

Serving Communities: How Four Organizations are Using National Service to Solve Community Problems



December 2011

Acknowledgements

This report is based largely on interviews with staff of four CNCS grantees along with their service members, partnering organizations, funders and program beneficiaries. Their willingness to share their time and stories is greatly appreciated. In particular, we acknowledge the contributions of the following individuals:

Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps (NDMVA)

Sissy Corr, Executive Director
Adrienne Andrews, Associate Director

Salt Lake County Senior Companion Program

Jean Nielson, Human Services Director at Salt Lake County
Dwight Rasmussen, Manager, Senior Companion/Foster Grandparent/Legacy Corps, Salt Lake County Aging Services
Beverly O'Brien-Bell, Senior Companion Intake Director, Salt Lake County Aging Services
Kimberly Clark, Volunteer Station Liaison, VA Salt Lake City Health Care System

Rebuilding Together

Gary Officer, President and CEO
Jessica Oh, Senior Director, National Service Programs
Susan Hawfield, Executive Director, Rebuilding Together Montgomery County

Earth Force

Lisa Bardwell, President/CEO, Earth Force
Alyssa Hawkins, Vice President of Programs
Vince Meldrum, Senior Fellow

The report was prepared by Abt Associates in collaboration with staff from the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Abt staff who conducted interviews and contributed to the report include: JoAnn Jastrzaab, Glen Schneider, Stephen Whitlow, Michael DiDomenico, Sophia Heller, Jill Hamadyk and Mary Joel Holin. CNCS staff managing and contributing to the project include: Heather Peeler, Susannah Washburn, LaMonica Shelton, Carla Fletcher, Nicole Gallant, Elson Nash, John Gomperts, Erwin Tan and Angela Roberts.

Prepared for
Corporation for National and Community Service
Office of Strategy and Special Initiatives
1201 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20525

Submitted by Abt Associates Inc.



Upon request, this material will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities.

Serving Communities

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
1. Improving Educational Opportunities in Underserved Communities: The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur’s Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps	7
2. Helping Seniors Live at Home: The Salt Lake County Senior Companion Program	15
3. Preserving Affordable, Energy-Efficient Homeownership: Rebuilding Together.....	21
4. Promoting Environmental and Civic Engagement: Earth Force	28

Introduction

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) serves thousands of grantees, Senior Corps members and AmeriCorps members and countless subgrantees, placement sites, and partner organizations. This network of people and organizations shares a common passion: improving community and country through hard work, innovation and collaboration. While unified in purpose, the CNCS network is as diverse and dynamic as the millions of Americans who populate it.

Here, we shine a light on the successes of four CNCS grantees. With this, we strive to give our partners in the national service network insight into the best practices of their peers. The purpose is to reflect on our work, see commonalities and differences, and consider how we can build on our successes and learn from our failures to move forward.

The four organizations included in this report represent a range of issue areas, program designs, funding streams and geography. Examining them more closely will provide the reader validation for his or her own work and insight into how peer organizations manage the opportunities and challenges of operating a national service program.

Through our partner, Abt Associates, we interviewed the four CNCS grantees described here at their sites between April and June 2011. In each case, interviews were conducted with some combination of the following: staff of the CNCS grantee, service members, partnering organizations, funders and program beneficiaries. When available, we also used program evaluations and reports generated from the grantees themselves or third parties for our assessment and description in this document.

The grantees we highlight include:

The Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps (NDMVA)

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur founded the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers in 1992. Since then they have been placing volunteers at schools and community organizations in low-income neighborhoods to promote literacy and education. As an AmeriCorps grantee, NDMVA has provided service to well over 340,000 children and adults in communities across the United States over the past 16 years. During the 2009-2010 program year, NDMVA members provided teaching assistance, small group instruction, and tutoring to more than 6,800 children. Additionally, 1,400 low-income adults received training in basic education, GED preparation, English as a Second Language, computers, and other job skills.

Salt Lake County Aging Services (SLCAS)

Salt Lake County Aging Services is an agency within Salt Lake County's Department of Human Services and is designated as the Area Agency on Aging. SLCAS staff provide a full continuum of care for seniors, including Meals On Wheels, senior transportation, a senior employment program, and a caregiver support program. CNCS began supporting the SLCAS Senior Companion Program in 1985. In 2010, SLCAS staff engaged 92 senior companions to make life better for 253 county residents through eight different non-profit and government organizations. These local partners include the Veteran's Administration medical center, the Salt Lake Housing Authority, and Jewish Family Services. SLCAS operates one of 224 Senior Companion programs supported by CNCS nationwide to ensure seniors can remain in their homes by providing a combination of companionship, advocacy, and respite.

Rebuilding Together

Rebuilding Together is a national non-profit organization preserving affordable homeownership and revitalizing communities. Through a network of more than 200 affiliates, Rebuilding Together provides free renovations and critical repairs to the homes of low-income Americans across the country. Rebuilding Together's AmeriCorps program, called CapacityCorps, involves more than 60 full-time AmeriCorps members serving in 20 states. CapacityCorps members enable Rebuilding Together affiliates to serve many more low-income homeowners through volunteer recruitment, client outreach, direct repairs for low-income homeowners, new project implementation, community partnership development, and program expansion.

Earth Force

Earth Force is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to engage young people as active citizens who improve their environment and communities, now and in the future. Earth Force accomplishes this goal by creating a local service-learning environment in targeted communities through which youth receive science education (in and out of the classroom), identify local environmental problems and work with their respective communities to address them. To this end, Earth Force staff work with a variety of partners in communities across the country—school districts, non-profit environmental organizations, local government agencies, corporations, and universities—to increase opportunities for civic learning and environmental education among young people. CNCS has supported Earth Force programs over the years. Most recently CNCS provided funding for Earth Force's Watershed STEM Initiative (WSI) through the Learn and Serve America Program.¹

Management Practices that Work

The four organizations we highlight in this report are quite different in terms of their mission, focus area, CNCS funding, and geographic coverage. Despite the differences, they have developed a number of common management practices:

- Developing a Centralized Management Structure
- Building Strong Partnerships and Partners
- Investing in Service Participants
- Using Evaluation and Monitoring Data to Measure and Improve Performance

1. Developing a Centralized Management Structure

Representatives from three of the four organizations interviewed for this report (NDMVA, SLCAS, and Rebuilding Together) describe their evolution to a centralized model for managing their national service members. Each came to the conclusion that a central office was best suited to assume responsibility for training and administrative oversight of service members. This approach frees field staff and local affiliates to help the service members focus on the direct provision of program

¹ The federal Learn and Serve America program did not receive funding in 2011, but the CNCS grant for Earth Force continues through 2012.

services. Responsibility for member recruitment varies; it is a headquarters function for SLCAS and Rebuilding Together, while at NDMVA it is the responsibility of local affiliates.

This management approach for national service is supported by research conducted by Rehnborg, Fallon, and Hinerfeld in 2002 on the impact of volunteer programs in Texas state agencies.² The research identified four models of volunteer organizations: centralized, decentralized, community-based, and hybrid models. In the centralized model, dedicated staff at central and regional offices support and manage volunteers. In the decentralized model, volunteering is managed on a project- or program-specific basis while the community-based model relies on independent non-profits at the local level to assist the state in service projects. The hybrid model represents some combination of these first three models. The authors conclude that the centralized model is the most effective at incorporating a large number of volunteers into service for the state. The profiles of Rebuilding Together and NDMVA describe their evolution to a centralized management model.

2. Building Strong Partnerships and Partners

Three of the four organizations profiled here (and many other CNCS grantees) place CNCS-sponsored service members with local non-profits and/or public agency partners to provide service in communities. SLCAS places senior companions with eight local senior service providers; Rebuilding Together works through a network of 200 local volunteer organizations across the country; and NDMVA places AmeriCorps members mainly in school and other community settings. The fourth organization, Earth Force, also works directly with a wide range of partners - including schools, local environmental organizations, and corporations. Each of the organizations profiled here identified the roles and relationships established between the organization and the local partners as critical to program outcomes and service member effectiveness.

Each of the four organizations has adopted systems that enable them to identify and strategically select partners that share their vision and have demonstrated a vested interest in the program's success. For example, when Earth Force first decided to establish field offices that would focus on program delivery, it embarked on an extensive national outreach effort to identify communities where there were potential partners who shared the Earth Force mission and vision.

Finding the right partners is just the first step, however. These organizations all describe ways that they nurture and sustain the partnerships and sometimes increase the capacity of the partner organizations. For example, since 2007, Rebuilding Together has operated a training arm that provides affiliate partners that host AmeriCorps members with training in non-profit management practices. The goal is to improve the quality and sustainability of their partners. These trainings include regional conferences and regularly scheduled webinars and conference calls.

This document will detail how the four service organizations identify strong partners, work to support and build the capacity of their partners, and then structure their relationships with these local partners so that service participants can effectively contribute to their partner's programs.

² Rehnborg, S.J., Fallon, C.K., and Hinerfeld, B. *Investing in volunteerism: An analysis of service initiatives in selected state agencies*; Austin, Texas: University Texas at Austin, LBJ School of Public Affairs, under contract to the Texas Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service; 2002.

3. *Investing in Service Participants*

The length of engagement and type of participant in each of these programs varies. Earth Force engages teachers and local community mentors to stay with the program over the long term as well as students whose involvement is often of a shorter duration. SLCAS engages non-employed men and women over 65 years old—generally retired and relatively low-income—as “Senior Companions” with the goal of retaining their participation for many years. Notre Dame Mission Volunteer Program AmeriCorps engages full-time members for a year or more, as does Rebuilding Together. No matter what the age, whether they engage as part of their professional life or full time for a few years, they are critical to the organization’s success. The organizations profiled here recognize this and invest in each service participant in a way that benefits the organization and the participant.

