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Fighting Poverty with Passion: AmeriCorps VISTA as a Replicable Solution to Local Poverty

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Jonathan M. Williams

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the replicability and effectiveness of AmeriCorps VISTA projects in fighting poverty at the state and local levels. AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is the chief domestic program of the Federal Government’s Corporation for National and Community Service. The scope of this study focuses on the seven states that comprise the Corporation’s North Central Cluster, (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin) and the AmeriCorps VISTA projects that operated in these states due to funding from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The selected region offers a microcosm of the nation’s geographical and political diversity, while the selected time frame demonstrates what AmeriCorps VISTA projects could accomplish at a time of strong federal support. Ultimately, the results of this study are presented from two angles; by project focus and by state, with states ranking on a performance scale from high performing to failing.
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Chapter I: Introduction & Literature Review

Is AmeriCorps VISTA an anti-poverty program that can successfully target negative socioeconomic challenges inherent within a community? The call to national service speaks to the patriotism of men and women throughout the nation to do their part to serve their country and fellow citizens. AmeriCorps VISTA, functioning as a domestic version of the Peace Corps, provides volunteers with the opportunity to serve, while increasing the capacity of local government agencies and non-profits to combat symptoms of poverty, (i.e. drug use, truancy, unemployment, illiteracy, illnesses) that are prevalent in their community. But just how efficient is AmeriCorps VISTA in reducing not only poverty, but the symptoms that appear to keep people in poverty?

Today, nearly 43 million Americans live in poverty. This large number suggests a need for federal government intervention on behalf of the plight of those afflicted by poverty in the United States. However, the question of how government tackles this question is heavily debated, and quite controversial. In the past, the federal government has sponsored numerous social programs, such as the Works Progress Act (WPA) and unemployment security. Over time, the WPA ceased to exist, largely due to the reduction of unemployment during the Second World War. Unemployment insurance is still in existence, but recipients face strict eligibility guidelines (Wallis, 1987).

In terms of addressing community based poverty, government responses have varied over the years, until consolidating into the AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) programs that we have in all fifty states today. Launched in 1965, the anti-poverty program, originally known only as VISTA, seeks to reduce poverty on a community level through federally funded volunteers who assist local non-profits and
government agencies to reduce poverty through programs that assist government agencies, non-profits, and schools as they work to serve clients (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017). What makes AmeriCorps VISTA unique from other anti-poverty programs is that it is broadly supported across partisan lines. Each president since Lyndon Johnson has supported funding for the program, which has grown significantly over the past decade. The program boasts a yearly recruitment of eight thousand volunteers serving in more than eleven hundred communities throughout the United States (VISTA Campus, 2015).

This thesis will examine AmeriCorps VISTA as a replicable and targeted anti-poverty program, by examining relevant socioeconomic data from states or communities impacted by an AmeriCorps VISTA project funded by the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, which placed a heavy focus upon national service programs, such as AmeriCorps VISTA. While this research does not measure every AmeriCorps VISTA project across the country, it does examine all twenty-five funded AmeriCorps VISTA projects from the states within what the Corporation for Nation and Community Service deems as the North Central Cluster.

These states include Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The success or failure of each project will be assessed based upon socioeconomic data related to the symptoms of poverty associated with each project’s goals (i.e.: unemployment, homelessness, community health, crime rates, graduation rates, etc.). This paper also demonstrates how loose reporting requirements can weaken an organization’s ability to reach targeted goals. Finally, this paper also examines categories of performance across the states. In this study, states will be ranked as either
high-performing, moderately successful, and failing. In order to achieve a high rating, the state’s AmeriCorps VISTA programs must demonstrate a linkage to positive trends in the socioeconomic issues relating to their AmeriCorps VISTA project’s goals, whether it be economic strength, education, healthy futures, homelessness, or volunteerism.

Moderately successful states will demonstrate a reasonable degree of success in improving their relevant socioeconomic factors, while still leaving room for improvement. Finally, failing states are those who demonstrate an inability to reverse declining socioeconomic trends, despite the assistance of AmeriCorps VISTA projects.

A Review of Anti-Poverty Literature

In judging the effectiveness of social programs, the divide in literature over the past few decades is drawn between recognition of the causes of poverty, as well as identifying successful standards by which to evaluate anti-poverty programs. Both of these areas have been open to intense debate, as poverty continues to remain a significant social problem in the United States, despite the existence of numerous programs aimed at addressed both short and long-term symptoms of poverty.

Definitions of Poverty

Before solutions can be identified, the root causes leading to poverty must first be understood. Bradshaw (2007) identifies five competing theories of poverty: physical or mental disability, belief systems within an impoverished community, politically sanctioned economic disparity, geographically based, and circumstantial origins. As poverty is believed to be caused by differing circumstances, anti-poverty programs must
hone in on a particular cause or set of causes, at which to target. Catch-all programs may not be suited to address the individual needs of everyone.

Sawhill (1988) finds that despite the ability of the U.S. to identify the demographics and geographical areas which are pre-disposed to greater risks of poverty, the anti-poverty programs themselves have largely failed to produce solid evidence of their effectiveness. Sawhill claims that the most successful forms of anti-poverty programs are social insurance programs such as Social Security, which the author claims have successfully kept the nation’s elderly out of deep poverty. As for the means-tested programs, the evidence is negligible in pointing to firm progress.

Hwanjoon (2001) finds heavy shortcomings within welfare states in general, as the assistance provided to the impoverished creates a false sense of security that can be harmed once a recipient finds steady employment, and is removed from program eligibility. The shock is felt once the individual is paying taxes, and suddenly making only modest improvements in their income, or actually falling short of their income while receiving tax free assistance. The author finds that incentive is decreased in welfare states, because programs can foster a dependency, and even a fear of entering the competitive job market, where steady income is not guaranteed.

Craig (2009) recognizes the growth of locally based anti-poverty programs, which employ federal funds for local organizations to combat poverty through a home-grown approach. As these programs are generally administered through local government agencies or non-profits, the federal government has become increasingly strict as to how the funds are used, and how effective these efforts truly are. However, the need to appease federal regulations also creates a chasm between the local agencies and
stakeholders using the funding, and the federal agencies overseeing the projects. The result is often confusing guidelines that can overwhelm local agencies and volunteers, as the emphasis shifts away from client services, onto meeting reporting standards.

Ben-Shalom, Moffitt, and Scholz (2012) view public assistance programs in the same prism of job training and volunteer programs, suggesting that these programs can actually lift people out of poverty by reducing their short-term financial pain. Using data since 1984, the authors find that the working poor, when aided by SNAP or TANF, actually were more apt to maintain steady employment and eventually leave the ranks of the impoverished; suggesting that all programs aimed at low income Americans have the ability to produce long term results.

The Effectiveness of Social Programs

Beyond exploring the causes of poverty, the national discussion on the value of anti-poverty programs centers on the effectiveness of these programs, or their ability to lift individuals out of poverty. There is no uniform standard of effectiveness, leading to a plethora of approaches that seek to identify the value of these programs through either the effects upon program recipients, or the inner structures of the program itself. Ravallion (2007) examines methods used to evaluate anti-poverty programs around the globe, and finds that there is no single method that can be uniformly replicated to every program. Ravallion states that in order to evaluate programs, methodology should be formed around the individual complexities of the program itself, as opposed to being judged by a uniform standard. Additionally, Ravallion believes that programs must reach deeper in
explaining the processes involved within a program, and how these processes lead to the desired result.

Hagerty, et. Al (2001) evaluate agency and organizational “quality of life” standards within a region. This standard, which the authors find to be a reliable method of measurement, can be an asset in determining which types of anti-poverty programs will be more effective in individual areas. However, the authors criticize the lack of uniformity among agencies measuring quality of life. What often happens is that agencies are overlapping, and judging quality of life on differing standards. Even more troubling, agencies are proving ineffective at detailing how their services will impact the quality of life within their jurisdictions.

Today’s trend toward a demand of greater transparency has driven both public and private sector agencies to retool their evaluation criteria in order to more easily explain what makes their projects or programs work and succeed. McLaughlin and Jordan (1999) assert that many managers are confused as how best to do this, as they are lacking “logic models” that effectively explain the core steps of a project, as well as the inputs and outputs throughout the project or program process.

The authors argue that a successful logic model can easily identify the resources used, activities performed, number of clientele served; as well as the expected and achieved outcomes in the short, intermediate, and long term. A clear logic model, the authors argue, will allow managers to remain accountable for the progress of the program at hand, as well as more easily identify potential areas of improvement. This could also render the task of defending programs against funding cuts much easier, as legislators or
agency officials would have easy access to information detailing the program’s objectives, costs, and outputs.

While performance management is the expectation in both the public and private sectors, there is not a uniform standard in place by which to set these measurements. Newcomer (1997) details the challenges that managers face when deciding what to measure. As monetary concerns influenced the move toward performance measurement in the 1990’s, Newcomer suggests that managers will select measurements that highlight areas where success is more easily achieved, and will likely be of greater appeal to the funder. When financial motivation takes center stage, Newcomer warns that internal processes that could inspire greater efficiency could be ignored.

When oversight is coming from multiple agencies, conflicting performance measurements may confuse managers and caseworkers alike, as one stakeholder may prioritize client service over process efficiency, whereas a competing stakeholder representing another constituency may prioritize the elimination of waste, at the possible expense of client services. In agencies under the jurisdiction of an elected official, these measurement demands may change from one administration to the next. A lack of consistency could potentially muddle the ability of managers to effectively identify or separate areas of effectiveness versus areas in need of improvement.

Shaping Public Attitudes

Northrop (1991) writes that a misunderstanding exists between the definitions of a public assistance program versus an anti-poverty program. Programs that are designed to assist individuals who are deemed to be impoverished, such as SNAP (Supplemental
Nutrition Access Program) or TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), are public assistance programs as opposed to anti-poverty programs. These programs are intended to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, whereas anti-poverty programs are designed to either lift people out of poverty, or avoid falling into it entirely. In this context, programs such as AmeriCorps VISTA or the Job Core must be judged differently than SNAP or TANF. Food or cash assistance is therefore not intended to link recipients to job opportunities. Rather, they exist solely to lessen the immediate impact of their economic situation.

Northrop believes that the success of an anti-poverty program should be evaluated by how well the program meets its stated goals. For SNAP and TANF, successful outcomes would be fewer individuals and families suffering from hunger; whereas success for an anti-poverty program would mean lower unemployment rates, or more students enrolled in job training programs. When the public (including legislators) lumps any program aiding low income individuals by the same standards, expecting the same outcomes across the board, the ability of these programs to succeed is placed at risk. For example, if legislators harbor negative views as to the effectiveness of public assistance programs, they may in turn vote against funding anti-poverty programs that actually address issues of residual poverty. Essentially, the failure to separate public assistance programs from anti-poverty programs could lead to funding cuts, based on factors the program at hand is not designed to address.

Simon (2002) writes of the success that the Corporation for National and Community Service has achieved in their goal of resurrecting national volunteerism, in a non-partisan approach. Simon showers praise on the CNCS, for its goal to not only
remain politically neutral, but also in its quest to serve in diverse areas of the nation. This fosters a reputation of inclusiveness, which prevents the corporation’s programs from being linked to the priorities of a particular political party, or to a specific racial or gender demographic. This approach is successful, as funding is sustainable across changes in the national political order. Programs that can be replicated in communities both large and small, urban and rural, can be embraced across ideologies; and at the same time, can foster a revival of community volunteerism. Essentially, the less divisive an anti-poverty program is, the more likely it can be embraced in polar political environments.

In examining Canadian educational reforms, Wallner (2008) points to a program’s legitimacy as the most crucial factor determining success. Wallner states that the program must fit the social norms of both the stakeholders invested in the program, but also to the surrounding community, and even the nation as a whole. If a program is far outside the values acceptable to a wide cross-section of society, the program will likely be panned, and deemed to be illegitimate by society, regardless of its merits. In order to achieve this legitimacy, Wallner asserts that policy backers must first test the program, and then take their message to the public, pointing to the perceived benefits of the program. This “bully pulpit” effect can shape attitudes of both the public and the government in favor of the proposed policy or program.

**Methodology**

As AmeriCorps VISTA projects are currently judged based on their internal capabilities, these projects are not required to illustrate a direct linkage between their presence and
improved socioeconomic statistics. In the appendix, an example of the current CNCS quarterly reports is provided. These reports focus squarely on number of volunteers, donations to the project, and number of impoverished individuals served. Matters such as poverty rates, high school graduation rates, and crime rates are not considered in reports to the CNCS.

The Trump Administration reflects a radically different approach to government accountability than that of his immediate predecessors. As opposed to charting incremental evidence over a period, the Trump Administration tends to favor immediate results. A failure to demonstrate growth often leads to termination of government positions or funding. Accordingly, the way CNCS measures AmeriCorps VISTA results place the program in great peril.

While what this thesis proposes is far from a complete substitute reporting template, it does provide concrete aspects where reform is needed, and will assess a series of projects from the North Central Cluster, funded under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. As explained earlier, this time frame was selected as to be representative of full federal government support. The high degree of federal support allows projects a greater opportunity to continue despite their ability to deliver immediate results. The location is important, as the upper Midwest represents a microcosm of the United States as a whole. Cities large and small compete with rural communities, some mirroring the social structure of Appalachian villas. AmeriCorps VISTA is a prime example of the school of thought which suggests that the lack of standard approaches to assessing effectiveness, negatively affects an organization’s ability to reach goals.
As of this writing, the Trump Administration has yet to order changes in federal reporting, nor has the CNCS significantly altered their reporting standards. This thesis will assess the selected AmeriCorps VISTA projects based upon socioeconomic criteria which most closely relates to the mission of the individual project. For instance, a project seeking to create job opportunities in a low-income community would be judged most heavily upon the unemployment rate both before and after the program’s period of service. A project focusing on providing legal services to low income residents will be judged more heavily upon the organization’s capacity to better serve the community because of the AmeriCorps VISTA project, more so than the state of the poverty rate. Because of this approach, consistency is not granted across the board. As AmeriCorps VISTA projects seek to address varying issues in differing communities, a broad-based reporting system cannot effectively test a project’s effectiveness. Readers will notice in the following chapter, varying socioeconomic factors (i.e. homelessness, unemployment, etc.) being tied to these projects. It cannot be stressed enough, that AmeriCorps VISTA projects must be linked to socioeconomic improvement if effectiveness is to be accurately accessed.

