM-based classroom learning. The program has enthusiastically tackled first-year challenges; they have assessed, solved problems strategically, and built partnerships. Thanks to these efforts, they have exceeded their expectations for the 2015-2016 service year. The Connecticut Commission is invested in shepherding powerful, change-making national service strategies such as these.

AmeriCorps National

FoodCorps has 15 AmeriCorps members serving in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Norwich, Meriden, Norwalk, Rockville, Waterbury, Willimantic, and Woodbridge. FoodCorps is a nationwide team of AmeriCorps leaders who work under the direction of local partner organizations to connect children to real food and help them grow up healthy. They teach children hands-on lessons about food and nutrition build and tend school gardens, teach cooking lessons, and help change what's on lunch trays so that children can eat healthy food from local farms. In the past year, the FoodCorps members in Connecticut served 14,932 children, built or brought back into use 59 school and community gardens, harvested 1,252 pounds of produce, and recruited 375 community volunteers.

One Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) Corps AmeriCorps member served this past year at Northwestern Connecticut Area Health Education Center in Waterbury. YMHFA is a certification course that introduces participants to risk factors and warning signs of adolescent mental health problems, focuses on the importance of early intervention, and teaches how to help adolescents who are in crisis or having a mental health or substance use challenge. The AmeriCorps Corps member, who is a trained YMHFA instructor, certified 328 community members in the program. A three month follow up survey revealed that YMHFA strategies helped 97 adolescents who struggle with a mental health challenge or illness. The program is collaborating with City Year to provide YMHFA certification for their AmeriCorps members.

Youth Volunteer Corps of Western Connecticut has three AmeriCorps members who have collectively served a total of six terms of service. It runs programs in Danbury and Stamford that have engaged 158 young people, ages 11-18, including 18 disadvantage youth. The youth have contributed 3,641 hours of service. They served on 118 projects for 34 local agencies, including Meals on Wheels, Still River Alliance, Imagination Library, and Connecticut Mission of Mercy.

AmeriCorps VISTA

AmeriCorps VISTA members are addressing critical community needs in housing, homelessness, financial literacy, and food security in Hartford, which has a 30 percent poverty rate. In a three-month period in 2015, Child Nutrition AmeriCorps VISTA Member Kyla Jones gathered more than 3,000 pounds of food for the Manna Pantry, which serves 400 low-income families each month. Kyla also secured a \$5,000 grant to purchase fresh fruit, jump ropes, and other fitness supplies for weekend backpacks sent home with 305 children who receive free and reduced school lunches during the school week. Kyla and the other VISTAs have developed or expanded two dozen partnerships with community organizations.

In 2015, 18 AmeriCorps VISTA members served in 14 nonprofit organizations, 11 schools, and New Haven Public Schools central office focused on bringing organizations together to improve and create programs to foster the success of New Haven's students and families. VISTAs coordinated programs which served over 3,200 students and raised over \$180,000 in cash and in-kind donations for organizations and students. VISTAs also recruited almost 400 community volunteers who served a total of 12,400 hours at their host site organizations.

AmeriCorps NCCC

In West Haven, an AmeriCorps NCCC team partnered with Animal Assisted Therapy Services to prepare a sensory trail. NCCC members removed invasive species, and constructed a fence and 13 sensory village boxes designed to enhance the experience of the trail for people of different abilities. The sensory trail enables disabled youth to interact with their surroundings using their different senses while riding horseback on the trail. A group of young adults from Roses for Autism assisted the team with construction of the sensory boxes. In addition to this project, NCCC members repaired fencing along the horse paddocks and installed new sprinklers in the horse arena.

Habitat for Humanity of Coastal Fairfield County in Bridgeport requested an AmeriCorps NCCC team to assist with building new homes, and lead and train volunteers to become task leaders. Over the course of the project, NCCC members assisted in the construction of 10 homes, one of which was a Veterans Build house, and cleared six vacant lots. The team helped install hurricane support rods, siding, doors and trim work, insulation, and build a chain-link fence. The team cleared overgrown brush from eight building lots to prepare them for foundation work and built wall panels for homes that will be built in the future. NCCC members also assisted in leading and working with 586 volunteers. The NCCC members enabled the program to build on more sites, utilize more volunteers, and house more families.

Senior Corps Foster Grandparent Program

The Greater Hartford Foster Grandparent project, sponsored by Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters, assigned 37 Foster Grandparents to Head Start/Day Care volunteer stations throughout central Connecticut, where they help young children build their social and emotional skills and work toward school readiness. A program evaluation conducted in 2015 indicated that almost 60 percent of the children augmented their literacy readiness, improved their motor skills, and increased their ability to follow directions. The project also assigned 19 Foster Grandparents to work with students in grades K-8 to improve academic and social skills. The evaluation showed that of the children working with a Foster Grandparent, 80 percent improved their literacy skills and 73 percent improved their math skills. The Foster Grandparents—almost half of whom speak Spanish as their first language—are particularly helpful with English-language learners in the classroom. The Hartford Foster Grandparent project benefits the senior volunteers as well; Foster Grandparents report increased energy, health, and sense of belonging in their communities.

Senior Corps RSVP

The first RSVP Veterans Coffeehouse in Connecticut was established by Thames Valley Council for Community Action's RSVP in Killingly during the spring of 2015. More than 433 guests, including 157 veterans, attended the coffeehouse during its first six months. The coffeehouse, open three times monthly, provides socialization for isolated veterans in the sparsely populated northeastern corner of the state. Regular attendees include representatives of the Soldiers, Sailors and Marines Fund and the Veterans Service Office of the Connecticut Department of Veterans Affairs. Through connections made at the coffeehouse, several veterans have been able to gain access to additional services and benefits. Two veterans were awarded full disability for Agent Orange complications. A 92-year-old veteran received two new hearing aids at no charge. Eight veterans began receiving housing, energy, medical and food assistance through the Soldiers, Sailors & Marines Fund. Other veterans are gaining access to health care through the Veterans Administration as a result of coffeehouse connections.

Senior Corps Senior Companion Program

The Senior Companion project sponsored by New Opportunities, Inc., in Waterbury engaged more than 50 Senior Companions in 70,000 hours of service to 174 people in 2015. One of those served was Navy Veteran Don Ruland, homebound with a chronic disease and dementia, who received companion services from Pat Johnson for the last two years of his life. Don's wife, Lucia, said Pat provided Don with moments of joy during weekly visits. Toward the end of Don's life, Lucia became a Senior Companion herself.

Social Innovation Fund

Social Innovation Fund programs are focused primarily on workforce development and supportive housing in Connecticut. The Social Innovation Fund is investing \$250,000 and expanding the impact of five nonprofits.