Like many CNCS grantees, all four service organizations devote significant time and attention to recruiting, selecting and training their service participants. For example, SLCAC employs a rigorous screening process to identify Senior Companions, provides extensive up-front training, and then continues to enhance the Companion’s ability to perform their service through on-going training and support. According to those involved, this intensive up-front investment in recruitment, selection and training—in conjunction with a significant investment in year round training—gives service members the skills they need to effectively perform, and, in turn, helps to retain service members.

NDMVA brings all of its 375 members and their staff together in a central location for a mid-year conference that includes training, inspirational speakers, team building and reflection. During their service year, teams at the individual sites meet weekly for member development activities. Investing in service participants to maximize impact is a practice that is supported by the research on volunteering. While service participants are not technically “volunteers,” CNCS believes that, in some cases, research on volunteer management is applicable to service participants. For instance, in an analysis of volunteer management among charities, researchers Hager and Brudney find that among the most effective volunteer management strategies are training, professional development, recognition, and the screening of volunteers in order to match them with appropriate tasks.³

A different report, based on observation of hundreds of organizations and programs that use volunteers, found three components to be critical for successful volunteer management. First, effective screening methods should be adopted to find those volunteers with the time, skills, and attitude required for a successful volunteering experience. Second, orientation and training should be used to build skills of volunteers and relay expectations to them. Finally, ongoing management of volunteers should focus on utilizing a volunteer’s time in an effective way.⁴

4. *Using Evaluation and Monitoring Data to Measure and Improve Performance*

In recent years, public and private sector funders alike have focused increasingly on understanding the outcomes of their investments in social service initiatives with the goal of applying the learning to improve program service delivery. CNCS’ 2011-2015 Strategic Plan reinforces the importance of performance measurement and documenting results. Three of the four organizations highlighted here

³Hager and Brudney; *Volunteer Management: Practices and Retention of Volunteers*; Urban Institute; 2004.

⁴Grossman and Furano, *Making the Most of Volunteers*; Public/Private Ventures Briefs; July, 2002.

use data from monitoring and formal evaluations to periodically assess how to improve operations and to guide decisions about future programming. For example, Rebuilding Together has established an internal evaluation and assessment process based on regular service member feedback. NDMVA has used an independent outside evaluator to assess its program activities and increasingly looks to place service members with programs that have demonstrated evidence of effectiveness.. Earth Force has established two central evaluation mechanisms: it reviews and evaluates its system-wide performance through annual third-party evaluations; and it requires that each of its partners report on specific program outcomes on a quarterly basis. All three examples are discussed in the profiles that follow.

CNCS is intensely interested in using evaluation and performance measurement to guide program management and policy making. In program year 2012, CNCS will implement common, agency-wide measures so that CNCS will be able to enhance its ability to assess programs and see the combined impact of national service.

1. Improving Educational Opportunities in Underserved Communities: The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps

The U.S. educational system is failing too many students, creating a situation in which young people's talents and aptitudes are not fulfilled and, as a result, our country's potential is not realized. Many students enter the early grades ill-prepared, unable to catch up and perform at grade level. They leave school early or graduate without adequate abilities. Many children—especially those in high poverty and minority communities—are denied the opportunity to succeed in school.

Recent studies highlight the relationship between poverty and academic achievement. For example, one study found that 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to just six percent of those who have never lived in poverty.⁵ A Department of Education study demonstrated that students attending schools in high poverty areas persistently score lower in math and reading achievement and are less likely to attend four-year colleges, compared to their peers in classrooms with lower poverty rates.⁶ The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Double Jeopardy Report* found that the effects of poor education begin very early and have long term implications: one in six children who do not read proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time; this percentage increases for those from economically disadvantaged households.



CNCS believes that service can put children on a path to success. Improving educational opportunities is a priority of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as emphasized in its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.⁷ CNCS focuses resources on improving the lives and learning opportunities for students, particularly in communities with underperforming schools. To this end, CNCS supports Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps (NDMVA), whose mission closely aligns with that of CNCS. NDMVA describes its mission as follows:

⁵ Hernandez, Donald J.; *Double Jeopardy How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*; April, 2011.

<http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/DoubleJeopardyHowThirdGradeReadingSkillsandPoverty/DoubleJeopardyReport040511FINAL.pdf>

⁶ *Condition of Education 2010*; National Center for Education Statistics; 2010.

<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/press/index.asp>

⁷ See http://www.nationalservice.gov/about/focus_areas/index.asp

NDMVA believes that education is the fundamental tool in the struggle of the poor toward realizing their full human potential, self-esteem, and self-determination. NDMVA seeks to build community among its members, as well as the people with whom NDMVA works, by reaching out across culture and class. We are committed to helping people help themselves. NDMVA's goal is to promote and encourage education, community empowerment, leadership development, and multicultural harmony.

This profile first describes the NDMVA program and then details the management structure and practices that have enabled it to integrate AmeriCorps service members into its faith- and community-based network and sustain and expand its capacity to address the educational and other needs of low-income children and adults.

Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps

NDMVA was established in 1990 as a nonprofit volunteer organization by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, a Catholic religious order founded in 1804. The Order, which includes approximately 900 sisters across the U.S. and a total of 1,500 worldwide, has a historical mission of providing educational services to the poor. NDMVA was founded to extend the work of the Sisters' efforts for the poor through full-time secular volunteers and, in part, to mitigate the impact of the declining number of women making lifetime commitments to service in its order.

NDMVA was initially limited in scale by financial constraints and able to support only a handful of volunteers to work in inner city schools. Concerned that the fledgling program would flounder without sufficient funding and infrastructure, the new executive director, Sister Katherine Corr, set out to expand the program in 1993. Sister Corr brought with her significant experience with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and other anti-poverty programs. She quickly recognized the challenge of growing the program with the limited resources available. Existing funding could only support ten volunteers at the most and the Sisters had requested 80.

Soon after becoming Executive Director, Sister Corr happened upon a presentation by an AmeriCorps representative at a service conference and immediately recognized the match in missions between CNCS and NDMVA. As she learned about the relatively new AmeriCorps program, she realized that it was a viable way to support a greater number of volunteers. With encouragement from CNCS, NDMVA applied for and received its first AmeriCorps grant in 1995. The program began with 46 service members placed in four communities: Baltimore, Boston, Cincinnati, and Apopka (Florida). Building on the initial success of these four sites, NDMVA has continued to systematically extend the range and depth of its AmeriCorps program.

NDMVA Today

During the recent 2010-2011 program year, NDMVA enrolled 375 full-time AmeriCorps service members in 23 low-income communities. In these communities a NDMVA site director, typically a Sister or NDMVA alumni, oversees the members' service, coordinates with local partnering sites where the members serve, and is the primary liaison between the national office and the members. Partnering sites in NDMVA's 23 communities include: public schools, charter schools, private religious schools and other community agencies in economically disadvantaged communities. AmeriCorps members provide services to students by serving as teachers' assistants, providing one-on-one or small group instruction and supporting after-school programs, helping to coordinate education and youth development activities. Consistent with their recognition of the importance of

providing holistic services, NDMVA also serves the students' parents and family members by helping to teach GED and adult literacy classes, and assisting in food pantries and homeless shelters.

Management Practices Adopted to Extend Reach and Maximize Service Outcomes

Over the past 16 years, the NDMVA leadership has put in place a number of organizational practices that enable it to effectively deploy and manage its growing cadre of AmeriCorps members and achieve its program goals. This profile highlights four of these practices, which are also shared by a number of AmeriCorps programs.

The first is the combination of a strong centralized management structure that supports a grassroots network of faith based affiliates through the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The second practice is using the network of indigenous affiliates as a foundation for connecting *with* their own local network of schools and other community-based partners to implement the NDMVA program and grow the mission of NDMVA. The third strategy focuses on the development of NDMVA members through their service experience and beyond. Finally, the program is increasingly relying on performance measurement and evaluation to document program outcomes and focus on evidence-based programming.

Strong Centralized Management Core

NDMVA has an organizational framework that supports the organization as a whole, centralizes key decisions and administrative tasks and still allows for flexible management at the local level. As in many multi-site service programs, NDMVA's centralized management acts as an umbrella for the service model, laying the road map for the organization's mission. NDMVA is overseen by a NDMVA Corporation and a Board of Directors. As Executive Director, Sister Corr manages the program and oversees external relations. An additional seven full-time administrative staff supports the program from its Baltimore headquarters. Program management also includes 17 full-time NDMVA site directors, based in their local affiliates. NDMVA's Baltimore headquarters is primarily responsible for administrative and financial activities while the site directors are responsible for the management of their local AmeriCorps members and the partnering sites where their members serve.

Headquarters staff is involved in, among other tasks: oversight of the organization's finances, coordination of benefits for members (e.g. health insurance, Eli Segal Education Award); approval of partnering site agreements, management of partnering site fees; and grant and reporting to CNCS.⁸ In addition, one core staff member coordinates placement of members in the "Nativity Miguel Network School" program.

Headquarters staff also organizes content and logistics for the mid-year service member conference and make at least annual visits to each NDMVA site. They provide a four-day orientation for new site directors at headquarters and disseminate "promising practices" guides and other technical assistance materials to their sites. These guides are intended to promote consistent practices for member development and management as well as sharing innovative strategies for member development.

⁸ A consultant works with NDMVA on grant-writing.

The centralization of NDMVA's financial, human resource and development functions in its Baltimore headquarters promotes consistency and clarity about staff roles and responsibilities. It allows site directors to focus on their members and their service. As one staff member explained, this way "not everyone is worrying about everything."

Development of Strong Local Partnerships

By working through the local affiliates of the Sisters, NDMVA enhances its ability to understand and respond to distinct needs in individual communities, attract staff and service members to carry out that mission, and create a network of local partners. Networks comprised of other Catholic institutions, the Sisters' allies among local educational providers and other non-profit service organizations are critical to helping NDMVA grow at the community level. According to Sister Corr, the local networks make NDMVA "authentically grassroots." She continues, "We are helping people understand their assets, their potential."