In the following chapter, the three categories of performance will be illustrated through case studies of states in the North Central cluster, and how their experiences shaped their effectiveness in operating AmeriCorps VISTA projects. Minnesota will receive special attention as the sole state to achieve a high-performance ranking in this study, followed by the moderately successful states of Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. Finally, the poorly ranked state of Michigan will be explored to determine what might have gone
wrong. However, this chapter will not feature a case by case analysis, but will rather focus on the more prolific and representative cases from these states.

Chapter II: Findings and Analysis

Five concrete focus areas are illustrated in the forthcoming project profiles: economic improvement, education, healthy futures, homelessness, and volunteerism. This section will disseminate the effectiveness of AmeriCorps VISTA projects by state.

Of the five AmeriCorps VISTA projects to focus upon education, 80% are assessed as effective in reaching their goals. This is the highest rate of effectiveness among the five issue focus areas. Projects targeting homelessness were right behind at 75% effectiveness. Of the four projects associated with homelessness, three of the four have been assessed as effective. The remaining issue areas, healthy futures, economic strength, and volunteerism produced far less degrees of effectiveness. Projects relating to healthy futures were assessed at 63% effective, with projects focused on economic strength 58% effective. Projects focusing primarily upon volunteerism succeeded at a staggeringly low 25%.

The ineffectiveness of volunteerism based projects is not necessarily a reflection of local citizens refusing to volunteer in their communities. As the economy improved throughout the first half of this decade, it is very likely that people in these areas had less time to volunteer as job prospects improved. What this does illustrate though, is that AmeriCorps VISTA projects need additional areas of focus beyond simply increasing the number of people volunteering in community affairs. AmeriCorps VISTA projects focused on improving concrete social issues appear to be far more effective in being linked to positive government data. Of course, AmeriCorps VISTA projects will not act
alone in improving socioeconomic data in their target areas. Many differing organizations and factors will influence issues such as community health and lower unemployment. However, when these factors improve during an AmeriCorps VISTA project’s period of operation, it is highly likely that the project’s existence placed a role in bettering the targeted locations.

Figure 1: Effectiveness by Focus Area

The data presented in this research can also demonstrate which states in the North Central cluster are better suited for AmeriCorps VISTA projects. For instance, all three projects located within the state of Minnesota are assessed as effective. Projects in Indiana and Iowa rated 75% effectiveness, while Illinois’ projects rated 66% effectiveness. Alarmingly, no projects in the states of Michigan, Ohio, or Wisconsin were assessed to be effective. These states either produced static or mixed results, or outright ineffectiveness.
Minnesota: A Profile in AmeriCorps VISTA Excellence

As illustrated in the above chart, Minnesota is the sole state within the CNCS North Central cluster to achieve a 100 percent success rate in this study. When compared to the vastly lower success rates in the remainder of the region, new questions arise as to what makes Minnesota different, and better suited to reach successful outcomes with their AmeriCorps VISTA projects.

Certainly, one aspect is the focus areas of the Minnesota AmeriCorps VISTA projects, which encompassed homelessness and healthy futures, both of which achieved high levels of success across the North Central cluster. The Minnesota Council of Churches, whose healthy futures campaign focused upon the plight of refugees illustrates a political culture of tolerance and international goodwill. Focusing particularly upon refugees arriving from the nations of Bhutan, Burma, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, and former Soviet states, the first task for the AmeriCorps VISTA members was to identify the key issues that created barriers for refugees as they attempted to re-settle in the United States.
The Employer Advisory Committee, a Minnesota advocacy group, also provided AmeriCorps VISTA members with valuable information on finding and keeping steady employment. Members of the Employer Advisory Committee were also recruited by the AmeriCorps VISTAs to serve as personal mentors to the program’s refugees, so that they could find steady employment, as well as feel encouraged to be active members of the community. AmeriCorps VISTA members also put their writing skills to work as they formed public relations strategies. By selecting touching stories, the AmeriCorps VISTA members could better persuade civic volunteers and elected officials to offer support to these programs, as well as to the state’s refugee population (Greving, 2011).

The Minnesota Department of Health maintains detailed records of refugee arrival and health statistics, which can assess social trends affecting Minnesota’s refugee population over the past several years. 2008, 2011, and 2014 figures are compared in order to rate the impact that AmeriCorps VISTA assistance may have had in relation to refugee assistance in Minnesota. In 2008, 1,205 people arrived in Minnesota seeking asylum. 51% of the refugees were men, while 49% were women. 20% of the state’s new refugees were children under the age of 15. As 2008 health records were not recorded, 2011 figures are used to determine the nature of refugee health earlier in the AmeriCorps VISTA project period. 98% of Minnesota’s refugees were subjected to a physical health screening within three months of their arrival to the United States, during which 82% tested positive for tuberculosis. 96% of refugees also received testing for HIV.

In 2014, 2,475 refugees arrived in Minnesota, with the same breakdown by gender as reported in 2008. An increased 29% of these refugees were children under the age of 15, demonstrating that more children are escaping the poverty and oppression of
the countries their parents fled. By 2014, nearly all refugees were given a health screening early in their stay in the United States. A sharp decline in tuberculosis infections were reported as well, with only 22% of refugees needing treatment for the infection. HIV testing was providing for 98% of refugees, with only 1% testing positive. The ability of the state to track their immigration population, and to serve them with important health treatment and screenings demonstrate a successful track record and commitment to ensuring the health of their refugee population. These outcomes certainly demonstrate successful outcomes of a region served by an AmeriCorps VISTA project, and of a state willing to share its resources to ensure the safety of its most vulnerable residents.

In addition to refugees, Minnesota has also faced a significant share of homeless residents. Homelessness which proved to be another area of success across the board, was an area in which Minnesota also made key improvements. St. Stephen’s Human Services is a homeless shelter, and homelessness advocacy organization serving the state of Minnesota, which operated an AmeriCorps VISTA project seeking to alleviate homelessness within the state. The organization got its start in the 1960’s as an informal volunteer effort, in which parishioners of St. Stephen’s Church would organize in order to offer services to impoverished and homeless within the Minneapolis community.

The scope of the organization began to grow during the 1980’s, when the sharp increase of homeless rates nationwide, and in Minnesota. As a response, St. Stephens collaborated with ten other churches in order to open a series of what were expected to be temporary homeless shelters across the state. Initially, this was viewed as a form of crisis control, by which to alleviate the sudden homeless epidemic brought about by an
economic recession, and conservative social policies generated by the federal government. While most of the temporary shelters closed, St. Stephens decided that permanent services were needed. In 1991, the church launched the non-profit organization Housing Alliance, which developed properties for use as homeless shelters. Eventually, the church decided that the organization had grown to the point that it would be prudent to seek official non-profit status. This change led to the creation of the current St. Stephen’s Human Services (St. Stephen’s Human Services, 2017).

The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA project seeks to assist homelessness efforts through sustainable projects that can increase volunteer involvement and community awareness of the issues surrounding homelessness. The AmeriCorps VISTA project led to outreach exercises, such as “A Day in the Life of the Homeless”, during which members of the state’s homeless population share their experiences. Presenters discuss the social issues that affect their situations, including systemic racism, substance abuse, and mental illness. Participants are also given tours of homeless shelters, in order to achieve a greater understanding of what it is like to be homeless and relegated to relying upon overcrowded centers for shelter. Furthermore, participants learn how extreme poverty and homelessness can happen to anyone, and that it takes the dedication of volunteers in order to meet the challenges presented by homelessness (Botzek, 2010).

The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA members were utilized to achieve a multitude of objectives, including volunteer recruitment and training, organizing a volunteer arts program, fundraising efforts, and educating landlords as to the programs available to assist those who provide housing for impoverished citizens (Brown, 2010).
The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation tracks Minnesota’s homelessness statistics in order to educate the general public as to the seriousness of the issue (Wilder Foundation, 2009). The benefits of the St. Stephens AmeriCorps VISTA project are assessed through a comparison of Wilder Foundation statistics from their 2009 and 2015 reports. The 2009 data painted a bleak picture, with 9,654 people considered to be homeless. Of the homeless population, 52% had been homeless for at least one year, with an average of just $300 per month income. 21% of those surveyed reported poor job opportunities as a key reasoning for their homelessness. Mental health issues were also a resinous problem, with 59% reporting serious mental health issues impacting their lack of housing or employment. Sadly, over 1,200 children were included among Minnesota’s homeless population.

The 2015 figures point to a positive trend in homelessness. The Wilder Foundation reports the first reduction in homelessness in nearly a decade, with 9,312 people counted as homeless in Minnesota. The number of homeless children also dropped to 779, a significant reduction from 2009 numbers. Wages also increased slightly to $550 per month. However, serious issues remain, as 54% of the state’s homeless population reported being homeless lasting more than one year, which is a slight increase over 2009. Mental health issues remained nearly stagnant, with 60% reporting serious mental health issues in 2015. St. Stephen’s Human Services can point to a recent drop in number of homeless individuals in Minnesota over the course of their AmeriCorps VISTA project. While those who are experiencing homelessness remain in dire circumstances, it does appear that human services agencies are doing a better job in helping the homeless overcome their adversity.
Minnesota even appears to buck the national trend of lower volunteer rates, with its stellar Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration; an organization with over 800 members, is the largest membership organization for professional volunteer leaders in the state of Minnesota. Founded in 2001, the organization seeks to align non-profit leaders across the state, in order to help these agencies thrive. The association is made up of volunteer leaders from many walks of life, such as representatives from social service agencies, religious groups, health care services, education, and grassroots community volunteers (MAVA, 2017.)

However, the organization was born out of a somewhat embarrassing situation, in which President Bill Clinton established the “Presidents' Summit for America's Future” initiative, only to find that there were no organizations to carry out associated volunteer efforts in Minnesota. As a response, non-profit leaders met to organize an association that could link and streamline volunteer efforts across the state. The Association’s past president, Mike Newman wrote of the association’s vital presence in the state’s non-profit sector, “with the closing of the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services during Governor Jesse Ventura's administration in 2002 and severe cuts to social programs in subsequent years, Minnesota's volunteer programs are under increasingly severe strain. The resources and education provided by MAVA are now more vital than ever” (Newman, 2017).

The Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA members recruited in 2009 served as Community Volunteer Coordinators and performed their duties with various partnering agencies throughout the state. One key aspect of their service was to develop infrastructure that demonstrated how partnering organizations could provide services to
and engage Minnesota’s senior citizens. Increasing the overall funding stream for partnering organizations was another key aspect of their capacity building services. To approach this, AmeriCorps VISTAs developed or restructured the various organizations’ database systems. In addition, AmeriCorps VISTAs also developed training courses designed to instruct service providers and volunteers with best practices of volunteer management. These courses would instruct providers on ways to both gain and retain community volunteers (Nahvi, 2009).

As the Association serves non-profits tackling many issues associated with poverty, a strong way to measure the Association’s success in fighting poverty in Minnesota is to explore socioeconomic data and examine comparisons from both before and after the 2009-2010 AmeriCorps VISTA grant year. The state’s poverty rate will be examined, accounting for both the general population as well as seniors (as seniors were a target area of the AmeriCorps VISTA project). Volunteerism in Minnesota will also be examined and compared, as a measure of the Association’s ability to promote the benefits of and the need for volunteers.

According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, the percentage of Minnesota residents living in poverty was 9.6% in 2008, compared to a higher 11.5% in 2014. Among seniors, the 2008 poverty rate was 8.6%, compared to 7.5% in 2014. While poverty rose between 2008 and 2014, the rate of poverty among seniors decreased. In 2007 and 2015, the Corporation for National and Community Service surveyed volunteerism throughout the United States. In the 2007 figures, Minnesota ranked third in the nation, with 40.4% of the state’s population involved in volunteer activities. In 2015, Minnesota climbed a spot to second in the nation, with 35.4% of residents volunteering.
Overall, while slightly more residents are living in poverty than were in 2008, and fewer people are volunteering today, Minnesota’s data demonstrates some key victories. In addition, the state is one of the highest ranking in terms of volunteerism. The fact that Minnesota has either maintained or improved its socioeconomic data related to poverty, the state certainly appears to have benefitted from its robust AmeriCorps VISTA presence.

**Moderate Success in Illinois, Indiana & Iowa**

While Minnesota is the highest-ranking AmeriCorps VISTA state in the North Central cluster, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa achieved reasonable social progress with their AmeriCorps VISTA projects as well. Illinois, being the largest state within the North Central Cluster, hosted a wide variety of projects, encompassing many of the five CNCS focus areas. Indiana and Iowa, on the other hand, are better representative of the North Central cluster, in terms of population. However, all three states were successful with over 60% of their AmeriCorps VISTA projects.

The Illinois AmeriCorps VISTA projects are represented by well-respected non-profit entities throughout the state: the Chicago Area Project, Cra-Wa-La, Volunteers in Probation, and Goodwill Industries. University of Chicago sociologist Clifford Shaw founded the Chicago Area Project in the 1930’s, after deciding it was time to battle juvenile delinquency, which plagued Chicago’s low-income neighborhoods during the Great Depression. Central to the Chicago Area Project’s mission is a community minded approach to solving local problems. Essentially, the organization’s goal is to help Chicago solve its own social problems (Schlossman & Sedlak, 1983).
Throughout the twentieth century, the Chicago Area Project developed crucial relationships with area community service organizations, and private sector businesses, in order to showcase the importance of a safe and educated community. It was this system of networking, and building a solid reputation, that allowed the Chicago Area Project to remain open following severe state budget cuts in 1981 that forced much of the organization’s staff to be laid off. However, this time of adversity led the Chicago Area Project toward one of its most vital partnerships to date, with the Department of Children and Family Services, where it continues to hold a line item in the department’s budget (Chicago Area Project).

In 2009, the Chicago Area Project launched an AmeriCorps VISTA team to develop the “Pathways to Self Sufficiency” program, which sought to alleviate the hardships generated by the 2008 recession. In this program, AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted in building the capacity of existing employment training centers, as they were met with larger caseloads. AmeriCorps VISTA members organized campaigns to link various employment service providers together and develop streamlined services in order to mentor unemployed residents, as well as train them for jobs that were locally available, and finally, linking them to gainful employment (Taylor-Dudley, 2009).

