



Changing Lives: Michigan's AmeriCorps Voices

Dear Friends,

Each year, AmeriCorps*State members transform Michigan communities through their service. This year, more than 1,200 members are serving in 19 programs, helping more than 370 nonprofits. Their efforts are impacting some of our most critical issues; including health care, affordable housing, literacy, disaster preparedness, mentoring, the environment, and much more.

These 1,200 Michigan's AmeriCorps members who successfully complete their term of service have the potential of earning more than \$2.5 million in education awards - to pay back qualified student loans or to attend college or vocational school.

The Michigan Community Service Commission (MCSC) is honored to serve as the state's lead agency on volunteerism and strives to increase the efforts and value of service by promoting it as a strategy to address Michigan's toughest challenges. AmeriCorps is one of the MCSC's signature initiatives, and has been since 1994. Members serving since that time have contributed more than 10 million hours of service to transform our neighborhoods and communities.

With assured growth in AmeriCorps programming, the MCSC looks forward to providing more and more individuals with the opportunity to gain valuable job skills, retrain for new careers, and remain in their home communities. Their selfless commitment will help move Michigan on its road to recovery.

Please enjoy the following stories that exhibit how AmeriCorps members in Michigan change lives, including their own.

Paula K. VanDam

Executive Director, Michigan Community Service Commission



AmeriCorps is a national service program that strengthens communities by involving people in service to meet local challenges. Individuals serving with the AmeriCorps*State or VISTA programs in Michigan serve with more than 530 nonprofits, public agencies, faith-based, and other community organizations to provide foreclosure prevention and financial education, organize literacy and tutoring programs, support health care services to those in need, and much more.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) administers AmeriCorps at the federal level and partners with states to fund national service programs locally. The Michigan Community Service Commission administers Michigan's AmeriCorps and the CNCS Michigan State Office administers AmeriCorps*VISTA.

The AmeriCorps Pledge

I will get things done for America - to make our people safer, smarter, and healthier.

I will bring Americans together to strengthen our communities.

Faced with apathy, I will take action.

Faced with conflict, I will seek common ground.

Faced with adversity, I will persevere.

I will carry this commitment with me this year and beyond.

I am an AmeriCorps member, and I will get things done.





Everyone Can Benefit from a Mentor

Christina Bishop - 4-H Mentor Michigan Initiative

Let me tell you about Ebony, an eight-year-old girl in our Community-Based Program. Ebony has been a victim of bullying at school and often becomes anxious and nervous. As a result she suffers from frequent panic attacks and a nervous disorder. We hoped a special volunteer would come along to be her Big Sister.

I had the opportunity to match Ebony with her Big Sister Lynda. When I interviewed Lynda, I knew she would be an excellent Big Sister for any of our Littles. Her bubbly, talkative, and bright personality could lift the spirits of any discouraged child.

I explained Ebony's home situation and gave her detailed descriptions of her behavior, interests, and personality. Lynda felt right away this match was "the one," as she too had been bullied in school because of her physical appearance and had suffered from panic attacks before. She hoped that as Ebony's Big Sister she could help her work through her frustration and anxiety in ways that would decrease and hopefully diminish her panic attacks.

Lynda arrived to the match meeting beaming with enthusiasm. She made a book for Ebony with pictures and descriptions of her home, family, and pets. Ebony loved the thoughtful gift and ran to her room to get a surprise for Lynda. Ebony enjoys creating books of her own, complete with pictures and a short story. The new "Sisters" were thrilled to find a shared hobby.

Later, I arrived at the office to find a lengthy e-mail from Lynda about the new match. She could not believe how similar their life experiences were, despite their significant age difference (Lynda is 60 years old). Often there are children who seem unmatchable, but by believing in the power of mentoring everyone can benefit from a caring adult.

Playing a Small Part in the Big Picture

Ernad Prnjat - Together We Prepare AmeriCorps



An Army Sergeant, with four kids and a wife, moved from North Carolina to Michigan. As if such a move was not difficult in itself, it occurred just before school started and the Sergeant was counting on receiving advanced pay in order for his family to start their life here. However, the paperwork did not come through and the family was off to a rough start. They had to stay at a hotel and could not secure an apartment without a rent deposit – but their budget was getting smaller every day. Thankfully, the Red Cross helped them secure an Army Emergency Relief (AER) Loan that allowed the family to find an apartment, get the kids signed up at school, and provide some support after a few hectic weeks.