NDMVA gains three important sources of support through its affiliate's local networks. First, it has access to schools and other community-based organizations that may, as partnering sites, host AmeriCorps members. Second, through their affiliates, NDMVA has access to individuals who may serve as site directors. Third, the network provides site directors with logical starting points for the recruitment of potential AmeriCorps members, as many local partners are already involved with volunteers who could transition to AmeriCorps. The partnering sites also contribute financially to the program through a required partner match, in-kind contributions, and small grants from other faith- and community-based networks. NDMVA's requirement for the local match helps improve the quality of the member experience because it is the source of funds for member development. NDMVA also recognizes the financial buy-in is an indication of commitment and helps to ensure the partner will support the member during their service year.

NDMVA carefully selects local *partnering sites* in which to place service members whose work closely aligns with its own mission. Potential partnering sites must either interview with the local affiliate or complete a partnership inquiry form that details their characteristics, mission and expectations for NDMVA service member support. A NDMVA staff person noted that "we really stress . . . recruiting sites and understanding what their mission is and if it's aligned with ours— understanding what the members service role is going to be and if it's going to be satisfying for that member and if it's going to fulfill our mission."

Although the Sisters have pre-existing relationships with their partners, the partners operate independently from NDMVA, with their own staff, mission, and organizational structure. Partners hosting NDMVA members are contractually linked to NDMVA through partnering site agreements that details the partners' duties, responsibilities, reporting requirements, timelines, and fees. Partners are required to identify a supervisor who is responsible for day-to-day management and support for on-site members.

Balanced with a strong centralized administrative core, NDMVA's affiliates, with their networks of indigenous partners, allow the program to efficiently and effectively address the needs of their local communities.

Investing in Service Member Development

NDMVA's service members are, on the whole, a group of young adults who are passionate about using education to improve the lives of the individuals they serve. Members are typically between the ages of 20 and 30, roughly 75 percent are female; most have an undergraduate degree. Although many members enter the program soon after college graduation, NDMVA has made a deliberate effort to recruit local leaders who have not had the opportunity to earn a post-secondary degree. NDMVA notes that these local leaders know and understand the needs of their community and are likely to remain in that community after their participation in the program ends. NDMVA can be selective in making decisions about which applicants to enroll—the program receives an average of nine applicants for each available slot.

An Apopka Florida member comments on NDMVA's role:

They are really supportive. It's a community and you feel like you belong to something.

NDMVA provides extensive member support that enhances the service experience. Each site offers ongoing trainings, workshops, guest speakers, and conferences to its members. Site directors provide assistance in any way necessary to facilitate the members' service experience, from finding housing, planning social events or simply lending an ear.



Members begin their service year with a multi-day orientation provided by the site director that is intended to prepare incoming members for their service. Orientations involve a variety of activities, including an introduction to NDMVA and its mission; completion of requisite paperwork; team-building exercises; guest speakers (often NDMVA alumni); professional development training; tours of partner sites and the community; and classroom management training. In addition to the NDMV orientation, members typically receive additional orientation and on-going training

from their sponsoring site. For example, about 100 members have the opportunity to get up to two years of direct supervision and support from a master teacher.

NDMVA inculcates its service mission through bi-weekly meetings in which all members in a site come together with their site director to discuss their service experience, participate in training sessions, attend workshops and listen to guest speakers. A Boulder, CO member described the trainings and their importance to her, noting that “We have a lot of trainings, and they are awesome, incredible trainings and we feel really, really prepared to do what we need to do with the youth we serve. . . . They provide us with monetary resources and tools to be able to have very specific trainings that are geared toward the population we serve in Boulder, which is very helpful so we don't feel like we are just jumping right in.”

Every year, NDMVA invites all of its members to attend a national conference at the mid-year mark of their service. The multi-day conference, which includes headquarter staff and site directors offers

members the opportunity to engage with other members who are conducting similar services across the country, share their experiences, and exchange ideas and strategies for improving their service. The conference includes national service leaders, inspirational speakers, workshops, trainings and nightly social events. An extremely popular activity at the conference is “storytelling”—artistic presentations developed by the members from each site to convey the spirit and service of their particular community.

Results of NDMVA’s investment in their members are further confirmed by members’ satisfaction with their service experience. In the 2009-10 service year, NDMVA had a 93 percent completion rate by its 375 members. For that same period, members reported an average satisfaction rate with the program of 4.4 on a 5 point scale; similar high satisfaction rates were reported at the mid-year conference. Recent interviews with members confirmed satisfaction with the program.⁹ Service members reported that they feel supported by NDMVA, that they have the tools and resources necessary to successfully conduct their service, and that they feel recognized and rewarded by NDMVA for their service. They appreciate their relationships with their site director, and value the opportunities to serve with and learn from their peers. A Watsonville, California member summed up her experience this way:

“I am the happiest I have ever been. I feel like I am successfully making a difference. I see changes in the students. I started a school store where they can trade their behavioral points for college things. I am seeing the sincere difference. . . It is all around awesome, I know it sounds corny, but I am super happy and love it. I don’t think it could be better.”

Aligning with Proven Service Strategies

Since its inception, NDMVA has focused on education. That focus was grounded in the Sisters’ long-time involvement in schools and literacy programs. The program acknowledges that, prior to its involvement in AmeriCorps, it was not targeted in how it selected its educational sites and was even less clear in specifying the outcomes it expected to achieve from its educational services. As noted earlier, the program has historically allowed considerable local flexibility, recognizing that each community had unique sets of needs and assets. Each site came to the program with a pre-existing set of partner organizations that varied across sites.

However, in the past ten years as it involved in partnership with AmeriCorps, NDMVA has become more thoughtful and intentional in assessing and prioritizing service opportunities for its members, or as Sister Corr explains “getting the data to lift up those [educational] accomplishments.” Building on its history of assessment and evaluation, NDMVA most recently funded an independent evaluation of its program by Loyola University Maryland to obtain preliminary evidence of its effectiveness.¹⁰ The evaluation examined both NDMVA’s in-school Programs and after-school Programs at nine partnering sites across the country. The evaluation was designed to measure the student’s attitudes regarding their satisfaction with being in school and the extent to which they perceive themselves as performing well in school. The evaluation concluded that there is “. . . strong evidence that the work

⁹ February 19-21, 2011.

¹⁰ This study relies on a pre-post design. The evaluator had originally planned to use a comparison group design but was unable to implement it due to confidentiality issues.

of the Notre Dame AmeriCorps members not only provides an important and valuable service to the schools and after school programs that they serve but also contributes significantly to raising students' academic achievement and preparation for higher education."¹¹

NDMVA's experience with evaluation has led it to think more strategically about measurement and outcomes. More significantly, NDMV is currently engaged with a specific educational intervention model—Nativity Miguel Network Schools¹² These schools are private, parochial schools, associated with the Jesuit Order, that serve low-income, inner city schools using a rigorous curriculum, extended-day schedules, and holistic services intended to promote high student engagement, parental involvement and academic achievement. Nativity Schools emphasize one-on-one and small-group instruction—making it an ideal intervention for NDMVA's members to help implement. NDMVA's decision to more actively pursue this targeted, well-articulated and evaluated model is deliberate. As Sister Corr explained, "You have to pay attention to something that holds up and works." NDMVA's interest in this model is grounded in its potential for generating measurable outcomes.

In addition to Nativity Miguel Network Schools, NDMVA is exploring other charter school models, in particular, models that include one-on-one and small group involvement, extended school hours and parental involvement because the program believes those components are essential for promoting educational success. For example, one of the models that NDMVA is currently exploring is the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), an intensive college preparation program with a track record of working with students in low income communities. According to NDMVA's Associate Director, "the point is to see if we can be more intentional about partnerships [and] make sure the foundation is solid before expanding."

The strategy of moving toward a more consistent and articulated set of services will be beneficial in helping NDMVA more consistently track its performance and outcomes.

NDMVA's Results

NDMVA's management and operational practices have been fundamental to the successful growth of the program and the provision of educational services to struggling students and adults. Adopting the Nativity Miguel Network School model NDMVA has focused its efforts on one-on-one and small group instruction. Through this approach, NDMVA members are able to foster meaningful relationships with those they serve and assist them in reaching their potential.

The program's results are as follows:

Over its 16 year experience running an AmeriCorps program, NDMVA has provided service to well over 340,000 children and adults in communities across the U.S. During the 2009-2010 program year, NDMVA AmeriCorps members provided teaching assistance, small group instruction, and tutoring to more than 6,800 children—including 300 children of incarcerated parents. Additionally,

¹¹ L. Mickey Fenzel, PhD and Rebecca J. Dean; Loyola University Maryland; *Report of the Evaluation of the Notre Dame AmeriCorps Program 2008—2009*; January 23, 2010

¹² Recent research provides preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of this model in some settings. See: L. Mickey Fenzel; *Improving Middle Schools: Lessons from the Nativity Schools*; SUNY; 2009.

1,400 low-income adults received training in basic education, GED preparation, ESL, computers, and other job skills. The 375 service members of the 2010-2011 service year contributed over 500,000 hours of service – investing the vast majority of their time on boosting the academic opportunities and improving educational outcomes of low income disadvantaged children and adults around the country.

During the 2010-2011 program year, NDMVA collected information to measure the effect of their program on student attendance.¹³ During the current program year, NDMVA is collecting information to assess the effect of their program on academic achievement of students using pre- and post-program measures. They are also tracking the progress of their adult service participants in advancing on their personal education plans.

¹³ The data will be available in late 2011.

2. Helping Seniors Live at Home: The Salt Lake County Senior Companion Program

In 2009, 39.6 million Americans were 65 years of age or older, an increase of 4.3 million since 1999. That number is expected to increase by 36 percent—to 55 million—by the year 2020. Salt Lake County, Utah, with a population of over one million in 2010, mirrors these national trends. The number of persons 60 years and older increased by 51 percent from 1995 to 2010—from 91,544 to 138,274. Estimates indicate that as many as 19,636 people age 60+ in Salt Lake County are living in their homes with a functional impairment that restricts their ability to maintain their own home. About 20 percent of this group has an unmet need for in-home services. Helping seniors and other persons with disabilities to continue to live independently in their homes is a county priority.