While the Chicago Area Project is primarily rooted in reducing social problems and trends relating to juvenile delinquency, their AmeriCorps VISTA project specifically centered on increasing employment in the Chicago area. When the project’s AmeriCorps VISTA members took office in April 2009, the unemployment rate in Cook County was 10%, higher than the national average of 8.9%. By the end of 2009, Cook County’s unemployment rate continued to rise to 11.3%, while the national average climbed to
10%. By the end of 2012, Cook County began to follow the national trend toward receding unemployment rates, by a narrow margin, according to Department of Labor figures. In April of 2012, Cook County’s unemployment rate stood at 9.2%, and ticked back to 9.5% in December of 2012. By January 2014, unemployment was still above 9%, but began to drop substantially by the end of the year, dropping to just 6%. While there exists no way to measure how significant AmeriCorps VISTA’s role was in reducing unemployment in the Chicago area, the city has seen a reduction in the number of people who are unemployed. As AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted in preparing employment service providers for the onslaught of residents left unemployed by the recession, the unemployment figures from ensuing years point to the city’s success in managing its high unemployment crisis.

According to U.S. Census figures, Cook County’s population has also rises during this period, from 5,194,675 in 2010 to an estimated 5,203,499 in 2016. This demonstrates that Cook County was able to bounce back from the recession without suffering a mass exodus of discouraged job seekers.

Illinois also hosted a rarity within AmeriCorps VISTA, through its statewide project hosted by Cra-Wa-La, Volunteers in Probation. This organization, which is primarily a small entity located in Southeastern Illinois, took proactive steps following the 2008 economic downturn, which led to its unique relationship with the CNCS. Due to the sting of the state’s budget problems, Cra-Wa-La’s Executive Director, Marie Goff, applied for, and was awarded an AmeriCorps VISTA project that enabled the organization to not only stay afloat, but to expand its outreach across the state of Illinois. Among the partnerships created through Cra-Wa-La’s AmeriCorps VISTA project,
known as the “Juvenile Justice Project” were the Illinois 2nd Judicial Circuit, Illinois Council on Youth, and the Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice Project. AmeriCorps VISTA members serving with Cra-Wa-La served in a variety of capacities, including the formation of teen courts throughout the state, which serve to isolate lower level juvenile crimes away from the court system. Teen courts allow these issues to be decided by fellow students and community stakeholders, who identify solutions toward rectifying harm without subjecting youths to the official court system (Cra-Wa-La.org).

AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in strengthening Cra-Wa-La’s local ties with the Lawrence County community. By 2011, the Lawrence County Mentoring program had been established as a revamping of Cra-Wa-La’s original mentoring work dating back to the 1970’s. A drug court was also established in Lawrence County, as a means to keep low level drug offenders out of the Department of Corrections, provided they subject themselves to an intense, yet community based program that targeted addiction (Cra-Wa-La.org).

Cra-Wa-La still has an AmeriCorps VISTA presence to this day and has expanded its original goals of juvenile justice reform, to include services including adult literacy, English as a second language, crime prevention initiatives, and a partnership with the Illinois Students against Destructive Decisions. Cra-Wa-La’s story is one of persistence, and a willingness to overcome state level political battles that closed many other small service providers across Illinois (Williams, 2013). While Cra-Wa-La has developed partnerships across the state, the bulk of its work occurs in Lawrence County, in the southeastern section of the state.
Based on available data, Lawrence County has demonstrated improvement in two key socioeconomic factors. In high school graduation rates, Lawrence County improved its standing 0.2 percent between 2010 and 2012, with 79.5% of county students graduating with a high school diploma. Lawrence County finished ahead of the state, which saw a 1.5% drop in the graduation rate during this period, according to figures compiled by the Social Impact Research Center at Heartland Alliance. The same report also signaled a 3.1% decrease in the county’s poverty rate, dropping to 14.4%.

Unfortunately, the teen birth rate rose over 4% between 2008 and 2009. Interestingly, the rise in the teen birth rate occurred at the same time as the 2008 recession occurred, which resulted in agencies such as Cra-Wa-La losing a bulk of its funding for teen mentoring programs. Despite the teen birth figures, Lawrence County saw improvement in two vital indicators relating to the juvenile population, poverty rates and high school graduation.

However, one Illinois project that failed to generate positive socioeconomic results, ironically, was hosted by the most well-known of the three studied AmeriCorps VISTA hosts in the state, Goodwill Industries. As the Northern Illinois branch of Goodwill’s national chain, eighteen counties are served in northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. Goodwill is best known for its chain of stores, in which citizens donate unwanted, gently used clothing and household items. These items are then sold at low prices, so that low income customers can purchase essential clothing and household needs. The stores are also noted for hiring disabled employees that are often overlooked by other employers (Goodwill Northern Illinois).

However, Goodwill also offers other, lesser known services to assist disadvantaged persons throughout the country; which became the focus of Goodwill’s
AmeriCorps VISTA project in 2009. The organization recruited five AmeriCorps VISTA members to build capacity in five areas, including development of senior programs, financial literacy, the formation of an income tax center, development of safer lending opportunities, and volunteer recruitment (Daily Chronicle, 2009).

As Goodwill stores seek to address poverty on several fronts, their success can be best measured in an examination of poverty rates in each county in the Goodwill Northern Illinois service area, of which a store is located. Unfortunately, Census data demonstrates a net rise in poverty rates from 2008-2012 in each of the counties that host a Goodwill store. For the Illinois counties, Dekalb County increased its poverty rate by 2.5%, to 16.1%, Kane County jumped 2% to 11%, La Salle rose by 4% to 14.4%, McHenry County rose 2.4% to 7.6%, Stephenson County increased 2.1% to 15%, Whiteside County rose .6% to 11.9%, while Winnebago County, where Goodwill Northern Illinois is headquartered, rose 2.5% to 16.1%. The single Wisconsin county with a Goodwill Northern Illinois location, Rock County, also saw an increase in poverty of 2.7% to 13.2% of residents living in poverty. While Goodwill is not the sole anti-poverty organization in the area, it does demonstrate that despite a vigorous AmeriCorps VISTA presence, poverty rates only increased.

Indiana and Iowa hosted a wide variety of AmeriCorps VISTA projects, focusing social issues such as veterans’ affairs, civil rights, and healthy futures. Civil rights concerns led to multiple projects within these two states, including those hosted by Indiana’s Neighborhood Christian League, the Indiana Attorney General’s Office, the Community Corrections Improvement Association in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and the Iowa Civil Rights Commission.
To reduce criminal recidivism, the Indiana Neighborhood Christian Leauge heads Project GRACE, which assists recently released offenders as they navigate through the complicated stages of re-entry. These services can include job training, child support representation, criminal record expungement, and restoration of privileges such as obtaining drivers licenses (NCLC.org). The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA project sought to build capacity in many areas, including community relations, family law, bankruptcy, elder law, and even the recruitment of a French interpreter, who would train volunteers in serving populations with language barriers. These AmeriCorps VISTA members served to both recruit new volunteers, while also assisting volunteer lawyers in the preparation of legal cases affecting their program clients. The project’s AmeriCorps VISTA members were also offered the option of becoming certified legal Interns, through the state, which would allow them to conduct legal hearings. In a strictly volunteer organization, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers perform key services in terms of legal research, and the recruitment of new volunteers (My AmeriCorps).

The Neighborhood Christian legal Clinic provides annual reports only for the years 2013 through 2015, both occurring after the closure of the organization’s 2009-2010 AmeriCorps VISTA project. However, these reports demonstrate the sustainability of the organization’s key programs. In 2013, the organization reported having 40 paid staff members and 130 community volunteers who generated 8,354 volunteer hours. The Immigrant Justice Program served 286 clients, including the filing of 111 applications for DACA status for newborns. The Victim Justice Program represented 165 victims of various forms of violent crime, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Project GRACE served 950 recently released prisoners through a variety of
seminars and trainings. The Consumer Justice Program noted substantial victories, including the reversal of 428 foreclosures, and recovering $263,266 in tax dollars returned to clients.

In the most recently filed report, for the year 2014, the organization’s paid staff was reduced to 36, yet generated over 5,000 volunteer hours. The Immigrant Justice Program served a slightly smaller number of immigrants, at 250, while filing 68 requests for DACA status. The Victim Justice Program represented 129 individuals, a significantly smaller number from 2013. Project GRACE served 1,998 recently released prisoners, signaling a dramatic increase over figures. The Consumer Justice Program reversed 451 foreclosures, a narrow increase over 2013 rates, while recovering $1,290,242 in tax refunds. The Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic has witnessed substantial improvements, others demonstrate a downward slope in the number of people served. The fewer number of volunteer hours also demonstrates the likelihood of overworked staff and volunteers, who are trying to serve more participants, with fewer volunteers. While the outputs are encouraging, the organization itself illustrates barriers to sustainability of its projects.

In Indiana, Attorney General Greg Zoeller (2009-2017) was fast to address one of the more controversial issues throughout the state at the time, the “do not call” lists which sought to protect Indiana residents from unwanted commercial solicitation. Initially, the law covered only landlines, but Zoeller’s efforts ultimately expanded the law to cover cellular phones as well. This was a consistent trademark of Zoeller’s time in office, as he dedicated special attention to consumer protection issues (Republican Attorney Generals
Association). During his first year in office, Zoeller enlisted the help of AmeriCorps VISTA, in order to build his office’s consumer protection service capacity.

The AmeriCorps VISTA members were placed in charge of an initiate to recruit and train pro bono lawyers to provide services to Indiana residents experiencing legal issues related to consumer matters. Services targeted for improvement under the AmeriCorps VISTA project included, predatory lending, identity theft, foreclosure prevention, and mortgage fraud (Mayer, 2009). The state’s thirteen-member AmeriCorps VISTA team ultimately established a statewide outreach network, which included over 40 partnerships with libraries, law offices, non-profits, and government agencies throughout Indiana. By the conclusion of the project, in July 2010, the AmeriCorps VISTA team was able to boast of numerous accomplishments stemming from their outreach network, including over 370 meetings and trainings with service providers. The AmeriCorps VISTAs also held 361 public informational events on the office’s consumer protection services, that reached 25,000 Indiana residents, and signing up nearly 1,500 residents on the state’s “do not call” registry. Additionally, the state could link nearly $95,000 in unclaimed property to rightful owners (Press Release, 2010).

While Attorney General Zoeller’s AmeriCorps VISTA team provided beneficial services to the state during their year of service, their ultimate effectiveness must be judged on the state’s ability to offer these services during successive years. To more effectively examine the project’s sustainability, foreclosure numbers are compared in years both prior to, and following the AmeriCorps VISTA term of service. In 2008, the year of the great recession, 45,937 Indiana homes were foreclosed. This staggering number was 114% higher than the number of foreclosures issued just two years prior,
according to numbers reported by RealtyTrac, a national real estate firm. By 2014, the number of new foreclosures had dropped significantly, to 19,486; following a slow trend of foreclosure reductions since the recession of 2008 (Indiana Judicial Service Report, 2014).

The Indiana Attorney General’s AmeriCorps VISTA project was enlisted at a time of record foreclosures throughout the state of Indiana. In the years since, it is apparent that the number of foreclosure filings have fallen drastically. While it is not a certainty that it was the AmeriCorps VISTA project that caused this, these numbers do illustrate a substantial socioeconomic recovery experienced by a state that had an AmeriCorps VISTA project seeking to educate residents about how to avoid, or fight foreclosure. As a result, this project would have to be regarded as a success. However, there is little statistical information available as to other issues that the project addressed. The only figures available are the numbers associated with dollar amounts of returned property, and the number of events held, and people reached by the AmeriCorps VISTA project. Once again, AmeriCorps VISTA effectiveness is lost due to a failure to chart outcomes achieved AmeriCorps VISTA efforts.

The Community Corrections Improvement Association in Cedar Rapids, administered by Iowa’s Sixth Judicial Circuit was established in 1991, to reduce recidivism in Linn, Johnson, and Tama counties (Iowacbc.org). The organization seeks to serve both at-risk youth, and adult offenders to both prevent crime, and foster a more peaceful transition back into the community for individuals recently released from prisons. The organization identifies “at-risk” youth to be children between the ages of five and eighteen, who have at least one parent in the state prison system.
The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA members worked to expand two program services within the Community Corrections Improvement Association’s jurisdiction, the VITA tax program, and BRIGHTEN, a neighborhood revitalization project. The organization’s VITA (Volunteer Tax Assistance Program) sought to assist low income residents with no cost tax preparation. Not only does such assistance encourage residents to comply with state and federal tax laws, it also helps these individuals collect the maximum amount of their entitled tax return, without preparation costs, of which low income citizens may not be able to afford. In this project, VISTAs sought out volunteers within the community who were qualified to provide these services. The BRIGHTEN project, meanwhile, was largely a homelessness awareness project which sought to educate area citizens as to the hardships experienced by the state’s homeless population. The 2009-2010 project recruited seventy-one full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members who served within these three counties (SJCDS Annual Report, 2010).

Homelessness in Iowa was slightly reduced between 2008 and 2012, accounting for periods both before and after the 2009-2010 grant period. This illustrates the effectiveness of programs such as BRIGHTEN, which seek to educate potential volunteers as to the need for community involvement in reducing homelessness. According to the Sixth Judicial Circuit’s 2010 Annual report, the VITA program assisted 1,142 Iowa residents with tax preparation assistance, which resulted in a total of $1.8 million returned to these filers.

As a state managed watchdog, the Iowa Civil Rights Commission seeks to ensure that Iowa residents are given protections guaranteed under the “Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1965”. Iowa’s Civil Rights Act mirrors the federal version signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, and bars discrimination in the areas of housing, credit, employment,
education, and public accommodations. The Commission’s AmeriCorps VISTA project for 2009-2010 centered on the organization of presentations aimed at reducing instances of civil rights violations. According to the Commission’s 2010 Annual Report, the topics that Iowa businesses and agencies were most concerned with were workshops related to workplace harassment, diversity, and overall refreshers in civil rights information and policies. These workshops were delivered in a variety of mediums, including online, in-person classes, and video presentations. The Commission reported reaching 17,693 Iowans through a total of 230 events and presentations.

AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted with a revamping of the Commission’s online presence, including their organizational; website, and that of partnering organization, the League of Iowa Human and Civil Rights Agencies. The AmeriCorps VISTA members also created a social media presence for the Commission through the launching of Facebook and Twitter accounts, which provide outreach to Iowa residents who otherwise would have little or no contact or knowledge of the Commission and its goals.