Not even a month passed when the Sergeant was informed his father had passed away back home in North Carolina. He needed to return for the funeral and his command granted him enough leave time, but he did not have a way of getting there. Again, he called the Red Cross for help.

I met him but wasn't sure what to expect. This man just went through a strenuous move and now life had thrown him another curveball. He, however, was very composed when we met and we talked about what he wanted to do. He wanted to take his whole family to North Carolina.

The only way this was going to be possible was to ask for another AER Loan.

We went through the application process and sent in the information. Within three hours I received the call his application had been approved. I was glad AER decided to help him out again and that I had a chance to play a small part in helping.



Overcoming Barriers

*Michael A. Shank - Michigan's Campaign
to End Homelessness*



It is often the smallest of services, so easily taken for granted, that have the greatest impact on those in need. It is frequently said that people just want to be heard, to have their stories and problems listened to, so even when there is no other help available, they can come away with a weight lifted from their shoulders and a little hope in their heart.

During my first week of service at Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency, I was just learning the ropes when a walk-in came through our doors in need of heating assistance. I asked the customer how I could help. Her name was Anne, and she needed help paying for heat. Although this was not my area of expertise, I provided the application and explained the information she would need to fill out the paperwork. I was about to leave and go back to my duties when I noticed Anne was staring hesitantly at the application. Even though it was a bit uncomfortable, I asked her if she needed help filling it out. She said she had trouble writing and asked, if I didn't mind, if I would assist her. In only a few minutes, we had finished her application and she was well on her way to receiving the heating assistance she needed.

Through a seemingly insignificant offer of assistance, Anne's barrier to help was overcome, and she was able to access important resources. This woman has heating assistance now, but we must wonder how often do people not get the help they need because of a lack of a small service? If someone only had time to listen, time to help with a piece of paperwork, time to make a phone call on someone else's behalf – if someone only had time!



Two Simple Goals

Diane Gomez - City Year Detroit

I tutor a fourth grade student named Jacob. On my first day at his school, he was slouching in his seat and breaking pencils on his chair. Most days he would fall asleep or spend his time writing all over his desk. When I began working with him we decided to focus on small goals.

First goal: Sit up in your seat and find out what you are supposed to be doing. In the beginning it would take us an hour just to get his name on the paper. His penmanship was illegible, and he had a hard time focusing for more than a minute or so. I promised Jacob I would help him, and he promised me he would try to do his best.

A few weeks later, I found out he had glasses yet never wore them. Second goal: You have to wear your glasses. We have continued on this path for almost four months, taking tedious baby steps the whole time. "Jacob, work on your letter A's," I ask, then "try to write as neatly as possible," and "promise me you will not get written up this week."

Slowly but surely he has started to improve. He wears his glasses every single day. I can't remember the last time he was written up, and I even caught him bragging to a fellow student, "I got all of my work done already."

His behavior has completely changed. Shortly after winter break, he gave me a picture he had drawn of a superhero standing on a mountain with shooting stars flying all over the place. I noticed the letters "D.G." on the superhero's belt buckle and when I asked him what it stood for he replied, "Miss Diane, those are your initials."





Literacy Skills - They're Not Just for Kids

Holly Martin - Superior AmeriCorps

I serve with BHK's Even Start program in Houghton, Michigan - a family literacy program offered to families who need to complete high school or obtain a GED, yet also have children age seven or younger. A participant in the program entered it after finding himself a widower with five children, ages one to 10. Although faced with challenges; including a poor education, no car, and no career, this father had goals he wished to accomplish.

Before we could even begin with GED preparations, we knew we had to address his literacy issues. The father indicated that he wanted to learn how to write a letter so he could connect with his mother in Arkansas – someone he had not been able to communicate with for several years. In fact, she had not yet seen a photograph of his youngest child because he did not know how to address an envelope. He had received a letter from her in which she had written, "I don't expect to hear back from you. I know you do not write well enough to respond, but I want you to know that I miss you and think about you and your family."

That single letter gave this man such meaningful, useful, and personal motivation. In the initial letter, he dictated to me what he wanted to say and then he re-wrote it. We included pictures of his kids and explained he was learning to write, and that he would now respond to every letter she sent him. Since then, he has not missed a single day of the writing lab made available to him. His penmanship has improved, his spelling has improved, and he is reading and writing every day. We read books he wants to read to his children so they do not have to correct him while he is reading, we help him fill out job applications, and he continues to write to his mother.