Salt Lake County Aging Services (SLCAS) operates one of 224 Senior Companion programs funded by CNCS nationwide. While program models may vary, they generally provide a combination of companionship, advocacy, and respite services that can contribute to an extended time at home by:

- Providing an important level of socialization and contact with individuals other than caregivers;
- Reducing isolation;
- Maintaining a familiar routine;
- Monitoring the client's general well-being; and
- Relieving overburdened primary caregivers.

SLCAS, an agency within the county's Department of Human Services, is designated as the Area Agency on Aging. Compared to many other Senior Companion grantees, SLCAS oversees a full continuum of care for seniors, including Meals On Wheels, senior transportation, a senior employment program, and a caregiver support program. In selecting SLCAS to implement a Senior Companion program, CNCS has funded an agency that is uniquely positioned to coordinate CNCS grant funds with other public and private resources that are similarly targeted to supporting the senior community in Salt Lake County.

This profile describes how SLCAS, with the support of CNCS, deploys and manages senior service members to help the County of Salt Lake address the needs of their senior residents and highlights several management practices that enable it to use service to make a difference in the community.

Senior Corps is a national network of community service programs administered by CNCS to apply the talents of Americans age 55 and older to address some of our Nation's most critical needs. This network connects over 500,000 older Americans to service opportunities such as mentoring young students through the Foster Grandparents Program, tackling tough issues in the community with the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, and helping older Americans through the Senior Companion Program. In 2009, 14,684 Senior Companions served 60,940 clients and provided respite for 7,860 caregivers in communities nationwide.

Salt Lake City's Senior Companion Program

The Salt Lake County Aging Services (SLCAS) Senior Companion Program started in 1985. Under the long-term leadership of SLCAS's Senior Companion Program Manager, Dwight Rasmussen, the program operates under the same basic service model that has been in place since its inception. SLCAS recruits Senior Companions, provides training, and places them with one of several partner "volunteer stations"

such as the local Veteran's Administration Medical Center, the Salt Lake Housing Authority, and Jewish Family Services who, in turn, match the companion with one or more clients in their local community. Over the past 25 years the program has expanded from two volunteer stations to approximately eight that currently represent an array of non-profits and government agencies.

While SLCAS and the volunteer stations provide the foundation for stability and success, the Senior Companions are the heart of the program. CNCS program rules (based on legislation) require that the companions be 55 years of age or over and have incomes less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line. In addition, they must be physically capable of performing the basic duties of a companion. Beyond that, there are no eligibility criteria or recruitment patterns that allow for the characterization of a "typical" companion—they include a broad cross section of Salt Lake County's older population, including those in immigrant and ethnic communities. Senior Companions in the SLCAS program serve 20-25 hours a week and are provided with a small hourly stipend, plus partial mileage reimbursement. On average, each Senior Companion spends four hours each weekday with one of their three-to-four assigned clients. The volunteer station, together with the companion and the client prepare an individualized care plan that summarizes basic services and activities that will be provided (e.g., transportation, respite care, helping to pay bills). While the care plan offers a basic service framework, companions are given considerable discretion and flexibility (within program regulations) in determining how to spend their time with each of their clients.

(I do) basically, whatever they need . . . doctor's appointments, going shopping; I help out with . . . the bills. I make appointments for them or sometimes I call people they do not know how to handle (for instance) if they have to cancel an appointment.

A Salt Lake County Senior Companion

Management Practices Adopted to Extend Reach and Maximize Service Outcomes

Over the past twenty-five years, Salt Lake County's Senior Companion Program has emerged as a highly effective program delivering invaluable companion services to Salt Lake County seniors and their caregivers. Despite its highly stable service delivery design, the program has gradually broadened its vision of the role that companions play. What started out as a simple visitation/companionship model has gradually evolved into one that seeks to support a broader set of national health priorities such as respite care, extended residency at home, and wellness. Critical to this evolution has been the refinement of management practices that have strengthened both the organizational and service capacity of SLCAS. Two dimensions of this effort are particularly noteworthy. The first involves enhancing its program management capacity and expertise through long term partnerships with volunteer stations. The second involves SLCAS's efforts to invest in their Senior Companion force with the goal of promoting stability and retaining service members.

Extending Program Management and Capacity through Partnerships with Volunteer Stations

Eight volunteer stations currently comprise the decentralized field structure of Salt Lake County's Senior Companion Program. As such, they have the primary responsibility for placing companions in the homes of clients that come under their organizational and geographic purview. Over the years, SLCAS has been highly deliberate in their selection of stations to insure that their companions are fully supported in the field and placed in settings where both they and the clients can thrive. Some of the partnerships, including with the Veteran's Administration (VA), have existed since the early years of the program (the VA partnership started in 1990). These long-standing partners know the needs and interests of their senior communities as well as SLCAS' priorities and expectations for the Senior Companion Program.

The net result is that the volunteer stations have emerged as an established component of the Senior Companion Program management team. In this capacity they bring on-the-ground insight and experience into key program operations such as the screening, placement and training of the companions. While these functions are formally managed by SLCAS's central program staff, over time they have evolved as shared responsibilities. Volunteer station supervisors participate in interviewing prospective companions before they are accepted into the program and placed in a home.

The volunteer stations play an equally critical role in training companions and reinforcing core competencies taught in the initial training provided by SLCAS, as well as providing specialized training related to their specific assignment. For instance, the Senior Companions who are assigned to the Veterans Administration Hospital of Salt Lake City (VA) work through the Home-Based Primary Care (HBPC) model which is designed to allow veterans to maintain independent living at home for as long as possible. The VA provides a separate orientation related to health issues and practices including infection control, emergency preparedness, patients' rights, and confidentiality. This preparedness has actually allowed for their Senior Companions to play a somewhat expanded role. Under HBPC, a veteran patient stays in his or her home, and a team of medical professionals makes home visits to meet the patient's medical needs. However, these house calls only last for an hour or so. The Senior Companions, who make regular four hour visits, are trained to see things that the medical professionals may not notice. If a companion sees a change in the client, he or she will alert the VA medical professionals to get the client the care they need. In many instances, Senior Companions are able to help target resources efficiently by being the eyes and ears for other aging care services.

Brian, a companion to several senior disabled veterans, explained this expanded responsibility, “[Ms. Clark, the VA station supervisor] works as the liaison between us and the health care team. We tell her . . . about any changes [in the client] because we see them all the time . . . and if we notice a change in their behavior, their attitude, their medical condition, we report it to her. She gets with the [certified nursing assistant], who then goes out to the home and checks it out.”

Accompanied by an open communications channel and a common sense of ownership of the program, the benefits of this shared management model are evident in the long tenure of the volunteers and, ultimately, the satisfaction of their elderly clients (as evidenced by annual surveys).

Developing and Maintaining an Effective Core of Service Members

The SLCAS Senior Companion Program recognizes that human resources are their most critical asset. While the basic operational parameters (e.g., eligibility, stipends, hours) of Senior Companions are proscribed by CNCS, SLCAS places additional emphasis on screening, placement, training, and retaining Senior Companions. SLCAS views their Senior Companions not as temporary volunteers who may come and go, but as valuable, long-term assets. Several operational dimensions of this philosophy are summarized below.

Selecting Serious Candidates

As a first step in identifying prospective companions, SLCAS screens out those who do not appear prepared to take on the challenges facing Senior Companions. When a candidate comes in for their first interview, Bev O’Brien-Bell, the Senior Companion Program Assistant, emphasizes the commitment associated with being a Senior Companion. She describes the inherent stress in this volunteer opportunity, including the need for patience and the ability to deal with issues such as dementia, lack of personal hygiene, and gradually-declining health. The SLCAS philosophy is to not “sugar coat” the demands of the Senior Companion position.

To further reinforce their commitment to accepting only serious candidates, SLCAS imposes a brief waiting period to give potential companions time to reflect on the associated responsibility before committing to becoming a Senior Companion. Applicants must make a second visit to the program after their background check is completed to finish the application process. This two stage screening process significantly improves the likelihood that only those who are serious about the program are selected as Senior Companions.

Matching Companions and Clients

Matching companions and clients occurs in two stages. First, SLCAS uses what they learn during the initial screening to match companions with specific volunteer stations. While the location of the companion’s home is a consideration (SLCAS wants to minimize companions’ travel), SLCAS is just as intentional about making matches based on shared experience. For example companions who are veterans are usually assigned to the VA Medical Center’s volunteer station. Ms. Clark of SLCAS commented, “The veterans love that. Because right off they have this bond, this brotherhood, because they are military men.”

The second stage involves volunteer stations matching a companion to one or more clients. Again, shared experience and language again play a role. One volunteer station identified an elderly Arabic speaking client who was in need of a companion. The volunteer station supervisor identified a prospective companion who spoke Arabic and made the match.

SLCAS has learned that this deliberate matching process requires careful balancing of the pool of clients waiting for companion services with available Senior Companions. As of July 2010, 91 elderly and disabled persons were on a waiting list for Senior Companion services. Having a manageable list of available clients to choose from allows volunteer stations to make the best companion/client matches. At the same time, it is critical that volunteer stations are not overwhelmed by excessive demand for companion services. To achieve a waiting list that is a manageable size, SLCAS tempers its outreach efforts so that the list does not grow too large and there is typically not a very long wait for a companion.

Promoting Companion Development

The Corporation for National and Community Service requires that Senior Companion grantees provide 40 hours of basic training for its volunteers. SLCAS has opted to provide the initial 20 hours before the individual can begin serving and the remaining 20 hours in the first April after they are hired. This is supplemented by a commitment to monthly in-service meetings (typically four hours on a Friday afternoon) that integrate both specialized training and recognition.