Throughout the year, AmeriCorps VISTA members were placed at host sites in eleven cities throughout Iowa, including Ames, Davenport, Fort Dodge, Sioux City, and Waterloo. In addition to planning and providing presentations, these AmeriCorps VISTA members also sought to ingratiate themselves in the local public sector, attending community meetings. At these meetings, VISTA members would occasional deliver presentations about their service work (differing from official civil rights presentations) and join local
coalition meetings to render the Commission’s presence better known in communities throughout the state.

From 2010 to 2012, the Iowa Civil Rights commission received fewer complaints of possible civil rights violations, standing at 1811, compared to 1905 in 2009-2010. In all areas covered by the Commission, credit, education, public accommodations, housing, and employment, fewer cases were logged between 2010 and 2012. The Commission’s 2012 annual report also explained a reduction in the backlog of complaints that were carried over from previous years.

As the Commission’s AmeriCorps VISTA project had expired prior to 2012, there were fewer presentations and outreach events than were held during the VISTA project time, but the Commission still reported 40 presentations, which reached 10,786 Iowa residents. As in 2010, the Commission maintained a presence at the Iowa State Fair, in which over 12,000 residents were given materials explaining the workings of the Commission. The 2012 annual report also reported fair housing laws as the most requested topic for presentations, by which the Commission regularly hosts seminars on the rights and responsibilities of landlords under the Iowa Civil Rights Act (ICRC, 2012).

The Iowa Civil Rights Commission illustrates success in their ability to maintain a vigorous public presence post-AmeriCorps VISTAs. The presentations that AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted in the development of, are still active and reaching a considerable number of Iowa residents. Most importantly, the Commission is reporting fewer new complaints of civil rights violations, signaling greater levels of cooperation from Iowa businesses and agencies. Additionally, the reduction of a chronic backlog of
complaints from previous years illustrates the Commission's ability to better serve the people of Iowa.

Aiding the economically disadvantaged was also a key focus of AmeriCorps VISTA projects in Indiana and Iowa. The American Legion Auxiliary in Indianapolis, exists to serve veterans and active military families, as they face the consequences of war. The organization was established by the United States Congress in 1919. The original purpose was to bolster patriotism for veterans returning from the First World War. The American Legion estimates that the U.S. economy grows $7 for every dollar the program spent on veterans and their families (The American Legion).

In 2009, the American Legion enlisted an AmeriCorps VISTA project, as the rate of veterans living in poverty rose to 5.9%, or 1.4 million of the 23 million American military veterans. The role of the project's AmeriCorps VISTA team was to refurbish the American Legion's performance and outcome operations (Parrot, 2009). A chief success from the AmeriCorps VISTA project was the creation of the “ALA Volunteer Recruitment and Placement System”, which allowed the American Legion greater access to possible volunteers. Under this system, anyone who volunteers are tracked in the database, so that they can be contacted via telephone or email when new volunteer opportunities become available. This targeted approach to volunteer recruitment is effective in retaining volunteers by developing closer relationships to these volunteers (2009-2010 VISTA Report).

Rising suicide levels also spawned the AmeriCorps VISTA led ALA KIDDs (Kids in Danger of Depression and Suicide) program, which sought to provide needed mental health treatment and counseling for children and teens of military families.
Additionally, ALA KIDDs sought to encourage military families to participate in a greater number of family centered activities. AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in the creation of a long term strategic plan, which sought to achieve long term sustainability for the American Legion, its satellite organizations, and its volunteer programs. This plan identified areas in which the projects could remain staffed, while also identifying funding sources that could keep the organization funded (2009-2010 Annual Report).

Today’s veterans are less prone to be living in poverty than non-veterans, according to the National Veterans Foundation. In 2012, only 6.6% of veterans were living in poverty, as compared to the 14.4% national average. Unemployment figures for veterans also demonstrate improvements, as the percentage of unemployed veterans dropped to 6.9% in 2012, compared to 8% in 2009. The number of Homeless Veterans has also declined since 2009. The National Alliance to End Homelessness reported in 2014 that the number of homeless veterans was 49,933 or 8.6% of the entire population of homeless Americans. This is a dramatic drop (67.4%) from the figures reported in 2009. Programs that seek to train veterans for new careers, as well as improved access to health care, including mental health screenings, have allowed more veterans to escape poverty (National Alliance to End Poverty, 2015).

There is little doubt that organizations such as the American Legion can claim responsibility for the lower rates of poverty experienced by America’s veterans. The Legion’s partnership with AmeriCorps VISTA has allowed the organization to more effectively utilize volunteer efforts, through improved internal tracking systems and databases. This increase in capacity correlates with improved conditions experienced by
veterans. The lower rates of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness experienced by veterans since the Legion’s AmeriCorps VISTA partnership began in 2009, demonstrates that the organization’s capacity to serve has been substantially improved as a result.

In Iowa, the Central Iowa Shelter & Services, is a homeless shelter in Des Moines made veteran outreach a centerpiece of the organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, as a VISTA position was created to streamline area services available to veterans statewide. In a job posting, the organization claimed that the VISTA member would identify existing services available to veterans, as well as determine gaps in these services (CentralIowaShelter.org).

Public awareness was another key aspect of the organization’s VISTA presence. One VISTA role sought to increase the organization’s media presence through identification of, and introduction to the area news media. The goal of such outreach was to make local media sources more aware of the organization, to generate positive media coverage that could generate volunteer dollars. Four other VISTA positions were created to mobilize community members for increased volunteer supports. Typical for VISTA assignments, is the creation of organizational social media accounts and computerized databases to store volunteer and benefactor information. This information allows easier access for outreach related to special events, or donation drives. An increased social media presence, also brings the organization a greater public awareness. This allows community members an opportunity to see what the organization does, putting a face on the organization and those it serves (Facebook posts-2011).

According to the Institute for Community Alliances, 9,049 individuals in Des Moines received homelessness services in 2008, out of 17,476 individuals statewide (out
of a state population of over 2.8 million). As a state, this was an increase of 6% over 2007 figures. Three percent of Iowa’s homeless, or near homeless, were military veterans. It is important to note that this includes services rendered by multiple service providers, not limited to the Central Iowa Shelter & Services (Iowans Experiencing Homelessness, 2008). Statewide figures are relevant to this study, as the organization accepts patients statewide. Therefore, a larger picture allows a scholarly examination as to whether the AmeriCorps VISTA presence positively affected the relevant symptoms of poverty.

The Institute’s 2012 figures illustrate a narrow reduction in homelessness, as 16,238 individuals (out of a state population of 3.076 million) received homelessness assistance in 2012, following the completion of the 2009-10 VISTA grant period. However, roughly 10% of the state’s homeless population were veterans, which signals an increase in the number of homeless veterans living in the state (Iowans Experiencing Homelessness, 2012). As for the organization itself, the Central Iowa Shelter & Services moved to a new facility in 2012, increasing the number of beds to 207, from 96 in the older facility. The size of the veteran transitional unit also increased from fourteen to nineteen beds (CentralIowaShelter.org). The drop in homelessness, along with the expanded service capabilities experienced by the organization between 2008 and 2012, suggest that an AmeriCorps VISTA presence did positively contribute to a reduction in the number of individuals experiencing poverty throughout the state of Iowa.

Indiana’s Red Cross operations also benefitted from its AmeriCorps VISTA project. The organization is sectioned into regional sub-organizations that serve the needs of their local communities. The American Red Cross of Greater Indianapolis serves the
Central Indiana counties of Boone, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Marion, and Morgan, which make up the city of Indianapolis and its surrounding suburbs. This region of the American Red Cross focuses on five areas of relief, including, disaster relief, support services for military families, lifesaving blood services, health safety services, and international services, in which the organization partners with their national colleagues in order to address disaster and humanitarian crises across the globe (United Way of Central Indiana).

AmeriCorps VISTA members serving with the Greater Indianapolis chapter of the Red Cross provided several capacity building services, which helped the organization attain new volunteers, as well as generate new funding sources. Some of the duties that these AmeriCorps VISTA members were assigned included researching grant opportunities, and editing grant proposals before they were submitted; as well as delivering presentations to area civic groups, with the goal of both spreading awareness, and generating new volunteers and benefactors (Scott, 2017).

Measuring the success of a local American Red Cross presence can be a challenging task, as much of their efforts tie into larger, national trends. However, researchers can examine local health statistics in order to determine whether an active Red Cross presence, aided by an AmeriCorps VISTTA project, can correlate to healthier residents. The University of Wisconsin’s Population Health Institute compiles annual reports as to the overall health of all fifty states, at the county level. To determine the health of the counties impacted by the American Red Cross’s Greater Indianapolis unit, figures are compared between 2010, while the studied AmeriCorps VISTA project was
still active, and figures from 2012, two years following the completion of the
AmeriCorps VISTA grant year.

In 2010, Boone County scored 4th in both health outcomes and health factors.
Hamilton County scored 1st in both areas. Hancock County placed 22nd in health
outcomes and 6th place in health factors. Hendricks County scored 2nd in both
categories. Marion County, where the city of Indianapolis is located, scored 80th in
health outcomes and 87th in health factors. Morgan County placed 40th in health
outcomes, and 32nd in health factors.

The updated 2012 figures show slight improvements upon the 2010 rankings.
Boone County improved its score, placing 2nd in both health outcomes and health
factors. Hamilton County maintained its 1st in the state rankings in both categories.
Hancock County fell to 28th in health outcomes, while rising to 4th in health factors.
Hendricks County fell slightly, to 5th place in health outcomes, and 3rd in health factors.
Marion County placed 82nd in health outcomes and 85th in health factors. Morgan
County placed 42nd in health outcomes and 31st in health factors. Aside from Marion
and Morgan counties, the remainder of the Greater Indianapolis service area
demonstrated not only high rankings overall, but also showed improvement between
2010 and 2012.

AmeriCorps VISTA projects that focus entirely on increasing volunteer rates
within their service areas see the lowest rate of success. Iowa hosted one such project,
The Iowa Campus Compact, which is a state-wide partnership of university officials who
seek to encourage college students to become further engaged in their respective
communities, both during and after their educational careers. Consistent with many other
AmeriCorps VISTA projects, members serving with the Iowa Campus Compact sought out an increase in community volunteers and financial benefactors that can keep the organization, and its community projects sustainable long after the AmeriCorps VISTA project expires.

According to the Iowa Campus Compact’s Facebook page, during the period covered under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Iowa Campus Compact’s project included partnerships that included the AIB College of Business and Children & Family Urban Ministries in Des Moines, along with Coe College and Cornell College of Cedar Rapids. These projects offered varied service opportunities that impacted communities throughout the state. At the AIB College of Business, AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted with capacity building efforts in the school’s Service Learning Center, in which members developed a database to track volunteer information, as well as developing a survey system by which the Center could grade its existing projects. The Children and Family Urban Ministries site used their VISTA members to recruit volunteers to assist with a struggling adult literacy program in a low income and ethnically diverse community.

In response to a campus-wide survey, the project focused its AmeriCorps VISTA efforts around mentoring programs, and activities to help new students adapt more easily to campus living. Meanwhile, at Cornell College, the Civic Engagement Center sought to encourage students to be community members throughout their lives. The AmeriCorps VISTAs serving with the school developed a tracking system that allowed the Civic Engagement Center to continually update their alumni information, in order to determine the level of civic engagement from former student members.
In the Volunteer Iowa organization’s 2010 annual report, the state was found to have the second highest volunteerism ranking in the nation and claimed to increase its rate of volunteerism by 35% from 2007-2009. However, the state’s volunteerism rates have been slowly dropping in the years since. In 2012, Iowa dropped to fifth place nationally in the percentage of residents who volunteer. By 2014, Iowa dropped again to seventh place. While still among the top ten states in terms of volunteerism, the trend has been on a downward slope in recent years (Nelson, 2014).

Interestingly, the numbers from 2012-2014 were obtained through the Volunteering and Civic Life in America report commissioned by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which operates all AmeriCorps programs, including VISTA. While the Iowa Campus Compact programs may be doing meaningful work, their goal of generating sustainable community volunteerism has demonstrated an uphill climb over the past five years.

What’s Going on in Michigan?

While the previously documented states demonstrated at least a partial ability to link their AmeriCorps VISTA presence to improved socioeconomic statistics, Michigan serves as an example of near total failure in its handling of AmeriCorps VISTA projects. The state’s AmeriCorps VISTA projects focused on serving disadvantaged residents and increasing local volunteerism. While projects focusing on volunteerism have generally failed across the board, projects aiding impoverished residents typically produce positive results. Sadly, this was not the case in Michigan, as none of its AmeriCorps VISTA projects generated outcomes that can be considered successful.
The Oakland County Child Care Council, the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living, and the Ingham County Health Department represent Michigan’s AmeriCorps VISTA efforts to combat socioeconomic dangers. The Oakland County Child Care Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA project sought to strengthen the Council’s ability to serve the community through a variety of means. One of the chief goals was reviewing the Council’s overall efficiency. Such reviews allow for identification of which programs are running effectively, as well as identifying areas in need of improvement. Volunteer and resource databases were also created, in order to more easily contact volunteers, as well as streamlining access and information related to local area service providers.

Outreach was another key aspect of this AmeriCorps VISTA project, as members were charged with organizing and delivering community presentations and events aimed at raising public awareness of the Council’s efforts. AmeriCorps VISTA members also recruited and trained new volunteers, who organized family literacy events, which included providing low income clients with free children’s and family books. An increase of media coverage was another target of the Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, which hoped to use media outreach as another tool to raise awareness, increase donations, and generate new community volunteers (Miller, 2011). To examine the effectiveness of the Oakland County Child Care Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA assisted efforts, it is important to consider factors such as the percentage of local children living in poverty, abuse and neglect cases, and number of children participating in preschool education. The 2016 Kids Count Survey, examines and compares child care data in Oakland County from 2006 and 2014, and demonstrates a disturbing trend of growing poverty. In 2006,
the local child poverty rate was 8.4%, or a total of 24,495 children. The rate had increased by 2014 to 12.4% or 33,586 children living in poverty.

Rates of families under investigation for child abuse or neglect also rose from 2006 to 2014, with 11,833 investigations in 2006, to 13,640 investigations in 2014. Rates of three and four-year old’s participating in pre-school is also abysmal, and narrowly falling. In 2006, 59% of Oakland County children participated in pre-school activities, while the percentage had fallen by 2014 to 58.7%.