This man's journey is an example of how worthwhile these programs are. It is a positive change in his life and his children's lives, and I am extremely fortunate to have been a part of that.

Personal Identity Provides Personal Service

Shana Holet - Michigan Community Service Commission



Serving at the Michigan Community Service Commission as the first-ever Inclusion AmeriCorps*VISTA has allowed me to help national service programs – AmeriCorps, Learn and Serve, and Senior Corps – engage and support individuals with disabilities in service.

Part of my service includes educating programs about how to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all individuals, as well as assisting programs with providing reasonable accommodations. I also reach out to the disability community to demonstrate how national service programs want to be diversified and ensure people with and without disabilities have an equal opportunity to serve their community.

The chance to support programs throughout the state and help connect all individuals to service opportunities has been a wonderful part of my VISTA experience. I am proud to share my own disability experience with mental illness, Fibromyalgia, and a cognitive disability with others and make my efforts relatable. My personal commitment and identity allow me to draw on prior knowledge of people, groups, and organizations that previously may not have been reached by the national service community.

It's exhilarating to know my own experience can provide an example to others with disabilities and also showcase the amazing opportunities that come along with committing yourself to service.



A Complete Transformation

Abby Ertel - Huron Pines

What do you get when you mix Boy Scouts, 60 volunteers, 3,000 native plants, and a prehistoric fish? All the ingredients for a successful Huron Pines AmeriCorps service project with the goal of restoring 500 feet of riverbank along the Black River in Cheboygan!



The Black River, one of Michigan's valuable coldwater rivers, is home to the state threatened Lake Sturgeon. Ever seen a Lake Sturgeon? Think ancient, nine feet long, and 300 pounds! Now imagine how many people want to see one when they get the chance. Unfortunately, human curiosity is causing this magnificent fish's decline. Along the river bank people had repeatedly traveled to see the fish up close, killing native plants and grasses as they went. Without plants covering the soil on the bank, rainfall was washing large amounts of sand directly into the river covering the gravel bottom necessary for sturgeon eggs to hatch.

Our volunteers were amazing. Boy Scouts placed heavy rock along the river's edge to stop harmful erosion and people crouched on the steep bank, digging holes for plants until all 3,000 were in the ground. Everyone understood by pitching in and working hard for just one day, we were strengthening and protecting the places where we live, work, and play forever.

Today, the riverbank is completely transformed. Ninety percent of the native plants are healthy and growing because of our volunteers' hard work. All 500 feet of riverbank has been reinforced further to protect the plants, and a fence has been installed to direct people to areas that can handle foot traffic. Finally, signs will be erected to inform visitors about the Black River, the Lake Sturgeon, and why a group of volunteers joined together for the sake of both that sunny day in spring.



Meeting the Needs of Refugees

Nathaniel Mullen - Michigan AmeriCorps Partnership

Exposure to the world of art is vital for the people I serve through AmeriCorps. In my second term of service, I am placed with Y Arts Detroit, the arts and humanities branch of the YMCA of Metropolitan Detroit. My service has connected me to a variety of individuals, including local youth and a special group of people at Freedom House.

Y Arts has a partnership with Freedom House, a temporary home for survivors of political persecution from around the world seeking asylum. These refugees receive housing, legal, mental health, and other services as they struggle to adjust to life in America. Through Y Arts, I help to provide service to round out the approach at Freedom House as residents receive vocational and professional development skills training to further their adjustments. I serve these individuals three days a week and strive to make an impact by engaging them in arts-related activities – although they are often the ones who have an impact on me.

Working with people who have faced immense struggles is intense, but at the same time very rewarding. Annually, the Y Arts-Freedom House partnership assists close to 200 refugees while they engage in the asylum application process.

I have a long history with and a strong passion for the arts. I'm so pleased to be able to expose the citizens of Detroit to my passion by providing art programming that helps them build skills, offers them a creative outlet, and engages them in the community.





A special thank you to all the members in this publication for allowing us to share their stories. Thanks also to all National Service Programs, nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations for allowing us to display the many accomplishments their members have achieved.

M I C H I G A N



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SERVICE**

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The Michigan Community Service Commission builds a culture of service by providing vision and resources to strengthen communities through volunteerism.

Upon request, information from this publication will be made available in alternative forms for people with disabilities.

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