SLCAS faces a unique training challenge because of the stability of their volunteer base. The challenge is to keep the training agenda engaging and relevant even to the most seasoned companions. To this end, SLCAS has used in-service sessions to invite outside experts to address the group around service-related topics. During a recent training, an expert on memory loss talked about techniques to build rapport with people who have memory problems. In-service meetings are also used to familiarize Senior Companions with other community resources that can help their clients. For example, trainings have included presentations from outside speakers on driver testing and hearing assistance programs available to local seniors.

The main thing is it is great for them, but it is amazing for me . . . What do you say, that it makes retirement worth living? It is kind of a cliché, but it does. . . I had a client say to me. “. . . You know you are the best friend I have had in my whole life.”

A Salt Lake County Senior Companion

To augment the required trainings, SLCAS has compiled a resource book entitled “55+.” This resource contains a detailed list of health related services such as medical clinics, in-home care services, and mental health counselors, as well as more general information about libraries, consumer protection agencies, and financial counseling centers. This resource further assists Senior Companions to serve as advocates for their clients. Using 55+, one Senior Companion helped a client contact her bank to modify her house payments, access survivor’s benefits through the Veteran’s Administration, and get assistance from the local food bank.

Retaining Service Members: Avoiding Companion Burnout

SLCAS works proactively and successfully to prevent burnout among its Senior Companions. In addition to being flexible with scheduling, the program staff emphasizes the importance of taking time away from their volunteer experience to relax. Even though CNCS regulations allow companions to serve up to 40 hours per week, SLCAS tries to enforce a 20-25 hour limit in an effort to reduce job related stress.

SLCAS staff has also learned over the years that periodic recognition goes a long way towards maintaining a positive attitude and minimizing burnout. Typically, they use a small allocation of resources leveraged through the county to hold periodic recognition events. These include a

recognition luncheon in the fall, a summer picnic, companion birthday salutes, and celebrations of service anniversary dates.

Despite concerted efforts to formally train, offer token compensation, and retain the companions, SLCAS has been careful to ensure that their approach does not in any way dampen the spirit of volunteerism. They afford each companion the flexibility to cultivate and maintain their client relationships in the way that best accommodates their personality, preferences, and interests. Companions in Salt Lake County fully recognize the delicate and challenging balance that the program is facing in generating an extended commitment from its Senior Companions. Companions often joke about the meager stipend (\$2.65/ hour) and mileage reimbursement (\$.34/mile) they receive, but they acknowledge financial benefits are not the primary motivation behind their service. While they expressed their appreciation for the nominal stipend and the small ‘treats’ it affords them—as noted earlier, all are living on relatively low-incomes—one companion noted that increasing the amount would be ill advised: “If they raised the money, you would probably get people doing it for the money. They almost want to make it unattractive so people are here that have the heart.” SLCAS through its support for, and recognition of its volunteer workforce, has set a tone that successfully reinforces the spirit of volunteerism that is the signature element of all Senior Corps programs.

The Results

Annual surveys of Salt Lake County Senior Companion clients and caregivers suggest that the program is meeting its objectives. According to the 2010 survey:

- 92 Senior Companion volunteers provided 52,230 hours of service to 253 individuals assisting them to remain independent and living in their homes
- 96 percent of Senior Companion Program clients reported a decrease in loneliness since receiving a companion
- 98 percent of the caretakers reported that the respite service provided to them by the Senior Companions was a major factor in their ability to keep their loved one at home.

In broadly framing these results, Dwight Rasmussen, the Program Manager, describes the Salt Lake County Senior Companion Program as the hub of a wheel of services. This professionally managed network of well-trained, committed, Senior Companions provides the county with over 90 committed men and women who connect the county’s homebound elderly and its diverse array of aging services.

Lucy Belkind has been visiting Erma since 2001. Erma was alone and needed help with grocery shopping. Over the years Lucy has become Erma’s “lifeline.” Erma has said that could not keep going without Lucy. Lucy spends hours with Erma at the grocery store. Erma is very picky, but Lucy is patient and gives Erma all the time she needs. Lucy’s support has definitely helped Erma to stay at home.

Narrative Submitted from the Community Nursing Services Volunteer Station Supervisor (Lucy is a SLCAS Senior Companion)¹⁴

¹⁴ Senior Companion Program Progress Report to CNCS; 01/01/2010 to 06/30/2010.

3. Preserving Affordable, Energy-Efficient Homeownership: Rebuilding Together

Rebuilding Together is a national nonprofit that aims to preserve affordable housing for low-income American homeowners by providing free home rehabilitation and critical home repair services. The need for such assistance is great. Low-income Americans are housed in units that are substandard, unsafe, and financially burdensome. Residents of substandard homes face risks to their health and safety because of insufficient heat, uneven floors, unsafe kitchens and bathrooms, and leaky plumbing and roofs.

The need for home maintenance and rehabilitation assistance is particularly acute for low-income seniors and veterans. Nearly 5 million senior households in the United States, representing 20 percent of all senior households, live on less than \$15,000 per year. While more than 60 percent of senior households living below the poverty threshold own their home, many live in older homes. In addition, more than 600,000 seniors were delinquent on their mortgage or in foreclosure in 2009. Even when senior homeowners have paid off their mortgages, they may still face burdensome housing costs associated with property taxes, insurance premiums, and utility fees. In fact, over 40 percent of low-income senior homeowners pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing and these related costs.

Veterans, particularly those who are seniors and/or disabled, are also vulnerable. Of the 23 million U.S. veterans, over one-third are seniors, and about 5.5 million veterans have disabilities. The income of half of the country's veterans is less than \$36,000 per year. In 2010, more than 20,000 veterans and active-duty troops lost their homes to foreclosure.

This profile describes how Rebuilding Together, with support from CNCS, deploys and manages AmeriCorps service members to communities across the country to meet the housing needs of low-income elderly and disabled persons, by providing home repair services that allow them to remain in their homes for as long as possible. The profile highlights several management practices that enable the organization to operate successfully and meet its mission by partnering with AmeriCorps, including: a centralized AmeriCorps program management structure, selection and support of affiliate partners, investment in service members, and the use of ongoing evaluation and monitoring techniques to increase program efficiencies and guide long-term decision making.



Rebuilding Together: Its Roots, its Mission and its Partnership with CNCS

Since its inception, Rebuilding Together (formerly Christmas in April) has been driven by the energy of its volunteers. In 1973, Bobby Trimble and a small group of friends from Midland, Texas, noticed that some of their elderly neighbors were struggling to keep up with basic home repairs. With an eye to the community tradition of helping neighbors raise a barn, Trimble's group began recruiting volunteers to commit once a year to a day of service during which they painted and repaired homes in need. Trevor Armbrister, a senior editor from Readers Digest, wrote a story about Rebuilding Together in 1982 and was so inspired by what he learned that, in 1983, he established a Rebuilding Together affiliate in Washington, DC. Since that time, the organization has been growing steadily. They currently have nearly 200 independent affiliates in 41 states.

Filling a National Program Gap and Tailoring Services to Changing Needs

From its origins in Midland, Texas in 1973, Rebuilding Together has maintained a sharp and consistent focus on its core mission of preserving affordable homeownership for low-income Americans. Rebuilding Together is unique in that it fills a gap in the spectrum of home repair and rehabilitation services available to low-income homeowners by providing free services based on a holistic assessment of the homeowner's needs.

Compared with other programs that focus on a single aspect of home repair such as weatherization and must account for constraining eligibility requirements, Rebuilding Together adopts a comprehensive approach to home repair that meets the low-income homeowner's full range of needs. To assess those needs, Rebuilding Together first conducts a complete physical inspection of the home and interviews the homeowner to identify any personal health or safety issues that could be addressed through the rehabilitation process. Rebuilding Together then develops a rehabilitation plan that is comprehensive and tailored to the homeowner's needs. This ensures that a home is simultaneously safe, comfortable, and energy-efficient as well as financially sustainable for the homeowner. In addition, Rebuilding Together sequences the work to minimize disruption to the homeowner.

It is worth noting that, in its early years, Rebuilding Together did not take a holistic approach to rehabilitation. At the outset, volunteers focused on "paint and scrape" tasks or relatively uncomplicated work that resulted in quick fixes. Over the years, by cultivating relationships with skilled trade groups and developing a cadre of "expert" skilled volunteers, Rebuilding Together has adopted a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation. Like most effective service organizations, Rebuilding Together is continually assessing the range of services it offers so that it can best meet client needs while maintaining a laser focus on its core mission. As an example, with rising energy costs, the organization has paid increasing attention to energy-related improvements in recent years.

Another way that Rebuilding Together fills a gap is that it provides comprehensive services to homeowners who may not be income-eligible for other home repair services. For example, because eligibility criteria for local weatherization programs can be quite narrow, some needy, low-income seniors are precluded from accessing these services. However, Rebuilding Together's income eligibility requirements are flexible enough to allow some of these low-income seniors to qualify for home renovations.

Many homeowner rehabilitation programs require the homeowner to take out a low-interest loan or pay a modest fee for service. Such types of home repair financing often pose a challenge and make home rehabilitation almost impossible for homeowners on low, fixed incomes, particularly seniors.

For Rebuilding Together, the contributions of a large number of volunteers and the acquisition of significant in-kind donations enable the organization to conduct extensive home rehabilitation at no cost to the homeowner.

Partnership with CNCS

For many years, Rebuilding Together relied largely on corporate donations to fund its management functions, pay for materials, and cover the costs associated with the volunteers who provide the labor. But, in 2007, the organization applied to CNCS for an AmeriCorps planning grant that would allow the organization to plan for the incorporation of AmeriCorps service members into its work. The application followed Rebuilding Together's successful experience working with VISTA members to meet a national commitment to rehabilitate 1,000 Gulf Coast homes following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

In 2008, Rebuilding Together launched CapacityCorps, an AmeriCorps funded program dedicated to increasing the capacity of Rebuilding Together affiliates to serve additional low-income homeowners in need. As of the 2010-2011 program year, Rebuilding Together has placed 65 AmeriCorps members in 32 Rebuilding Together affiliate organizations across the country. Rather than engage in direct service activities, members placed at affiliate sites generally design and implement capacity building strategies to increase the affiliate organization's ability to meet community needs and carry out the Rebuilding Together mission.