In all three studies categories, Oakland County had demonstrated negative outcomes in relation to child welfare statistics. The number of students living in households receiving SNAP benefits or were eligible for free or reduced school lunches had also risen substantially between 2006 and 2014, demonstrating that the community had not found a sustainable platform in which to target poverty factors relating to the county’s youngest residents. Despite an AmeriCorps VISTA project, charged with generating greater degrees of outreach and attention, the Council cannot point to positive socioeconomic factors that its presence in the community could take pride in. While Oakland County might demonstrate worsening conditions without the Council’s presence, the Council has not been successful in reducing conditions of poverty in Oakland County.

The Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living’s AmeriCorps VISTA project provided capacity-building services to satellite partners across the state of Michigan. The goal of initiating the organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA program was to simplify the linkage of disabled persons to eligible programs and services, regardless of where they live in the state. As part of their services, the project’s twenty-eight VISTA members
recruited and trained volunteers, as well as assisted in grant writing efforts, and streamlining services. When the project started in 2009, the organization’s volunteer structure, while well meaning, lacked structure and direction, according to former AmeriCorps VISTA member Robin Bennett. Over the course of the project, various volunteer tracking systems were developed to ensure that existing volunteers were kept informed of service opportunities, while also seeking new volunteers. AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in the organization’s youth department, which sought to teach important job and independent living skills to disabled teens, to prepare them for adult living (Bennett, 2011).

As the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living seeks to enrich the lives of the state’s disabled population through more active lives in the community, two key socioeconomic factors, the number of disabled students graduating high school, and the number of disabled persons participating in the workforce, are compared in the years since the AmeriCorps VISTA program was in place. In terms of high school graduation, the graduation rate of Michigan’s disabled students was a disappointingly low 52%. This school year ended a year after the completion of the AmeriCorps VISTA grant period, as the program’s recommendations were being established. By the end of the 2013-2014 school year, the graduation rate for disabled students had narrowly improved, to 55.07%.

In terms of job placement, only 28.6% of Michigan’s disabled persons participated in the workforce, compared to 33.6% nationwide, according to the 2010 American Community Survey. Four years later, disabled persons in Michigan’s workforce rose slightly to 29.6%, compared to a national average of 34.4%. The miniscule changes suggest that disabled persons continue to remain largely
underrepresented in the job market. While disabilities may render individuals unable to work, it may also be possible that employers are not inclined to hire disabled persons. For disabled persons with a bachelor’s degree or higher, 46.9% were employed in Michigan in 2014, as compared to 50.7% in 2010. This illustrates a drop in employment even among disabled persons with a college education, which would likely include office work that might not require a great deal of physical activity.

Based upon these socioeconomic figures, it is not fair to determine that the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living was able to generate either positive or negative results. The number of disabled students completing high school is abysmal compared to the rest of the population, and their workforce participation is extremely low, despite services offered by organizations such as the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living. The situation has not worsened but remains a critical problem despite a vigorous AmeriCorps VISTA project.

The Ingham County Health Department’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, known as “The Power of We”, has been running since 2006, and seeks to serve the community through a reduction in area hunger and chronic diseases, as well as making the community more attractive to new businesses and residents, keeping children safe and engaged, and educated (Villanueva, n.d). Among the activities that the project’s AmeriCorps VISTA members are engaged include, community gardens, cooking demos, and organizing nutritional education courses.

As this AmeriCorps VISTA project is housed in a public health department, it has the advantage of being linked to community data, by which its impact on local poverty and health can be tracked. The County’s Behavioral Risk Factor Report measures the
county’s health through a variety of factors, including rates of health issues, such as obesity, diabetes, mental health, smoking, and drinking. Also tracked is local access to health care, healthy foods, and physical activity. This inclusive reporting encompasses not only the number of people afflicted by health issues, but also addresses the probable causes for it, and remedies within the community that can be used to improve community health.

The Behavioral Risk Factor report is completed every three years, most recently in 2016, spanning the years 2011-2013. To access the outcome of the Department’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, the following factors will be compared between the 2008-2010 and 2011-2013 Behavioral Risk Factor reports, poor mental health status, diabetes rates, health coverage, obesity, leisure time physical activity, and fruit and vegetable consumption.

Poor mental health is judged through survey reports of resident reporting at least 14 days per month, in which they feel depressed or anxious. In the 2008-2010 reporting period, 12.1% of Lansing County residents were rated as suffering poor mental health. The 2011-2013 report, which includes two surrounding counties, is nearly static, with 12.6% of respondents reporting several days of feeling depressed. Diabetes rates reported in 2008-2010 were 8.8% of the population, compared to 8.3% in 2011-2013. The number of residents with health coverage was 88.6% in the 2008-2010 reporting period, but was not charted in the 2011-2013 report, possibly due to the Implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

The obesity rate in 2008-2010 was reported at 24.1% and ticked up to 27% in 2011-2013. Ingham County reported that 81.4% of residents claimed to perform an
adequate amount of physical activity during the 2008-2010 reporting period, while the number dropped significantly, to 65.1% in the 2011-2013 report. Nutritional rates were alarmingly low in the 2008-2010 period, with only 20.1% of respondents claiming to eat 5 or more servings of fruits or vegetables per day. The 2011-2013 report did demonstrate significant improvement, however, with 38.3% of Ingham County residents eating at least 5 servings of fruits or vegetables per day. The health figures tracked by the Ingham County Health Department demonstrate that the community has made important improvements in some areas, consumption of nutritious foods. However, negative trends in diabetes rates and physical activity point to troubling health factors in the community that the Department has yet to successfully target, despite a long running AmeriCorps VISTA project.

Michigan’s AmeriCorps VISTA effort to increase volunteerism met the same fate as most other volunteer-building projects within the North Central cluster. The Michigan Nonprofit Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA project serves these programs through four service goals, including student engagement, college access and success, financial literacy, and employment services. This project sends AmeriCorps VISTA members to non-profit organizations and schools throughout the state, in order to strengthen or develop programs hosted by these entities. Annually, the project recruits an average of thirty AmeriCorps VISTA members to carry out the project’s initiatives related to education and economic opportunity (NMAVISTA.org).

AmeriCorps VISTA projects sought to benefit Michigan schools and non-profit organizations by offering these consulting and volunteer streamlining services that would otherwise need to be outsourced to more costly firms. The AmeriCorps VISTA members
can serve through a variety of means, including recruiting and training volunteers, writing grants, and developing social media presences for the hosting organizations (GuideStar, 2017).

As the Michigan Non-Profit Association serves organizations throughout the state of Michigan, their impact on socioeconomic indicators can be measured through statewide statistics, including high school graduation rates, overall poverty rate, and volunteerism. This data can demonstrate whether this AmeriCorps VISTA assisted Association has been successful in improving the conditions of the state’s residents.

Figures from the state of Michigan report that in the 2008-2009 school year, 75.23% of Michigan’s high school seniors graduated, while 11.33% dropped out. However, when only economically disadvantaged students are considered, only 59.57% of high school students graduated in 2009, while 19.26% dropped out. In the 2013-2014 school year, the number of high school students graduating has risen to 78.58%, with only 9.61% of students dropping out. Economically disadvantaged students were graduating at higher levels in 2014 as well, at 65.64%, with only 15.72% of students dropping out. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 16.2% of Michigan’s residents lived in poverty, compared to 17.1% in 2014. Despite the increasing poverty rates in Michigan, the graduation rates have been substantially improving.

As for one of the most important goals of the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteerism, Michigan ranked #17 in the nation with 32.2% of residents claiming to have performed volunteer service in a 2007 report issued by the Corporation. By 2014, Michigan’s ranking had dropped to 26th in the nation, with 26.6%
of residents reporting volunteer participation. As with the statistics on poverty, Michigan has demonstrated a negative trend over the past several years.

The positive numbers associated with high school graduations demonstrate Michigan’s commitment to public education, especially against the odds of higher rates of poverty and fewer residents being civically engaged. However, not even a strong AmeriCorps VISTA project has been able to successfully target growing poverty numbers or encourage a higher number of Michigan’s residents to be civically engaged.

Michigan’s undesirable AmeriCorps VISTA results are puzzling for numerous reasons. Where most projects within the North Central cluster generated considerable success in issues such as healthy futures and education, Michigan was unable to demonstrate success in these or any other areas. Only in few situations were Michigan’s AmeriCorps VISTA projects able to link to static socioeconomic figures. What is also puzzling, is that the state government appeared to support such efforts to reverse declining socioeconomic conditions throughout the state. However, Michigan’s problems were so severe during the years following the 2008 economic downturn, that perhaps the existing social service apparatus was simply overwhelmed by the fresh economic wounds that compounded an already long-suffering state.

Chapter III: Conclusions

The preceding case studies point to a somewhat lacking federal program, based on the criteria assigned in this thesis. However, areas of positive results are sprinkled throughout. When all twenty-five projects are assessed, only eleven, or 44% of projects were rated as successful in reaching their anti-poverty goals. Eight of the twenty-five
projects, or 32% were rated as failures. The remaining six were comprised of projects that produced either static or mixed results. Of those with mixed results, their individual focus areas are charted in the appropriate category of either success or failure. The static and mixed results apply only to the AmeriCorps VISTA project overall.

When measured at the state level, the North Central Cluster presents a wide gap between success and failure. Minnesota is rated at the top, with 100% of their three projects rated as successful. Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin are tied at the bottom with none of their projects meeting the criteria to be considered successful. Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa scored success rates between 66-75%. Of course, state level comparisons do not distinguish between the types of services or goals an AmeriCorps VISTA project seeks to address.

However, when broken into focus areas, an interesting picture is painted, as we can ascertain which issues are more heavily addressed by AmeriCorps VISTA. We can also distinguish how a state’s socioeconomic structure may impact the vitality of an AmeriCorps VISTA project. Economic issues are obviously at the top of concern, with the highest number of project’s focusing on this area. Throughout the twenty-five projects, twelve of them carried an economic focus. Despite the heavy number of projects, only a lackluster 58% are deemed to be successful. The projects that appear to be the most successful, also happen to attract the smallest number of projects. Projects focusing on education were successful 80% of the time, and homelessness-based projects were successful at a rate of 75%. Yet, only five of the projects focused upon educational goals, and only four addressed homelessness. Eight of the projects focused upon healthy futures, and 63% of them are rated as successful. As with economic focused projects, the
figures are only mildly successful. Several of these projects either failed or produced static results. The issue that nearly failed across the board is volunteerism. Despite being AmeriCorps VISTAs flagship focus, aside from defeating poverty; three of the four projects with a volunteer recruitment focus failed to produce desired results.

In terms of state level analysis, we can determine that the types of socioeconomic issues facing a state, their political culture, and the types of AmeriCorps VISTA projects that are chosen, can greatly impact the degree of success achieved by the project. Minnesota, which was the sole state in this study to receive a high-performance rating, tackled issues such as humanitarian support for refugees, and the establishment of a social service network to create job opportunities for the disadvantaged. In terms of political culture, this demonstrates a willingness of individuals and organizations to work together to solve serious problems. The cases examined in Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa demonstrated limited success, as these organizations were scattered throughout the state, with little communication between agencies and organizations. While these states also tackled many of the same issues of Minnesota, these states lacked the cohesive element amongst the social service sector that made the latter successful. Michigan, meanwhile, suffered from both severe socioeconomic problems, and an inability of the state’s social service sector to handle these matters, or an AmeriCorps VISTA presence for that matter.

This thesis demonstrates that AmeriCorps VISTA has certainly helped non-profit and governmental agencies serve economically disadvantaged persons, especially in terms of improving economic and health indicators. However, the program has failed to generate a higher rate of volunteerism, at least within the North Central Cluster. Despite this, it is the rate of volunteer recruitment that the CNCS places the greatest emphasis.
While this is clearly the area where improvement is most critically needed, AmeriCorps VISTA might be well served to place greater emphasis on their ability to generate improved economic strength and community health. Even with fewer volunteers, organizations with an AmeriCorps VISTA presence have been able to offer more services to their communities. 64% of the charted projects can point to either improved or steady relevant socioeconomic indicators.

In an era with instant gratification expected from the federal government, the CNCS would be wise to point to relevant socioeconomic figures as a significant reporting tool. Simply reporting upon internal operations will not impress a government and voting population that expects easily identifiable progress. Success can no longer be a reading of how stable the bureaucracy might be. Rather, it is up to the bureaucracy to link its health and future to the world around it.
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Appendix: Organizational Profiles

The following are detailed profiles of each of the AmeriCorps VISTA projects that were studied in this research. These profiles provide information as to the focus areas of each project, and assesses their degree of effectiveness, based upon relevant government data.

Chicago Area Project- Chicago, IL

University of Chicago sociologist Clifford Shaw founded the Chicago Area Project in the 1930’s, after deciding it was time to battle juvenile delinquency, which plagued Chicago’s low-income neighborhoods during the Great Depression. Central to the Chicago Area Project’s mission is a community minded approach to solving local problems. Essentially, the organization’s goal is to help Chicago solve its own social problems (Schlossman & Sedlak, 1983).

The Chicago Area Project serves the people of Chicago through community organizing, advocacy, and direct service. Community organizing is an approach of spreading awareness within local communities as to issues such as truancy, drug abuse, or violent crime that affects the area. If community members are more aware of which problems exist, the multitude of these problems, and ways to prevent or curb such problems, then the community will be more capable of tackling its own ills. Advocacy differs from community organizing, as this approach includes lobbying elected officials and benefactors who can benefits the goals of the organization. Finally, direct service is the face to face assistance offered to local residents through the various programs that an organization offers (Chicago Area Project).

Throughout the twentieth century, the Chicago Area Project developed crucial relationships with area community service organizations, and private sector businesses, in order to showcase the importance of a safe and educated community. It was this system of networking, and building a solid reputation, that allowed the Chicago Area Project to remain open following severe state budget cuts in 1981 that forced much of the organization’s staff to be laid off. However, this time of adversity led the Chicago Area Project toward one of its most vital partnerships to date, with the Department of Children and Family Services, where it continues to hold a line item in the department’s budget (Chicago Area Project).

In 2009, the Chicago Area Project launched an AmeriCorps VISTA team to develop the “Pathways to Self Sufficiency” program, which sought to alleviate the hardships generated by the 2008
recession. In this program, AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted in building the capacity of existing employment training centers, as they were met with larger caseloads. AmeriCorps VISTA members organized campaigns to link various employment service providers together and develop streamlined services in order to mentor unemployed residents, as well as train them for jobs that were locally available, and finally, linking them to gainful employment (Taylor-Dudley, 2009).

Cra-Wa-La Volunteers in Probation, Inc.-Lawrenceville, IL

Founded in 1971 by Judge Phillip Benefiel, Cra-Wa-La was established as a mentoring program for youths in rural Lawrence County, IL. By 1973, the program had spread to the surrounding counties of Crawford and Wabash, lending to its present moniker, Cra-Wa-La (Tumblr, 2015). As a human services organization that is almost solely reliant upon grant funding, it was vital for Cra-Wa-La to develop linkages with state and federal sources in order to fund their flagship mentoring program. This program, which matched children, often with parents incarcerated in the Illinois Department of Corrections, sought to link the area’s at-risk youth with positive adult role models.

Unfortunately, state budget cuts following the 2008 recession left agencies including Cra-Wa-La, facing difficult choices to gain funding. In the summer of 2009, Cra-Wa-La was notified by the Illinois Department of Human Services, that it no longer had the state funding to cover many of their programs, including the Community Youth Services grant, and the Unified Delinquency Services program. This development was potentially disastrous to Cra-Wa-La, as the Community Youth Services grant allowed the organization to expand to a total of thirteen counties in Southern Illinois (Weskerna, 2009).

Due to the sting of the state’s budget problems, Cra-Wa-La’s Executive Director, Marie Goff, applied for, and was awarded an AmeriCorps VISTA project that enabled the organization to not only stay afloat, but to expand its outreach across the state of Illinois. Among the partnerships created through Cra-Wa-La’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, known as the “Juvenile Justice Project” were the Illinois 2nd Judicial Circuit, Illinois Council on Youth, and the Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice Project. AmeriCorps VISTA members serving with Cra-Wa-La served in a variety of capacities, including the formation of teen courts throughout the state, which serve to isolate lower level juvenile crimes away from the court system.
Teen courts allow these issues to be decided by fellow students and community stakeholders, who identify solutions toward rectifying harm without subjecting youths to the official court system (Cra-Wa-La.org).

AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in strengthening Cra-Wa-La’s local ties with the Lawrence County community. By 2011, the Lawrence County Mentoring program had been established as a revamping of Cra-Wa-La’s original mentoring work dating back to the 1970’s. A drug court was also established in Lawrence County, as a means to keep low level drug offenders out of the Department of Corrections, provided they subject themselves to an intense, yet community based program that targeted addiction (Cra-Wa-La.org).

Cra-Wa-La still has an AmeriCorps VISTA presence to this day and has expanded its original goals of juvenile justice reform, to include services including adult literacy, English as a second language, crime prevention initiatives, and a partnership with the Illinois Students against Destructive Decisions. Cra-Wa-La’s story is one of persistence, and a willingness to overcome state level political battles that closed many other small service providers across Illinois (Williams, 2013).

American Legion Auxiliary National Headquarters: Indianapolis, IN

The American Legion Auxiliary exists to serve veterans and active military families, as they face the consequences of war. The organization was established by the United States Congress in 1919. The original purpose was to bolster patriotism for veterans returning from the First World War. The initial members were recently discharged soldiers who sought to rid the world of war. Among the organization’s first notable accomplishments was the formation of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, which served as a model for the current Veterans Administration. In 1943, the American Legion lobbied the Roosevelt Administration in support of the G.I. Bill of Rights, which provided essential compensation for veterans returning home. As more people were achieving college education based upon the G.I. Bill of Rights, the economy grew substantially during the ensuing years. The American Legion estimates that the U.S. economy grew $7 for every dollar the program spent on veterans and their families (The American Legion).

In 2009, the American Legion enlisted an AmeriCorps VISTA project, as the rate of veterans living in poverty rose to 5.9%, or 1.4 million of the 23 million American military veterans. The role of the project’s AmeriCorps VISTA team was to refurbish the American Legion’s performance and outcome operations (Parrot, 2009). A chief success from the AmeriCorps VISTA project was the creation of the
“ALA Volunteer Recruitment and Placement System”, which allowed the American Legion greater access to possible volunteers. Under this system, anyone who volunteers are tracked in the database, so that they can be contacted via telephone or email when new volunteer opportunities become available. This targeted approach to volunteer recruitment is effective in retaining volunteers by developing closer relationships to these volunteers (2009-2010 VISTA Report).

Rising suicide levels also spawned the AmeriCorps VISTA led ALA KIDDS (Kids in Danger of Depression and Suicide) program, which sought to provide needed mental health treatment and counseling for children and teens of military families. Additionally, ALA KIDDS sought to encourage military families to participate in a greater number of family centered activities. AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in the creation of a long term strategic plan, which sought to achieve long term sustainability for the American Legion, its satellite organizations, and its volunteer programs. This plan identified areas in which the projects could remain staffed, while also identifying funding sources that could keep the organization funded (2009-2010 Annual Report).

**American Red Cross of Greater Indianapolis- Indianapolis, IN**

The Red Cross is one of the more well-known humanitarian organizations within the United States. Their relief operations are used to combat several disasters, both natural and man-made. Through citizen donations of blood, time, and money, the American Red Cross comes to the aid of an emergency roughly every eight minutes (Red Cross.org). Founded in 1881 by Clara Barton, the organization originally served as both a military aid and political lobbying effort, which included the successful campaign to ratify the Geneva Convention. After the Spanish-American War ended at the turn of the twentieth Century, the American Red Cross added civilian relief efforts to their charter, which has become their flagship operation. Following the Second World War, the American Red Cross established its blood collection program, which led to the organization becoming one of the foremost blood handlers in the United States, handling 40% of the nation’s blood supply, and instituting a modernization of blood safety testing in the 1990’s (Red Cross.org).

The organization is sectioned into regional sub-organizations that serve the needs of their local communities. The American Red Cross of Greater Indianapolis serves the Central Indiana counties of Boone, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Marion, and Morgan, which make up the city of Indianapolis and
its surrounding suburbs. This region of the American Red Cross focuses on five areas of relief, including, disaster relief, support services for military families, lifesaving blood services, health safety services, and international services, in which the organization partners with their national colleagues in order to address disaster and humanitarian crises across the globe (United Way of Central Indiana).

AmeriCorps VISTA members serving with the Greater Indianapolis chapter of the Red Cross provided several capacity building services, which helped the organization attain new volunteers, as well as generate new funding sources. Some of the duties that these AmeriCorps VISTA members were assigned included researching grant opportunities, and editing grant proposals before they were submitted; as well as delivering presentations to area civic groups, with the goal of both spreading awareness, and generating new volunteers and benefactors (Scott, 2017).

Office of the Indiana Attorney General- Indianapolis, IN

State Attorney Generals are tasked with representing their states in all legal matters of which the state is party to. However, a key aspect of their service is also representing and protecting the residents of their state. These services can range from notifying individuals of unclaimed property, protection from unsolicited phone calls, to fraud protection (IN.gov). In Indiana, Attorney General Greg Zoeller (2009-2017) was elected to the office in November 2008, following an extensive legal career that included serving as an aide to Vice President Dan Quayle, and Chief Deputy Attorney General. Zoeller holds the distinction of being the only Attorney General in Indiana history to have experience in the Attorney General’s office prior to taking office (Republican Attorney Generals Association).

Once in office, Zoeller was fast to address one of the more controversial issues throughout the state at the time, the “do not call” lists which sought to protect Indiana residents from unwanted commercial solicitation. Initially, the law covered only landlines, but Zoeller’s efforts ultimately expanded the law to cover cellular phones as well. This was a consistent trademark of Zoeller’s time in office, as he dedicated special attention to consumer protection issues (Republican Attorney Generals Association). During his first year in office, Zoeller enlisted the help of AmeriCorps VISTA, in order to build his office’s consumer protection service capacity.

The AmeriCorps VISTA members were placed in charge of an initiate to recruit and train pro bono lawyers to provide services to Indiana residents experiencing legal issues related to consumer matters.
Services targeted for improvement under the AmeriCorps VISTA project included, predatory lending, identity theft, foreclosure prevention, and mortgage fraud (Mayer, 2009). The state’s thirteen-member AmeriCorps VISTA team ultimately established a statewide outreach network, which included over 40 partnerships with libraries, law offices, non-profits, and government agencies throughout Indiana. By the conclusion of the project, in July 2010, the AmeriCorps VISTA team was able to boast of numerous accomplishments stemming from their outreach network, including over 370 meetings and trainings with service providers. The AmeriCorps VISTAs also held 361 public informational events on the office’s consumer protection services, that reached 25,000 Indiana residents, and signing up nearly 1,500 residents on the state’s “do not call” registry. Additionally, the state could link nearly $95,000 in unclaimed property to rightful owners (Press Release, 2010).

Central Iowa Shelter & Services- Des Moines, Iowa

Central Iowa Shelter & Services, is a homeless shelter in Des Moines, the largest city in Iowa. Their mission statement, “to provide low-barrier shelter, meals and support services at no cost to adults experiencing homelessness and to facilitate their move toward self-sufficiency” details their goal of addressing not only homelessness, but the associated nutritional and educational aspects that might further hinder someone from finding permanent shelter. The shelter opened in 1992, as a joint venture between eight Des Moines Area churches, who sought to streamline a community response to the city’s homelessness problems.

The facility includes services, including medical care and group counseling, along with meals, showers, and laundry services. Of special concern is transitional housing for homeless veterans, which includes a fourteen-bed special unit (HomelessShelterDirectory.org) Their veteran outreach aspect was a centerpiece of the organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, as a VISTA position was created to streamline area services available to veterans statewide. In a job posting, the organization claimed that the VISTA member would identify existing services available to veterans, as well as determine gaps in these services (CentralIowaShelter.org).

Public awareness was another key aspect of the organization’s VISTA presence. One VISTA role sought to increase the organization’s media presence through identification of, and introduction to the area
news media. The goal of such outreach was to make local media sources more aware of the organization, to generate positive media coverage that could generate volunteer dollars. Four other VISTA positions were created to mobilize community members for increased volunteer supports. Typical for VISTA assignments, is the creation of organizational social media accounts and computerized databases to store volunteer and benefactor information. This information allows easier access for outreach related to special events, or donation drives. An increased social media presence, also brings the organization a greater public awareness. This allows community members an opportunity to see what the organization does, putting a face on the organization and those it serves (Facebook posts-2011).

Community Corrections Improvement Association: Cedar Rapids, Iowa

This non-profit, administered by Iowa’s Sixth Judicial Circuit was established in 1991, to reduce recidivism in Linn, Johnson, and Tama counties (Iowacbc.org). The organization seeks to serve both at-risk youth, and adult offenders to both prevent crime, and foster a more peaceful transition back into the community for individuals recently released from prisons. The organization identifies “at-risk” youth to be children between the ages of five and eighteen, who have at least one parent in the state prison system.

The services offered by the organization include a foster grandparent program, which reaches out to low income seniors in order to provide a positive adult influence in a child’s life, particularly from an adult living in similar economic conditions. The organization also seeks to provide mental health counseling to families with young children, in order reduce negative domestic situations within the household. Adult ex-offenders are served through housing projects that offer reduced rent to adults recently released from the state prison system (greatnon-profits.org).

While AmeriCorps VISTA projects are primarily rooted in in-direct services, exceptional circumstances can alter these assignments toward direct service when appropriate. In May and June of 2008, that state of Iowa was hit by a historic flood that caused nearly $10 billion in damages. Out of 99 counties, 86 were declared to be disaster areas by Governor Chet Culver. Property damage alone, exceeded $1 billion dollars, leaving thousands of homes severely impacted (National Weather Service, 2009).

As a result, the Community Corrections Improvement Association recruited AmeriCorps VISTA members to assist with the rebuilding efforts throughout the state. The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA members also worked to expand two program services within the Community Corrections Improvement
Association’s jurisdiction, the VITA tax program, and BRIGHTEN, a neighborhood revitalization project. The organization’s VITA (Volunteer Tax Assistance Program) sought to assist low income residents with no cost tax preparation. Not only does such assistance encourage residents to comply with state and federal tax laws, it also helps these individuals collect the maximum amount of their entitled tax return, without preparation costs, of which low income citizens may not be able to afford. In this project, VISTAs sought out volunteers within the community who were qualified to provide these services. The BRIGHTEN project, meanwhile, was largely a homelessness awareness project which sought to educate area citizens as to the hardships experienced by the state’s homeless population. The 2009-2010 project recruited seventy-one full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members who served within these three counties (SJCDS Annual Report, 2010).

**Iowa Civil Rights Commission**

As a state managed watchdog, the Iowa Civil Rights Commission seeks to ensure that Iowa residents are given protections guaranteed under the “Iowa Civil Rights Act of 1965”. Iowa’s Civil Rights Act mirrors the federal version signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, and bars discrimination in the areas of housing, credit, employment, education, and public accommodations. To reach its goal of ensuring the protections of civil rights, the Commission screens complaints of potential violations, and orders public hearings, mediation, and other means of settling violations. The Commission also offers preventative services for businesses and agencies, to spread awareness for potential instances of discrimination, as well as conductive statewide assessments in order to determine public satisfaction in the protection of civil rights (ICRC, 2010).

The Commission’s AmeriCorps VISTA project for 2009-2010 centered on the organization of presentations aimed at reducing instances of civil rights violations. According to the Commission’s 2010 Annual Report, the topics that Iowa businesses and agencies were most concerned with were workshops related to workplace harassment, diversity, and overall refreshers in civil rights information and policies. These workshops were delivered in a variety of mediums, including online, in-person classes, and video presentations. The Commission reported reaching 17,693 Iowans through a total of 230 events and presentations.
AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted with a revamping of the Commission's online presence, including their organizational website, and that of partnering organization, the League of Iowa Human and Civil Rights Agencies. The AmeriCorps VISTA members also created a social media presence for the Commission through the launching of Facebook and Twitter accounts, which provide outreach to Iowa residents who otherwise would have little or no contact or knowledge of the Commission and its goals.

Throughout the year, AmeriCorps VISTA members were placed at host sites in eleven cities throughout Iowa, including Ames, Davenport, Fort Dodge, Sioux City, and Waterloo. In addition to planning and providing presentations, these AmeriCorps VISTA members also sought to ingratiate themselves in the local public sector, attending community meetings. At these meetings, VISTA members would occasional deliver presentations about their service work (differing from official civil rights presentations) and join local coalition meetings to render the Commission's presence better known in communities throughout the state.