Management Practices Adopted to Extend Reach and Maximize Service Outcomes

Charity Navigator, an independent evaluator of non-profit agencies, has recognized Rebuilding Together as an effective national non-profit. Similarly, numerous corporations including Sears, Lowe's, and Sherwin-Williams have recognized Rebuilding Together for developing and sustaining affordable housing opportunities by providing financial support on an ongoing basis.

While a variety of factors have contributed to Rebuilding Together's success, four management practices are particularly noteworthy. The first is a centralized management structure designed specifically for the Capacity Corps program that allows the Rebuilding Together national office staff to efficiently support its network of affiliates to achieve the organization's mission. The second relates to how the national office identifies and selects affiliates that have the greatest potential to incorporate AmeriCorps service members into their programs and builds the capacity of all their affiliates (those who host Capacity Corps members and those who do not). The third relates to the investment that Rebuilding Together makes in service members to ensure that they have a productive service experience. The final practice stems from Rebuilding Together's flexible and responsive culture which has—over time—led to the development of an extensive system of routine assessments and feedback mechanisms that allow the organization to make regular adjustments to the way they recruit and manage service participants.

A Centralized Management Structure

Rebuilding Together has traditionally operated its programs through a loosely organized group of 200 local affiliates—local non-profit housing organizations that operate as independent non-profits in communities across the country—with the goal of helping affiliates produce high quality home maintenance and rehabilitation services that meet individual homeowner and community needs. The

exception to this is CapacityCorps, for which Rebuilding Together has created a centralized structure to support the local affiliates that host AmeriCorps service members. The administrative arrangement was a conscious decision intended to minimize local affiliates' administrative responsibilities. Jessica Oh, Senior Director of Rebuilding Together's National Service Programs, described the importance of centralized management to the organization:

“What I . . . view as part of our program success is we are a centralized program model. We keep all the funds at the national level and we dole out the positions, but we want to keep the administrative burden off our affiliates.... Our affiliates are very grassroots [and] they find the regulations and the process very tiresome and burdensome. So we try to do as much for them so they can focus on being successful at hosting members and facilitating their success....”

While the affiliates provide day-to-day member supervision, the national office coordinates nearly all other elements associated with the management of AmeriCorps members. Each year, Rebuilding Together's national office recruits and screens approximately 800 to 1,000 applications for 65 CapacityCorps positions. Candidates who make the first cut are interviewed by a national office staff member, after which they may be recommended to a local affiliate for a final interview before a final hiring decision is made.

Initial training of successful CapacityCorps applicants occurs at a national orientation session in which the new members learn about AmeriCorps regulations and expectations. Affiliate Site Supervisors, who manage service members on a day-to-day basis, also attend the orientation and receive training in AmeriCorps policies and procedures, supervision strategies, and conflict resolution. Once members have dispersed to their respective affiliates, the national office manages most administrative requirements, including ongoing training, monitoring, and reporting, and provides support to members.

Selecting and Supporting Strong Affiliate Partners

Selecting the right affiliate partners in which to place CapacityCorps members is another way that Rebuilding Together works to make their program effective and ensure that the service participant experience is productive. Every fall, the national office conducts a competitive application process for affiliates who wish to take part in CapacityCorps. The national office gauges the readiness of affiliates to host a member, preferring those affiliates that have been established for a longer period and those with at least one paid staff member. To encourage the placement of members in affiliates fully prepared to host them, the national office requires affiliates who are awarded a member to place a \$2,000 deposit toward the \$7,500 annual cost they are required to contribute per member.

Not only does the national office look for affiliates that are “service member ready,” they also look for opportunities to place CapacityCorps members in positions where they can help to build or extend the affiliate's capacity to achieve its local program goals. For example, the three service members at one Maryland affiliate were recently engaged in special initiatives that helped to strengthen or expand the affiliate's program. One member worked on a range of community engagement and recruitment strategies, including the adoption of social networking technologies, to expand the number and type of potential clients and volunteers reached by the affiliate. Another member implemented an inventory system for the efficient management of in-kind donations at the affiliate's remote warehouse, thereby reducing material waste and time spent securing materials needed for home

rehabilitation. A third member secured a grant that expanded the affiliate's ability to supplement its traditional services with energy-efficiency audits and repairs. The affiliate now conducts extensive energy audits that include blower door tests to check for leakage, tests for air quality, and tests for the efficiency and safety of furnaces.

Rebuilding Together complements the effort to use service members to expand or strengthen affiliate programs by offering technical assistance and training directly to its affiliates. In 2007, Rebuilding Together created a training arm called the Organizational Development Institute (ODI) that provides its affiliate partners with training in nonprofit management practices to support the work of paid staff and volunteers. Trainings are provided through regional conferences as well as regularly scheduled webinars and conference calls.

Investing in Service Members

Over the years, Rebuilding Together has learned that service members can become isolated simply because they are scattered among local affiliates across the country. In order to ensure that the members have a positive experience, the organization has worked to strengthen the central office's communication with members by holding regular webinars and conference calls with corps members at all affiliate sites. They also encourage service members to network with one another to share experiences and effective practices implemented by their respective affiliates. Rebuilding Together has provided a framework for communication through the creation of "affinity groups" so that service members who are working on similar issues—for example volunteer recruitment or energy efficiency—can share their experiences via phone and email. As discussed in the next section, Rebuilding Together continually looks for ways to improve its member communication and networking strategies based on regular input from service members. In the case of the affinity groups, member feedback has resulted in a re-organization of these groups according to affiliate budget size. Thus, members serving in affiliates with budgets under \$300,000 will be placed in one affinity group; those serving in affiliates with higher budgets will be placed in another. This helps members discuss strategies for building capacity and expanding programs relevant to organization size as well as project and program type.



Evaluation and Feedback

Rebuilding Together has established a management culture of flexibility and responsiveness that allows it to respond in a 'just in time' way to observations, requests and formally written communications from its service members and affiliates. This culture is reflected and supported through a systematic, internal evaluation and feedback process, that involves staff, service members, and affiliate site supervisors who manage service members. The process includes the following:

- An annual three-day site supervisor convening that includes a session called "CapacityCorps Program Improvement Forum." The forum is used to solicit feedback from site supervisors at the beginning of each program year.

- Three check-in meetings with each service member to make sure they are acclimating to their affiliate sites, to answer any questions the members have, and to provide guidance as they navigate through their service year.
- An annual review by Rebuilding Together staff of aggregated end-of-term evaluations from all service members, as well as the final check-in calls through which additional feedback is solicited to better capture the details of the service members' experiences.
- Bi-annual staff retreats to discuss strategic planning and program operations, and program effectiveness. Topics covered include: strategizing on CapacityCorps support systems, and reviewing service member quarterly report trends.

The combination of mechanisms designed to capture regular feedback from service members and staff of both Rebuilding Together and local affiliates, along with the organization's culture of flexibility and responsiveness, results in regular adjustments—both big and small—to operations. Among the changes that have been made are the following:

- After a seven day intensive centralized service member orientation, evaluations revealed that service members wanted to hear more from their peers and alumni. The following year, Rebuilding Together staff added a "Second Year Member Panel" to the orientation schedule that has proven to be an effective channel for service members to share strategies for making a local impact and to assuage members' pre-service fears.
- After evaluating the results of a "risk assessment" survey completed by service members to identify problems at affiliate sites, Rebuilding Together staff determined that the survey tool was flawed since few sites were identified as "high risk." In response, Rebuilding Together staff refined the assessment tool and shared it with the participating affiliates so that they might better understand how they are being assessed. As a result, staff are now better able to identify issues at affiliate sites and provide targeted support to service members, thereby improving their service experience.
- As noted earlier, based on member feedback, service member affinity groups have been re-organized according to affiliate size rather than the type of program that the service member was engaged in.

Overall, the Rebuilding Together staff report that these internal evaluation and feedback process translate into a higher level of service member and affiliate satisfaction, as well as improved delivery of program services.

The Results

By making homes more affordable for low-income and disabled Americans and by helping seniors age in place, Rebuilding Together and CNCS are helping low-income Americans weather the ongoing economic downturn while assisting in local community revitalization efforts.

Over the course of the 2009-2010 service year, AmeriCorps service members working with Rebuilding Together affiliates:

- Created and implemented 26 volunteer recruitment and management systems;

Serving Communities

- Recruited or managed over 17,000 skilled and unskilled volunteers; and
- Built capacity to enable repairs on 1,070 homes.

During the same period, 200,000 Rebuilding Together volunteers performed work valued at approximately \$100 million on a total of 9,569 homes. As a result of AmeriCorps member efforts, over 4,600 low-income senior and veteran homeowners were assisted in reducing their housing costs and remaining in their home.

4. Promoting Environmental and Civic Engagement: Earth Force

In 1991, the Pew Charitable Trusts (PCT) funded a study to identify unmet environmental needs. The study found that American youth had an interest in working on local environmental problems but that few outlets existed to direct or channel that interest.¹⁵ This finding led PCT in 1993 to found Earth Force, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to engage young people as active citizens who improve the environment and their communities, now and in the future.

With an initial grant of \$13 million, the newly-hired Earth Force staff set about polling youth across the country about the environmental issues that Earth Force should address. Within two years, they had identified several partners, including the Nickelodeon television channel, the World Wildlife Fund, and The Nature Conservancy. With these partners they created a series of national campaigns to raise youth awareness and funds for the top initiatives identified through youth polling. This included protecting wildlife habitats and planting trees. Over time, this broad approach evolved into a targeted strategy of creating school-based opportunities for environmental and civic education.



Today, the Earth Force mission remains largely the same, although the way that it approaches this mission and its list of partners have changed. Along the way, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) became a funder of several Earth Force programs, primarily through Learn and Serve America. With these resources, Earth Force has begun to increasingly target its programs to low-income communities.

This profile begins with an overview of Earth Force and its evolution and then details three noteworthy management strategies that Earth Force has adopted over the years. These strategies have contributed to its growth from a small nonprofit with a single funder into a national organization with multiple partners and funders that operates in communities across the country.

¹⁵ The Bridgespan Group, Inc.; *Earth Force: Building a national network while developing a new program offering and diversifying funding*; October; 2004.

The Development of Earth Force

In 1996, after three years of operations, the Earth Force staff stepped back to assess their progress. With the help of an outside evaluator, they determined that while the national campaigns had been successful in raising youth awareness of, and involvement in, environment issues (millions of youth according to the Earth Force president), the overall impact on children was modest.¹⁶

With the goal of “fostering a deeper level of involvement in young people,” Earth Force leaders decided to shift gears and focus more directly on environmental and civic education. They hired experts to develop a middle school curriculum (still in use today) to facilitate an inquiry-to-action process that incorporates community partners and youth voice. The curriculum is based on a service-learning model through which students identify an environmental issue they want to address and the ways they will work to effect change on that issue.¹⁷ The curriculum does not replace existing school curricula. Rather, it is designed as an overlay across an existing curriculum to allow educators to engage their students in environmental service-learning.

Curriculum in hand, the next step was to figure out how to get it implemented in schools across the country. After some extensive research and outreach, Earth Force rented office space in communities where they planned to target their programs. Staff were hired to conduct outreach to schools and other organizations in these communities to promote the Earth Force curriculum and to train educators to use it. Today, Earth Force continues to promote its curriculum, but its geographic reach is much broader and staff travel around the country identifying, training and supporting local partners who work to implement service-learning within their school systems.

All Earth Force programs, although they vary in content and curriculum, are based on a service-learning model. The following are four examples of Earth Force programs that operate nationwide:

- The Summer of Service, an initiative to build a network of intensive summer service-learning opportunities for middle and early high school youth;
- The Urban Environmental Challenge, in partnership with the Staples Foundation for Learning, encourages young people in urban communities to take action on pressing local issues created by global climate change by sponsoring regional competitions for climate change projects in which the winning presentations receive a \$1,000 custom technology and supplies package or one of two \$500 packages;
- The GREEN (Global Rivers Environmental Education Network)—Earth Force’s largest program detailed in the following section; and,
- The Watershed STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) Initiative, with significant support from CNCS,

Service-learning is a method of teaching and learning that connects classroom lessons with meaningful service to the community. Students build academic skills while strengthening communities through service. Benefits include improved academic achievement, increased student engagement and civic skills and stronger communities.

¹⁶ The Bridgespan Group; 2004.

¹⁷ The Bridgespan Group; 2004.

establishes GREEN in low income communities with a high number of under-served students from groups traditionally under-represented in the sciences and where there are demonstrable environmental challenges. This program is also detailed in the following section.

The Earth Force Curriculum is based on a six step program led by Earth Force trained teachers:

Step 1- Community Environmental Inventory: Students identify environmental issues and strengths within their own community.

Step 2- Issue Selection: Students learn democratic decision-making processes to select the issue they will be researching. They research the issue and narrow and refine its definition.

Step 3- Policy and Practice Research: Students identify and analyze policies and practices related to their issue. They research the issue from all sides and identify key stakeholders they can engage in their research and action.

Step 4- Options for Influencing Policy and Practice: Students identify a policy or practice related to their issue that they want to affect. They set a project goal and use democratic decision-making again to determine a course of action.

Step 5- Planning and Taking Civic Action: Students develop and implement a well-organized plan of action to ensure project reaches completion.

Step 6- Looking Back and Ahead: Students assess the project and process, identify next steps, celebrate successes and share their stories.

Earth Force website: www.earthforce.org

The GREEN (Global Rivers Environmental Education Network) Program

The GREEN program was started in 1984 by a group of high school students investigating pollution issues in the Huron River in Ann Arbor, Michigan. With the help of a local University of Michigan professor, GREEN developed as an environmental education program focused on engaging citizens in protecting rivers, streams and watersheds. The program was adopted by schools in metropolitan Detroit and then expanded to a number of other U.S. and international locations. GREEN's success was fueled in part by a major partnership with General Motors (GM), which provided financial and volunteer support to the program.

Earth Force acquired GREEN and its environmental education program in 1999. The decision to make the acquisition was based on several factors. Most important, GREEN had a well-developed and geographically dispersed network of corporate and non-profit partner organizations to deliver their programs. This provided a built-in platform for delivering the Earth Force curriculum more broadly than it had done previously. At the time of the acquisition, 26 GM facilities were participating in GREEN in communities across the country. In fact, Earth Force was able to maintain the partnership with GM, which has continued to provide an important source of funding and volunteers over the years.

The Watershed STEM Initiative

The Watershed STEM Initiative (WSI) is designed to engage local educators in the delivery and institutionalization of Earth Force’s GREEN program in seven school districts across the country. Developed with CNCS funding, the initiative is designed to support educators and engage more than 4,000 students in communities that have a high number of underserved students and demonstrable environmental challenges.



WSI started in three communities that each had a strong existing relationship with Earth Force, a supportive district administration, and a demonstrated commitment to participate in the program’s professional development model. These communities include: Louisville, KY (partner Salt River Watershed Watch); Flint, MI (partner Flint River Watershed Coalition); and, Youngstown, OH (partner Youngstown State University).

As the program progresses, Earth Force continues to select communities strategically but uses slightly different criteria—selecting educational partners with the ability to meet the stated program criteria and who are reviewed and recommended by the program’s existing educational partners. This strategic approach to selecting partners runs throughout Earth Force programs and is discussed further below.

WSI’s service-learning model centers on the study of watersheds as a means for young students to learn about hydrological processes, analyze the chemical composition of water, and study the relationship between the biological life of streams and pollution. Once the students study the watersheds in their respective communities, each group will select a project. Students may find, for example, that their stream is threatened by nutrients from home fertilizers and thus their project would focus on educating homeowners on the proper use of fertilizers. In another community, students may find that golf courses are mowing to the edge of a stream and that mowing removes the plants vital to keeping pollutants out of streams. Consequently, students would work with the golf courses to change landscaping practices.

Watersheds are an excellent means to teach mathematics. Through their watershed investigation, students:

- Gather quantitative data and apply formulas;
- Graph data and compare it to related variables; or,
- Develop and evaluate predictions that are based on data.

Technology is applied when students learn how to use probes to gather data, identify their location using a GPS device or position their monitoring location using a GIS program. The report Environmental Literacy concludes that a strategy that combines the environmental issues with active educational strategies that explicitly engage students in solving community problems is the best means to create an engaged citizenry.

WSI Grant Narrative, Earth Force

Throughout the program, Earth Force staff works to establish and strengthen the working relationships among local partners with the goal of building a network that can institutionalize the WSI program in each community. As detailed in the following section, partners include local government and non-government environmental organizations as well as corporations, universities and community organizations.

Management Practices Adopted to Extend Reach and Maximize Service Outcomes

Earth Force has been successful in becoming a stable organization and growing its influence in part because it has been flexible, periodically assessed its ability to meet its goals, and refined its approach accordingly. The organization has also stayed true to its mission—creating and supporting channels through which youth can address environmental problems in their communities. Three noteworthy and complementary management practices have been central to the organization’s success:

1. ***Establishing and Supporting Strategic Partnerships:*** Earth Force works with a broad range of local, regional and national partners to implement its environmental service-learning program. The careful selection and the subsequent management of these partnerships enable the organization to systematically drive its mission and outcomes.
2. ***Investing in its Service Participants through Training and Support:*** One of the core – and most noteworthy – aspects of these partnerships is the investment that Earth Force makes in training staff and volunteers from its partner agencies in the service-learning model and supporting their work on an ongoing basis.
3. ***Using Evaluation Data as a Management Tool:*** Earth Force not only reviews and evaluates its organization-wide performance but it also requires that each of its partners report on specific program outcomes on a quarterly basis. The results of this systematic evaluation process inform day-to-day management decisions and guide the organization’s long-term strategic decisions.

Building Broad Partnerships to Expand Reach and Strengthen Impact

Earth Force functions through an operational model that relies on identifying a diverse set of partners in each community that, working together, provide environmental education and service-learning to students in local schools. While Earth Force staff provides intensive training and significant support, the partners are directly responsible for implementing service-learning programs in their communities.

Consequently, Earth Force has a range of national and local partners that participate in local coalitions committed to engaging young people in environmental and community work through service-learning projects during school, after-school, and as part of summer school events. Each partner has a specific role to play in the service-learning model and Earth Force helps them to understand each of these roles and how the partners can work together—making use of the communities' particular resources, characteristics and natural environment—to effectively engage and support young people. Although the partners vary from one place to the next, they typically include:

- Schools, School Districts and Teachers
- Local government environmental agencies and non-profit environmental organizations and/or coalitions
- National Corporate Partners such as General Motors, Staples, and Agrium Inc.
- Universities which offer teacher training

The role that each plays is described below.

Schools and Teachers

At the core of Earth Force's program is the integration of service-learning and environmental education into the classroom curriculum. To this end, Earth Force staff focuses significant attention on establishing strong partnerships with individual schools, School Districts and teachers. These partners are carefully chosen based on their interest in and commitment to environmental service-learning, the degree of support from the school superintendent, and whether they serve a significant number of low-income students. Once an agreement has been established between Earth Force and a School District and/or a school to create a particular service-learning program, Earth Force provides the educators and other community partners with grant funds, program materials, training and on-going technical assistance both to prepare them before the students are involved and then throughout program implementation. Though there are some variations, teachers generally provide the classroom science instruction, then partners (discussed below) take the students to sites such as watersheds or other water sources where they work with the students to research and test the quality of the particular environment. Together the teachers, partners and students will discuss the environmental problems and develop strategies to address them.