**Iowa Campus Compact- Waverly, Iowa**

The Iowa Campus Compact, is a state-wide partnership of university officials who seek to encourage college students to become further engaged in their respective communities, both during and after their educational careers. Consistent with many other AmeriCorps VISTA projects, members serving with the Iowa Campus Compact sought out an increase in community volunteers and financial benefactors that can keep the organization, and its community projects sustainable long after the AmeriCorps VISTA project expires.

According to the Iowa Campus Compact’s Facebook page, during the period covered under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the Iowa Campus Compact’s project included partnerships that included the AIB College of Business and Children & Family Urban Ministries in Des Moines, along with Coe College and Cornell College of Cedar Rapids. These projects offered varied service opportunities that impacted communities throughout the state. At the AIB College of Business, AmeriCorps VISTA members assisted with capacity building efforts in the school’s Service Learning Center, in which members developed a database to track volunteer information, as well as developing a survey system by which the
Center could grade its existing projects. The Children and Family Urban Ministries site used their VISTA members to recruit volunteers to assist with a struggling adult literacy program in a low income and ethnically diverse community.

Coe College mandated that their freshman students participate in service learning projects on campus, which created a solid constituency for their AmeriCorps VISTA outreach. In response to a campus-wide survey, the project focused its AmeriCorps VISTA efforts around mentoring programs, and activities to help new students adapt more easily to campus living. Meanwhile, at Cornell College, the Civic Engagement Center sought to encourage students to be community members throughout their lives. The AmeriCorps VISTAs serving with the school developed a tracking system that allowed the Civic Engagement Center to continually update their alumni information, in order to determine the level of civic engagement from former student members.

Another unique project developed from the Iowa Campus Compact, turned into a full-fledged non-profit organization. The Iowa Refugee Support Project, started as a student effort known as the “Conversation Starter Program”. This project sought to bring Iraqi refugees out of the shadows and building relationships with American volunteers in order to learn the English language, and develop skills needed to obtain employment and live independently (Turley, 2011). The organization’s Board of Directors stated in a 2012 letter that “when new Iraqi refugees move to the area, they can immediately find friends in the community, and many of the refugees who have been here longer are stable enough in their new lives to reach out and help others in need. Our program has helped to create lasting friendships between our volunteers and Iraqi refugees, and these relationships, in turn, have helped to strengthen the ties between the refugees and the wider community.” (Patton, et.al. 2012).

**Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic- Indianapolis, IN**

This faith-based organization seeks to ensure that all citizens of Indiana have access to justice in our legal system. In keeping with this mission, the organization provides no cost legal assistance to low income Indiana residents. According to its website, the organization claims to serve over 10,000 people annually, in a variety of legal services, including financial issues, immigration assistance, homelessness among the youth population and veterans, violent crime and recidivism. The organization’s Consumer Justice Project seeks to represent low income residents in legal disputes regarding taxes and property
claims, as well as linking residents to state and federal resources that they qualify for; including tax credits and mortgage relief funds for unemployed residents. The Immigrant Justice Program provides a variety of services to immigrants, including citizenship representation and political asylum for immigrants of qualifying countries. The organization's homelessness services include representation and counseling in matters related to youth emancipation, notices of eviction, and assistance with bankruptcy cases, when appropriate (NCLC.org).

To reduce criminal recidivism, the organization heads Project GRACE, which assists recently released offenders as they navigate through the complicated stages of re-entry. These services can include job training, child support representation, criminal record expungement, and restoration of privileges such as obtaining drivers licenses (NCLC.org). The organization's AmeriCorps VISTA project sought to build capacity in a number of areas, including community relations, family law, bankruptcy, elder law, and even the recruitment of a French interpreter, who would train volunteers in serving populations with language barriers. These AmeriCorps VISTA members served to both recruit new volunteers, while also assisting volunteer lawyers in the preparation of legal cases affecting their program clients. The project's AmeriCorps VISTA members were also offered the option of becoming certified legal Interns, through the state, which would allow them to conduct legal hearings. In a strictly volunteer organization, AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers perform key services in terms of legal research, and the recruitment of new volunteers (My AmeriCorps).

Oakland County Child Care Council- Pontiac, Michigan

The Oakland County Child Care Council was established in 1973 in order to promote excellent care for young children of the area. In caring for local children, the organization provides a variety of services, including training for childcare providers and skill development classes for parents, as well as providing day care services for children with working parents. The organization seeks to link families to the right kind of service provider, based upon their personal needs. This personalized approach to providing child care, ensures that parents can have the peace of mind, in knowing that their children are in a safe and healthy, even educational environment (Oakland County Child Care Council, 2016).

As discipline is also an important aspect in child-rearing, the Oakland County Child Care Council also provides courses on how to properly discipline children, so that parents can correct their children...
without risking abuse. The organization is well regarded throughout the local area, with some service providers mandating their employees to participate in the Council’s T.E.A.C.H. scholarship program (Harmony Child Care & Learning Center, 2010). These courses teach valuable skills and information to child care providers, including how to teach children in a professional manner, providing healthy foods and sanitation skills to children, how to spot abuse, and how to intervene, as well as management skills for those operating or managing child care centers (Great Start Collaborative).

The Oakland County Child Care Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA project sought to strengthen the Council’s ability to serve the community through a variety of means. One of the chief goals was reviewing the Council’s overall efficiency. Such reviews allow for identification of which programs are running effectively, as well as identifying areas in need of improvement. Volunteer and resource databases were also created, in order to more easily contact volunteers, as well as streamlining access and information related to local area service providers. Outreach was another key aspect of this AmeriCorps VISTA project, as members were charged with organizing and delivering community presentations and events aimed at raising public awareness of the Council’s efforts. AmeriCorps VISTA members also recruited and trained new volunteers, who organized family literacy events, which included providing low income clients with free children’s and family books. An increase of media coverage was another target of the Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA project, which hoped to use media outreach as another tool to raise awareness, increase donations, and generate new community volunteers (Miller, 2011).

Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living- Ann Arbor, Michigan

This organization, founded in 1976, seeks to assist disabled persons in their quest to live better lives, in spite of the physical and mental obstacles presented unto them. Disabled persons are served by the organization through a variety of means that seek to help individuals develop their unique talents. The Ann Arbor chapter of the Center for Independent Living, a national franchise of service providers, claims to serve over 4,000 individuals each year, while collaborating with disabled individuals, their families, as well as community stakeholders such as businesses and agencies. The Ann Arbor Center was also the first Center for Independent Living in the state of Michigan, and only the fourth in the United States.
The services provided by the Centers for Independent Living encompass a wide array of areas, including skills training and job placement, encouraging small business development, peer support groups, and care for individuals transitioning from nursing homes (Ann Arbor CIL).

The organization's AmeriCorps VISTA project provided capacity-building services to satellite partners across the state of Michigan. The goal of initiating the organization's AmeriCorps VISTA program was to simplify the linkage of disabled persons to eligible programs and services, regardless of where they live in the state. As part of their services, the project's twenty-eight VISTA members recruited and trained volunteers, as well as assisted in grant writing efforts, and streamlining services. When the project started in 2009, the organization's volunteer structure, while well meaning, lacked structure and direction, according to former AmeriCorps VISTA member Robin Bennett. Over the course of the project, various volunteer tracking systems were developed to ensure that existing volunteers were kept informed of service opportunities, while also seeking new volunteers. AmeriCorps VISTA members also assisted in the organization's youth department, which sought to teach important job and independent living skills to disabled teens, to prepare them for adult living (Bennett, 2011).

**Ingham County Health Department- Lansing, Michigan**

Like many other county health departments, the Ingham County Health Department offers the public a variety of services tests for sexually transmitted, and other infectious diseases, vaccinations, and other health screenings. Environmental health is also addressed by the Ingham County Health Department, including inspections of businesses to evaluate risks for health and safety hazards, as well as issuing permits for activities that fall under their regulations (Ingham County Health Department).

The county's AmeriCorps VISTA project, known as "The Power of We", has been running since 2006, and seeks to serve the community through a reduction in area hunger and chronic diseases, as well as making the community more attractive to new businesses and residents, keeping children safe and engaged, and educated (Villanueva, n.d).

Among the activities that the project's AmeriCorps VISTA members are engaged include, community gardens, cooking demos, and organizing nutritional education courses. The project also seeks to encourage physical activity among community members, to avoid diseases that can be caused by inactivity and obesity. The project's AmeriCorps VISTA members are involved in the community through a variety...
of means, including membership in area civic coalitions and delivering presentations on the project’s goal to these and other area businesses and organizations. AmeriCorps VISTA members also assist in grant writing, and volunteer recruitment (Spaniolo, 2014).

As this AmeriCorps VISTA project is housed in a public health department, it has the advantage of being linked to community data, by which its impact on local poverty and health can be tracked. The County’s Behavioral Risk Factor Report measures the county’s health through a variety of factors, including rates of health issues, such as obesity, diabetes, mental health, smoking, and drinking. Also tracked is local access to health care, healthy foods, and physical activity. This inclusive reporting encompasses not only the number of people afflicted by health issues, but also addresses the possible causes for it, and remedies within the community that can be used to improve community health.

**Michigan Nonprofit Association- Lansing, Michigan**

The Michigan Nonprofit Association was established in 1990 as a membership organization aimed at serving Michigan’s non-profit sector through capacity building activities that generate volunteerism, financial support, and technological improvements. The Association, which is open for membership to any non-profit organization in the state, operates three major programs, MNA Technological Services, The LEAGUE Michigan, and the Michigan Campus Compact. The MNA Technological Service program seeks to educate non-profit staff on how to take advantage of online opportunities for outreach and reporting. The LEAGUE Michigan is a philanthropic program that seeks to teach the value of civic engagement to Michigan’s youth. Currently, the program is used in over 900 classes in 200 Michigan schools. Michigan Campus Compact focuses on civic engagement among college and university students through community service, and service-learning projects. The goal of the Michigan Campus Compact is to instill civic engagement during youth, with the hope that individuals will remain civically engaged throughout their adult lives (MNAOnline.org).

The Michigan Nonprofit Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA project serves these programs through four service goals, including student engagement, college access and success, financial literacy, and employment services. This project sends AmeriCorps VISTA members to non-profit organizations and schools throughout the state, in order to strengthen or develop programs hosted by these entities. Annually,
The project recruits an average of thirty AmeriCorps VISTA members to carry out the project’s initiatives related to education and economic opportunity (NMAVISTA.org).

AmeriCorps VISTA projects benefit Michigan schools and non-profit organizations by offering these consulting and volunteer streamlining services that would otherwise need to be outsourced to more costly firms. The AmeriCorps VISTA members can serve through a variety of means, including recruiting and training volunteers, writing grants, and developing social media presences for the hosting organizations (GuideStar, 2017).

**Retired & Senior Volunteer Program of Ingham, Eaton & Clinton Co. Lansing, Michigan**

The Retired & Senior Volunteer Program, a community-based volunteer organization serving Ingham, Eaton, and Clinton counties in Michigan, exists to provide services to the various non-profit agencies within the three county service area. The organization operates six programs, including adult respite services, Ambassador for Preparedness, Bridge to Wellness, foster grandparent, retired and senior volunteer outreach, and senior companions. These programs serve a variety of needs, across every age group (rsvplansingarea.com).

The organization’s adult respite services aid seniors who are trying to remain in their own homes. The care provided includes wellness checks, home health services, and rides for trips into town, whether it be for purchasing groceries, or seeking entertainment. The Ambassador for Preparedness Program trains area volunteers on how to be community captains in the case of an emergency or natural disaster. These services can be useful in the event that local law enforcement and health care officials need assistance in the event of an emergency. The foster grandparent program links at-risk children and teens with positive senior role models who can tutoring skills, and classroom assistance. The Senior Companions program functions similarly, only as a program by which to link elderly residents with volunteers with the aim of building lasting friendships, especially for seniors with little or no family supports nearby (rsvplansingarea.com).

Despite receiving an AmeriCorps VISTA grant for the 2009-2010 year, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the organization did not follow through with an AmeriCorps VISTA project. Instead, the organization chose to invest in other service opportunities offered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, including the Retired and Senior Volunteer program and Senior
Corps. Both of these projects seek to engage senior citizens in community service projects throughout the country. No information is available as to why the AmeriCorps VISTA project did not happen, but the organization would certainly be a good fit for an AmeriCorps VISTA project, especially in terms of volunteer and fundraising efforts (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2014).

**Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration- Maplewood, MN**

The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration, with over 800 members, is the largest membership organization for professional volunteer leaders in the state of Minnesota. Founded in 2001, the organization seeks to align non-profit leaders across the state, in order to help these organizations thrive. The association is made up of volunteer leaders from many walks of life, such as representatives from social service agencies, religious groups, health care services, education, and grassroots community volunteers (MAVA, 2017).

The organization was born out of a somewhat embarrassing situation, in which President Bill Clinton established the “Presidents' Summit for America's Future” initiative, only to find that there were no organizations to carry out associated volunteer efforts in Minnesota. As a response, non-profit leaders met to organize an association that could link and streamline volunteer efforts across the state. The Association’s past president, Mike Newman wrote of the association’s vital presence in the state’s non-profit sector, “with the closing of the Minnesota Office of Citizenship and Volunteer Services during Governor Jesse Ventura's administration in 2002 and severe cuts to social programs in subsequent years, Minnesota’s volunteer programs are under increasingly severe strain. The resources and education provided by MAVA are now more vital than ever” (Newman, 2017).

The Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA members recruited in 2009 served as Community Volunteer Coordinators and performed their duties with various partnering agencies throughout the state. One key aspect of their service was to develop infrastructure that demonstrated how partnering organizations could provide services to and engage Minnesota’s senior citizens. Increasing the overall funding stream for partnering organizations was another key aspect of their capacity building services. To approach this, AmeriCorps VISTAs developed or restructured the various organizations’ database systems.
In addition, AmeriCorps VISTAs also developed training courses designed to instruct service providers and volunteers with best practices of volunteer management. These courses would instruct providers on ways to both gain and retain community volunteers (Nahvi, 2009).