The inclusion of environmental service-learning into a local school district often starts with one or two schools, although Earth Force's goal is to see it expand to the entire school district. For example,

the Grand Prairie Texas School District¹⁸, which had piloted the Earth Force service-learning process in a few science classes, made the decision to integrate it across the entire 7th grade curriculum.

Local Government and Nonprofit Community-based Organizations

These partners, including local environmental health agencies and other government offices as well as local Audubon Society offices and watershed coalitions—make the out-of-classroom learning happen.

Environmental professionals from these organizations accompany students to out of classroom ‘live laboratories.’ In the lab setting, students interact with the professional mentors who help them extend their classroom learning. For example, in Louisville, Kentucky, Metropolitan Sewer District Office staff are providing Jefferson County Public Schools students with the opportunity to visit sites and work with scientists to help mitigate storm water issues facing the City.¹⁹

Partnerships aren’t necessarily limited to mentoring students in one community. In Grand Prairie, Texas for example, Earth Force’s initial partnership with the Trinity River Audubon Center has led to discussions about how Earth Force might work with additional Audubon Centers across the country, as well as how it might expand its partnerships in Texas. Through the work in Grand Prairie, Earth Force has generated interest along the full length of the Trinity River and hopes to expand service-learning through working with several agencies and universities in the surrounding area.²⁰

Corporate Partnerships

General Motors’ involvement with GREEN illustrates the nature and extent of corporate involvement with Earth Force, which goes far beyond financial support. Together, Earth Force and GM have developed programs in over 30 communities where GM plants are located in the United States and Canada. As with staff from local government and nonprofit organizations, GM employees work with students and teachers in a real world setting to investigate, research, and solve water quality issues in their communities.

University Partners

Earth Force is also growing the number of partnerships it has with colleges of education across the country to institutionalize the Earth Force service-learning process into teacher education programs. Earth Force views these partnership – currently at around ten - as critical in order to influence teaching and learning among new cohorts of teachers so that they learn the model in their pre-service training and implement it throughout their teaching careers. Strategically, this ensures that service-learning outcomes are driven systematically and no longer dependent entirely on Earth Force staff and financial resources. By partnering with universities, Earth Force can reach far more teachers and educators—and thus students—than it can by using its staff to conduct service-learning training school by school or even District by District.

¹⁸ Grand Prairie Texas is an urban/suburban community located between Dallas and Fort Worth. It is primarily a working class community. The students in the school district are 58% Hispanic, and at least 60 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The district has 22 elementary schools and each grade level has one bilingual/ESL teacher.

¹⁹ Earth Force K-12 School Based Progress Report for reporting period 01/01/2010 to 06/30/2010.

²⁰ Earth Force Watershed STEM Initiative Progress Report; December, 2010.

Significant Training and Support of Local Program Participants

The outcomes of Earth Force programs depend on the quality and quantity of environmental service-learning experiences that students engage in with teachers and other adults in their communities. Consequently, a key focus of Earth Force's staff time and investments is placed on training and educating educators and other volunteers—or 'service participants'—from its range of partner institutions as they prepare for and then implement Earth Force's service-learning process. Service participants include but are not limited to: teachers; board and staff of community-based organizations; General Motors environmental engineers; school district staff (administrative and curriculum development professionals); university faculty; graduate students; corporate sponsors and their volunteers; and government agency staff (e.g., local Department of Natural Resources, Water Authorities, Environmental Protection Agency).

Training for teachers, mentors and other volunteers occurs both before and during work with students. Service participants learn the six steps of the Earth Force service-learning process and participate in hands-on service-learning so that they are capable of using the strategy with students and training other adults in the community who may want to participate in the program. As part of the Watershed STEM Initiative, for example, teachers receive training that includes detailed instruction and practice using Earth Force six step process, as well as time for integrating each step into their school district's curriculum, interacting with community partners and discussion on implementation.

The level of Earth Force staff involvement in training varies with the needs of a community and its prior experience with Earth Force and service-learning. Earth Force staff are often the primary trainers though the long term goal is that local partners become the primary program and service-learning trainers in their communities. In Grand Prairie Texas, for example, the director of the Natural Science Education Center K through 12 Environmental Education Program now trains teachers in all of the District's middle schools in service-learning.

Training and program support is an ongoing activity in all of the communities where Earth Force operates and is critical to the long term sustainability of their programs. Sometimes maintaining support from school administrators can be challenging particularly in today's educational climate where the focus is on test scores and the accumulation of knowledge through traditional forms of teaching. When these challenges arise, Earth Force staff will spend time understanding the local issues and identifying solutions that allow the program to better synchronize with the local curriculum and alleviate administrative concerns. Such solutions may include working with school administrators to develop a small, pilot program that can be replicated throughout the system if successful.

Over the last year, however, it has become evident that a more pro-active and systematic approach to overcoming waning school administrator support for the GREEN Watershed STEM Initiative is needed. To address this challenge, Earth Force staff have developed a two-step strategy. First, they are working with teachers to create a clear strategy for communication with those in leadership and decision making positions in their respective District's school administrations. Secondly, Earth Force staff will hold formal meetings with teachers, watershed partners and the school superintendents in each of the program's school districts to thank the school administrators for their support, share

successes, outline plans for future service-learning work in the district and to renew the commitment of school administrators to infusing service-learning across the District.²¹

In addition to direct training and ongoing program support, Earth Force strongly encourages local partners to attend Earth Force annual meetings where there are training and professional development opportunities. Here partners gain additional knowledge of the Earth Force programs, service-learning and the effects of service-learning on students. Year round, Earth Force staff hold monthly phone calls with each community as well as quarterly calls in which participants from all program sites participate. This allows Earth Force to provide on-going support and identify local challenges to program success. When problems become evident, Earth Force staff is able to quickly go to the program site and provide the appropriate support or intervention necessary for the program to continue its course.

Program Evaluation as a Management and Program Strategy Tool

Earth Force has an established culture of monitoring and assessing program results to determine the impact of its work and to provide ‘just in time’ data that enables program adjustments as needed. The organization has established two central evaluation mechanisms: (1) it reviews and evaluates its system-wide performance through annual third-party evaluations; (2) it requires that each of its partners report on specific program outcomes on a quarterly basis.

For over 12 years, Brandeis University has conducted annual evaluations of Earth Force programs to track outcomes and identify ways that the organization can improve its operations and impact on students and teachers. These evaluations are based on annual surveys of Earth Force students and teachers as well as quarterly reports from local partners.

A number of outcomes are examined for students including: “significant gains in students’ ability to find information about environmental issues, decide whether information is useful and accurate, make decisions after examining diverse views, communicate issue positions to the community, adapt a project plan to changing circumstances, and identify steps to put a project plan into action.”²² For educators, the Brandeis evaluators measure “the change in educators’ belief that youth can make a difference, their knowledge of environmental issues, their use of community resources, and the likelihood that they will use student led projects in the future.”²³

The information from the evaluations is then used to make strategic decisions. The 2007 Brandeis report, for example, “confirmed the link between duration and quality: the longer students participated, the more likely they were to demonstrate gains in civic knowledge and skills.” This

²¹ Earth Force K-12 School Based Progress Report for reporting period 01/01/2010 to 06/30/2010.

²² Application for Federal Assistance to the Corporation for National and Community Service; Earth Force; 02/22/10.

²³ Application for Federal Assistance to the Corporation for National and Community Service; Earth Force; 02/22/10.

finding led Earth Force to establish a minimum duration of 40 hours of student engagement over a ten week period for its Watershed STEM Initiative.²⁴

Additionally, each school and/or school district is required to submit a quarterly narrative and financial report. Just-in-time information on program progress and challenges is also provided through frequent communication with partners via monthly conference calls, emails, and site visits. Earth Force regularly tries to improve its assessment systems; for example, staff is currently developing additional monitoring systems that will track specific progress goals for program sites. This regular and detailed monitoring also enables Earth Force to respond to issues in a timely manner. Last year, for example, training for teachers in the Watershed STEM Initiative was held in Youngstown, Ohio in the fall. Soon after however, Earth Force staff held a follow-up training and planning session after regular site monitoring suggested that teachers needed support moving the program forward.²⁵

Results

Over the course of almost two decades, Earth Force has evolved into a well-established national nonprofit organization reaching approximately 15,000 young people a year with programs in more than 21 states and with the support of multiple public and nonprofit partners as well as major corporate funders across the country. The 2010 Brandeis University evaluations reported the following outcomes for 2009-2010 Earth Force programs, representing the sixth straight year of positive outcomes for program participants:

- 90 percent of students indicated an increased understanding of environmental issues.
- 40 percent of students reported an increase in discussing local environmental issues with friends and parents and paying attention to local water issues.
- Over 74 percent of students indicated that they want to learn more about environmental issues and felt their project made a difference in their community.
- 65 percent of students want to continue working on the issues addressed by their program.

In addition to these findings, Earth Force has successfully increased the diversity of students served through its programs and improved its effort to target disadvantaged communities. The 2009-2010 Brandeis evaluation found that roughly half of Earth Force students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program.

Positive program impacts were also identified for the educators, among them:

- 95 percent of educators were interested in participating in a watershed project again.
- 100 percent of Earth Force trained educators reported that the training was helpful to their work.

²⁴Application for Federal Assistance to the Corporation for National and Community Service; Earth Force; 02/22/10.

²⁵ Earth Force K-12 School Based Progress Report for reporting period 01/01/2010 to 06/30/2010.

- 81 percent of educators indicated that the program increased their job satisfaction.
- 86 percent of educators noticed an increase in their students' interest in and enthusiasm for learning.
- 61 percent of educators said that the program helped them create new partnerships with environmental organizations in their communities.