**Minnesota Council of Churches - Minneapolis, MN**

The Minnesota Council of Churches is a unique faith-based operation, as it seeks to bring together people and volunteers from across the religious spectrum. As an exercise in learning, Council members are encouraged to meet with, advocate alongside, and dine with people of other faiths to enhance their own base of knowledge, and to assist churches as they seek to reach goals. The Council also advocates on behalf of refugees and for just public policies (Minnesota Council of Churches, 2012).

As part of the Council’s, “Respectful Conversations” program, people of various faiths met to discuss controversial social topics to gain insights into other perspectives. Among the topics discussed at these meetings include race relations, gun rights, and immigration. The Council reports holding 85 of these sessions, reaching over 2,300 people. Of those who attended, 84% reported gaining empathy toward a particular view that they oppose. As of 2015, the Council had also linked 68 refugees to sustainable employment, claiming to have the 2nd highest exit rate for any cash assistance program in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Council of Churches, 2015).

The Council’s AmeriCorps VISTA project focused upon the plight of refugees, particularly those arriving from the nations of Bhutan, Burma, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, and former Soviet states. The first task for the AmeriCorps VISTA members was to identify the key issues that created barriers for refugees as they attempted to re-settle in the United States. The Employer Advisory Committee, a Minnesota advocacy group, also provided AmeriCorps VISTA members with valuable information on finding and keeping steady employment. Members of the Employer Advisory Committee were also recruited by the AmeriCorps VISTAs to serve as personal mentors to the program’s refugees, so that they could find steady employment, as well as feel encouraged to be active members of the community. AmeriCorps VISTA members also put their writing skills to work as they formed public relations strategies. By selecting touching stories, the AmeriCorps VISTA members could better persuade civic volunteers and elected officials to offer support to these programs, as well as to the state’s refugee population (Greving, 2011).

**St. Stephen’s Human Services - Minneapolis, MN**
St. Stephen’s Human Services is a homeless shelter, and homelessness advocacy organization serving the state of Minnesota. The organization got its start in the 1960’s as an informal volunteer effort, in which parishioners of St. Stephen’s Church would organize in order to offer services to impoverished and homeless within the Minneapolis community. The scope of the organization began to grow during the 1980’s, when the sharp increase of homeless rates nationwide, and in Minnesota. As a response, St. Stephens collaborated with ten other churches in order to open a series of what were expected to be temporary homeless shelters across the state. Initially, this was viewed as a form of crisis control, by which to alleviate the sudden homeless epidemic brought about by an economic recession, and conservative social policies generated by the federal government. While most of the temporary shelters closed, St. Stephens decided that permanent services were needed. In 1991, the church launched the non-profit organization Housing Alliance, which developed properties for use as homeless shelters. Eventually, the church decided that the organization had grown to the point that it would be prudent to seek official non-profit status. This change led to the creation of the current St. Stephen’s Human Services (St. Stephen’s Human Services, 2017).

The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA project seeks to assist homelessness efforts through sustainable projects that can increase volunteer involvement and community awareness of the issues surrounding homelessness. The AmeriCorps VISTA project led to outreach exercises, such as “A Day in the Life of the Homeless”, during which members of the state’s homeless population share their experiences. Presenters discuss the social issues that affect their situations, including systemic racism, substance abuse, and mental illness. Participants are also given tours of are homeless shelters, in order to achieve a greater understanding of what it is like to be homeless and relegated to relying upon overcrowded centers for shelter. Furthermore, participants learn how extreme poverty and homelessness can happen to anyone, and that it takes the dedication of volunteers in order to meet the challenges presented by homelessness (Botzek, 2010). The organization’s AmeriCorps VISTA members were utilized to achieve a multitude of objectives, including volunteer recruitment and training, organizing a volunteer arts program, fundraising efforts, and educating landlords as to the programs available to assist those who provide housing for impoverished citizens (Brown, 2010).

The Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks- Columbus, Ohio
The Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbank is a statewide service organization that exists to serve and assist the twelve foodbanks operated under the “Feeding America” program. The organization began as a partnership among foodbank directors in the 1980’s, during the early stages of implementation of what is now known as the Emergency Food Assistance Program. In its early years, this federal program was essentially a liquidation of food products that were purchased by the federal government from farms throughout the country, as a means of stabilizing the agricultural industry. These foodbank directors would assist the state government in ensuring that these federal resources were delivered to people who needed it most. In 1991, following several years of an informal partnership, the directors formally chartered the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks (Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks).

What makes the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks especially important, is that foodbanks often find themselves at the mercy of community donations, which may not be as healthy or substantial as the federal food products that the Association seeks to ensure are delivered. A 2003 study focused on the discrepancy between the federal foods, and those donated by members of the community. The report noted that nearly 100% of the products were rated to be high quality foods, while only 28% of foods that had been donated by community residents were rated to be high quality foods. Donated foods were also found to equal only half of the total inventory of foods available at foodbanks throughout Ohio (Hansen, 2003).

The Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA project was launched in 2008, with a goal of fighting childhood hunger throughout the state of Ohio. The Association’s Executive Director, Lisa Hamler-Fugitt says “Children who aren’t hungry learn better, behave better and feel better, yet many children in Ohio are not getting the nutrition they need to learn, play and grow throughout the summer months when they are out of school” (Hamler-Fugitt, 2012). In reaching the goal of reducing childhood hunger, the Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA members are housed in the various foodbanks in the state to assist them in developing new programs that can lead to easier access to nutritious foods, increased financial literacy, and increased community awareness through presentations and education seminars (Litzinger, 2010).

Wilmington College - Wilmington, Ohio

Wilmington College is a liberal arts school located in Wilmington, Ohio. The school beginnings are traced to an auction in 1870, when a group of Quakers purchased a lot with an unfinished building. Within one year, the Quakers had built a school that was ready to open its doors. In the years since
graduating its first class in 1875, Wilmington College has grown to currently serve over 1,100 students in an environment that seeks to foster a positive learning experience that includes an encouragement to partake in civic engagement and worldly knowledge (Wilmington College, 2017).

To foster the College’s mission of volunteerism, the Wilmington College Center for Service and Civic Engagement was established. The center seeks to instill a desire to serve the common good through service learning and volunteer projects throughout the community. In striving to meet the College’s mission of a “commitment to peace making, social justice, humanitarian service, and respect for all persons”, the center focuses on building the knowledge and harvesting the passion of civic minded students, with the hope of providing experience that can be useful in obtaining career positions in the public service realm (Idealist, 2017).

In 2008, Wilmington College purchased an acre of farmland to grow vegetables in bulk in order to provide food to area foodbanks. Each year, thousands of pounds of vegetables such as tomatoes, corn, peppers, squash, and zucchini are grown on the farm as part of its “Grow Food, Grow Hope” program. In order to support the program, Wilmington College launched an AmeriCorps VISTA project, which sought to keep the food program sustainable for years to come (Kerschner, 2008). Beyond raising financial prospects for the program, the Wilmington College AmeriCorps VISTA team sought to educate the community on the benefits of healthier eating habits, and engaging the community in supporting local businesses, in order to improve the local business climate. AmeriCorps VISTA members also recruited and trained local volunteers to perform community service work in the College’s community garden. (Lydy, 2009). These activities included all aspects of the gardening process, planting, maintenance, and harvesting. Wilmington College President Dan DiBiasio expressly credited increased federal funding, such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for the College’s ability to keep programs such as “Grow Food, Grow Hope” alive, stating “This increased commitment at the federal level enables Wilmington College to expand what we have been doing for years in the areas of service and civic engagement” (Cheyney University, 2009).

Corporation For Ohio Appalachian Development (COAD) - Athens, Ohio

The Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development is a non-profit community action organization serving Ohio’s rural Appalachian region. Established in 1971, the organization serves as a
council of seventeen social service organizations and agencies that serve communities over a thirty-county area, focusing primarily upon child education, senior care, and community development. The organization also offers youth leadership development and college scholarship opportunities (Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development).

The organization’s community development work includes a variety of approaches, including making area homes more cost effective and environmentally friendly. Courses are funded by the organization, which teaches volunteers how to weatherize and upgrade homes to ensure quality air and water flow, as well as the safe removal of harmful toxins, such as lead paint. Participants are also taught how to manage home repair projects through grant writing exercises and strategic planning that would allow these efforts to remain in place well into the future (U.S. Department of Energy).

The organization launched its AmeriCorps VISTA project in 2009, recruiting a group of fifteen AmeriCorps VISTA members who were housed with the organization’s partnering agencies throughout the state’s Appalachian area. These AmeriCorps VISTA members recruited additional volunteers to serve throughout the organization’s service area and raised local awareness through a series of community presentations which sought to spotlight the difficulties faced by those living in the extreme poverty that has often been felt in the Appalachian area. The AmeriCorps VISTA project also launched transitional housing programs which linked homeless individuals with temporary housing, as they trained for jobs and learned valuable independent living skills. Another important aspect of the AmeriCorps VISTA project was to streamline access to existing public assistance programs to low income families throughout the organization’s service area. These services often included low income or transitional housing, access to nutritional foods, and temporary financial assistance. In addition, AmeriCorps VISTA members also trained volunteers to participate in youth mentoring and senior assistance programs offered by the organization (Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development-AmeriCorps VISTA Project).

Wisconsin Community Action Program Association Inc. - Madison, WI

The Wisconsin Community Action Program Association seeks to alleviate poverty throughout the state through providing support to non-profit organizations throughout the state. Founded in 1974, the Association hopes to achieve economic self-sufficiency for Wisconsin’s impoverished families. The membership of the Association consists of representatives from eighteen social service non-profits within
the state, working to fight poverty through efforts such as streamlining available social services, advocating for positive legislation and economic opportunity (WISCAP, About).

A wide array of services are made possible through the Association, including small business loans and grants for low income citizens, as well as job training and financial literacy awareness. Housing has been another goal of the Association, as they seek to stave off the effects of foreclosures, with home ownership opportunities, and updating homes to meet federal and state criteria for tax credits associated with environmental reforms. Nutrition is another goal addressed by the Association, through efforts to ensure Wisconsin residents have access to healthy foods and healthcare services (WISCAP, More Info).

The Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA team consisted of eight members, who focused primarily on nutritional projects assisted by the Association. In seeking to make healthier foods available to low income families, the AmeriCorps VISTA team sought to not only supply food to area foodbanks, but also to provide incentives to area farmers, in order to ease their own financial burdens by making their crops profitable and sold locally. Some AmeriCorps VISTA members were placed in charge of managing local foodbanks, ensuring that the foodbanks continued to stock nutritious, and often locally grown food. The management tasks also including the assignment of long-term strategic planning and increased marketing in areas heavily impacted by poverty. Another project launched by the Association’s AmeriCorps VISTA team was the Family Table Cooking Club, which low income parents were taught cooking skills, as well as nutritional education, in order to better provide healthy meals to their families. In this club, the participants would cook in groups, using locally produced ingredients, whenever possible. This both supports local citizens, and area farmers who agree to assist such efforts (Thomas, 2011).

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction- Madison, WI

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction is a state government agency charged with overseeing Wisconsin’s public schools and libraries. Their stated goal is to “ensure every child graduates ready for further education and the workplace” (WPI.WI.gov, 2017). The agency is one of the oldest in Wisconsin’s history, established in 1848. Education was prioritized by the state from its beginning, as the state’s founders added a constitutional plank mandating an agency to provide no cost education to all of Wisconsin’s youth, to be carried out through localized school districts. The current State Superintendent of Schools is Tony Evers, who has held the position since 2009 (WPI.WI.gov, 2017)
The Department’s AmeriCorps VISTA project seeks to strengthen the state’s Cooperative Educational Service Agencies, or CESA’s, which serve as liaison agencies between school districts across the state, and between the school districts and the state government itself. The AmeriCorps VISTA members are assigned to four service areas, including expansion of knowledge as to educational best practices, providing supports to homeless students throughout the state, conducting needs assessments and identifying opportunities for streamlining services, and establishing a mentoring program for homeless students. Like most AmeriCorps VISTA project throughout the nation, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s AmeriCorps VISTA team seeks to build capacity through recruiting volunteers, conducting trainings, and providing a public face to the agency in the state’s social service community (Nadolski, 2017).

An intersecting facet of this AmeriCorps VISTA project, is its focus on race relations. While acknowledging the larger percentage of homeless youth is made up of minorities, the Department’s CESA organizations seek to encourage their Caucasian volunteers to understand diversity, and the concept of “white privilege” in particular. Among these diversity projects is the requirement of Caucasian AmeriCorps VISTA members to wear white wristbands during their service, in order to serve as a constant reminder of their social privilege, and a public statement of their commitment to erasing racial injustice. The Department issued a statement on their website regarding the requirement, stating “Not only should you examine the kind of privilege you bring to your (work) site but also how power is distributed among the families, community members, and students you work with” (Burke, 2013).

Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, UW-Extension- Madison, WI

The University of Wisconsin’s Board of Regents is a committee of eighteen members, fourteen of which all but two are appointed by Wisconsin’s governor. The gubernatorial appointments are for seven-year terms, which are staggered in order to prevent mass turnover. Two other members are university students selected to serve, while the remaining two members, the state superintendent of public instruction and the president of the Wisconsin Technical College System Board hold ex-officio status during their terms of service in those positions. The Board of Regents holds eight meetings throughout the year and governs the university’s policies and standards. The Board of Regents contains eight standing committees, including Education, Business and Finance, Capital Planning and Budget, Executive, Personnel Matters and Review,
Faculty and Academic Staff Collective Bargaining, Research, Economic Development, and Innovation, and the Audit committee (University of Wisconsin System, 2017).

The University of Wisconsin system houses AmeriCorps VISTA members throughout the state’s public universities, where they work to build capacity in areas relating to food security, technological modernization, and civic engagement (University of Wisconsin-Stout, 2017). The AmeriCorps VISTA members recruited and trained volunteers for events in these focus areas, as well as gathered data and compiled updates regarding the project’s progress, which were to be presented at Board of Regents meetings. The AmeriCorps VISTA team’s flagship effort was the “Badger Volunteers” program, which was a single semester commitment by University of Wisconsin students, in which interested students participate in weekly service learning projects throughout their university’s community. The AmeriCorps VISTA members became the public face for the “Badger Volunteers” program, as they were placed in charge of promoting the program throughout the state, as well as fielding community queries related to the program. In addition, the AmeriCorps VISTA team was encouraged to expand the program’s presence on Wisconsin campuses by identifying new departmental partnerships for their community service learning projects in both public and private entities across the state (Sommerfield, 2011).