Dear Commonwealth Corps Members, Partners, Alumni, and Friends,

The 2020-2021 Commonwealth Corps members have been staying busy this Spring, including trying out some new ways to stay in touch virtually through a Book Club, Language Club, and Social Justice and Equity committee. In these spaces, members have the chance to share what they have in common and build connections. In addition to these activities, members also participated in a series of virtual training sessions on preparing for their next steps and ensuring they’re able to make the most of their last few months of service. MSA also has started to attend virtual host site visits in order to see members in action. During these virtual visits, members and host sites provide updates about what members have been up to and feedback for the Commonwealth Corps Program.

MSA is also excited to announce that we’ll be partnering with 17 agencies in the 2021-2022 service term that will be hosting 44 members. These agencies have demonstrated their commitment to creating meaningful change in their communities.

Thank you to all of our 2020-2021 members and partners who contributed to this month’s newsletter! We’re excited to see what members accomplish in these last few months of service.
Positive Action Against Chemical Addiction, Inc.

PAACA is a nonprofit agency on the South Coast with a Youth Services division that seeks to prevent delinquency, substance use and violence through positive youth development, education and engagement. PAACA and SCYC have hosted 4 part-time members this year to serve as program developers, facilitators and recruiters. They have helped expand our education programs throughout the community and recruited volunteer lawyers for South Coast Youth Courts and volunteers for other various programs within the agency. Members have developed several hybrid/in-person programs with creative curriculum to serve middle school and upcoming transitional 5th graders. The pandemic brought a world of change to our organization. Our members have helped in more ways than we could have expected by thinking outside the box, being committed, and compassionate. They have supported with the curriculum for new virtual programs and helped to keep the doors open for families and youth that needed services and places to go during the pandemic. We have been able to serve over 6000 people with food boxes at our pop up pantry or home deliveries for families not able to get out.

“When we applied for Commonwealth Corps in 2020 we were looking for members to be a “breath of fresh air” that we desperately needed to add new ideas to our programs that had sustained for almost two decades when others had failed. I have always been a believer that things happen for a reason. When the pandemic hit we watched so many organizations become crippled and unable to operate. With the help of our young members, their fresh innovative “outside the box” ideas, we were able to stay afloat, provide programming and serve our community. We are so grateful for our members, their unique personalities, and their compassion for others.”

- Nina Sousa,
Consultant and Grant Manager at PAACA

Henry Nguyen is the calm in the storm of our team. He keeps the rest of the team grounded and brings them back to center. Gavin Alves is the creative and innovative service member that puts ideas on the table and asks if we can do this. Elijah Rodriguez is a talented facilitator and has the ability to keep youth and adults engaged and excited about whatever it is he is talking about. Dakota Chixarro has been the driving force on recruitment and engaging outside community members with his charisma and amazing public speaking skills. Our CC members have received thank you’s from individuals and the community at large for being on the forefront handing out boxes of food and helping our homeless men and women receive clothing, blankets, furniture, and other needed materials. In August, we opened our office as a weekly testing site. It was our team’s perspective that if we were able to follow guidelines, we should be in the office to offer in-person programming because the youth needed to be safe and needed the mental health that comes with socializing and in person education. Those interactions are important. With that in mind, our team returned to do what we do best, serve our community.

- Teresa Belliveau,
Youth Services Director at PAACA
**ELIJAH RODRIGUEZ**

What drew me in to serve with Commonwealth Corps was my past relationship with the organization I am serving. I had previously worked with PAACA over the summers of 2016 through 2019 and they always welcomed me back every summer. When I was notified of the position to serve with PAACA and continue helping the youth of my community I knew I couldn’t pass it up. So far we’ve accomplished many things but there are two that stick out to me the most. One being that myself and the other CC members have developed a S.T.E.A.M after school program for the youth of our community. Instead of doing long lectures, we instead do activities to make things as fun as possible to keep the kids coming and loving program. Some activities we’ve done with the kids that I am proud of are making homemade lava lamps and crafting a paper mache volcano that actually erupted. Another accomplishment that sticks out the most to me would be interviewing the Police Chief of Fall River.

*Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have learned to be thankful and appreciative for those that are willing to help me when I need it.*

After hearing about the opportunity to support directly in the community I was certainly more enthusiastic about what I could accomplish compared to my younger years. In the past volunteer work would typically be giving days or evenings off in order to help out my school or a local organization. These jobs usually included helping to run events, cleaning up a local park, or lending a helping hand for any needed tasks. A ‘service year’ with the MSA is very different. Longer term commitments like these allow you to settle into an organization’s setting, their mission, and the challenges that everybody faces. I was given the threefold goal of: Strengthening communities - Our outreach and program facilitation has allowed more community members to speak and know one another. Address critical needs - Our target population has primarily been at-risk youth. Increase Volunteerism - My fellow corps members have used their skills to recruit from the local community, finding a group of capable youth. I am not from the local community but New Bedford has accepted and helped me through this pandemic as if I lived here. That is why I am invested in providing ideas and passion for the youth to succeed in life. Along the way I have learned how to develop curriculum, set up community events, and run a youth program during a pandemic. Going forward, I am confident I can apply my skills and knowledge to solve whatever problem comes across my way. Cheers to the volunteers!

*Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have made lasting relationships, enhanced my knowledge of non-profit organizations, and built up my repertoire of skills.*

**HENRY NGUYEN**

Myself and another member interviewed the police chief about youth court and its impact it has on our community. He had said that he would have participated in youth court in his younger days and would recommend it to any youth now as a good way to stay out of trouble and make lots of friends. My experience being a Commonwealth Corps member has improved skills with working with kids and being creative. I’ve also improved heavily on my communication skills. I have never really been one to go out of my way to meet new people. During my service I gained the skill of interacting with the Police Chief, other youth, parents, strangers and the new vice principal of Diman Vocational High School to discuss what youth court does to help the youth get a second chance. Meeting these types of people is really benefiting me as it is a good way to get my name out there and gain more relationships with people that can help me in all aspects of life.

*Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have made lasting relationships, enhanced my knowledge of non-profit organizations, and built up my repertoire of skills.*
GAVIN ALVES

I joined the Commonwealth corps because it felt that it was a great way to get involved with my community and grow professionally. As an aspiring lawyer, businessman, and politician, community is the one thing that brings all three jobs together. I believe in strong communities and together that they can accomplish great things. Being able to help the at-risk youth in the South Coast Area is a privilege and I believe that the work is necessary. One of the best things about serving in the Commonwealth Corps is the ability to grow as a person. We receive many great professional and personal development training’s that propel us toward a brighter future. For me, there is not much that is better than achieving a goal or a job well done. I have had the opportunity to develop and run in- person programs from the start of my service year until now. When supporting kids and young adults you have a major responsibility.

After connecting with Terri, she made me aware of the CC Service Member position. I saw this as an opportunity to further give back to my community and so I was drawn to take hold of that experience. The first thing that I hoped to accomplish was to set a precedent for virtual Youth Court hearings during COVID. The organization had taken a hit in cases, from hearing about 200 cases a year to being at about 2 or 3 upon our entry. As such, we were trying to develop an engaging and effective strategy to serve our youth respondents while facing the pandemic. We were able to accomplish this through the use of panel style hearings, where it is more of a neutral based open question forum as opposed to the standard prosecution and defense style of hearings. The second goal is to complete the Youth Court Promo video in which we are currently working on. In this, we are collecting testimony from past and current judges, volunteers, community partners, and other involved personnel in order to compile a video in support of the program that we can use as an advertisement in a way.

You have to work hard at pushing them and along with that comes some strain, but I believe it is all worth it when you see that they are having fun in a positive environment. By doing a service year with the Commonwealth Corps I am learning so much that will benefit me professionally. I have learned the importance of time management and how to shift certain things that I have on my plate around. Also, I have had the opportunity to network at virtual events hosted by the Commonwealth Corps and by other organizations and presenters. By expanding my knowledge and not limiting professional development to only my service but other things I can and will move my career forward.

"Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am able to serve my community and grow as a person and for that I am thankful."

DAKOTA CHIXARRO

One story that comes to mind immediately is our STEAM program, and one session in particular. Myself and the other CC members serving here essentially created, orchestrated, and built curriculum for a STEAM program from scratch, and it has now become a very successful and enjoyable program for our youth. While I was nervous working with a younger crowd than I was use to, after working with the students during one of our sessions I began to enjoy facilitating the program more and more, and even began to form bonds with some of our youth. It filled me with joy as they would walk into the program room and smile through their masks when they saw “Mr. Dakota” or “Mr. Elijah” or whomever else was in charge of the program that day.

"Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been able to effectively leave a large, positive impact on my community by giving back to our most vulnerable and impressionable population, who will one day be the future of our society."
More Than Words

More Than Words is a social enterprise that empowers youth who are in the foster care system, court involved, homeless, or out of school to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. We have the privilege of hosting Commonwealth Corps members as Employment and Partnership Coordinators in our Career Services Department, supporting our youth and program graduates find jobs and access training programs and higher education. Throughout their service term, members also build partnerships and complete projects to increase the efficiency of the department. Rachel Dovek serves in our Boston site, and Domitille Buricatu serves in our Waltham location. They have built systems to hold More Than Words accountable for tracking the quality of jobs graduates hold and strengthened our partnerships with postsecondary education providers. They have been here for our graduates during a hard year, consistently reaching out and supporting youth to pivot and access opportunities. Thanks to their invaluable service, our Career Services team has continued to empower graduates to make meaningful progress in work, school, and life throughout the COVID-19 crisis. While many of our working graduates lost jobs at the start the pandemic, our team was able to respond and support their engagement, and 79% of our graduates continued to be productively engaged in school and/or work for at least 30 hours each week.

“Rachel and Domitille have been game-changers at More Than Words this year. Their passion and belief in the potential of our youth have help us respond to COVID, adapt outreach and programming, and support youth to outcomes.

One great success was revamping our jobs e-blasts to graduates: we can now individually track which graduates are checking out jobs and follow up to support them. Everyone at More Than Words is grateful for their service!”

- Leanne Goff, Site Director at MTW

A former Peace Corps volunteer, Domitille knew she wanted to work in the social sector. Her experience as a Commonwealth Corps member provided her with the opportunity to explore the nonprofit field. “More Than Words helped me realize what I like and what I don’t like,” she said. “I’ve really enjoyed working with people who know that they can make a change. Alex and Edi [Supervisor and Waltham Site Director] genuinely care about my growth, and tell me when I’m doing something well.” Following the completion of her service term, Domitille plans to study Public Policy at UMASS Amherst.

“Rachel and Domitille have been game-changers at More Than Words this year,” said Leanne Coff, Boston Site Director. “Their passion and belief in the potential of our youth have help us respond to COVID, adapt outreach and programming, and support youth to outcomes. One great success was revamping our jobs e-blasts to graduates: we can now individually track which graduates are checking out jobs and follow up to support them. Everyone at More Than Words is grateful for their service!”

- Naomi Parker, Chief Advancement Officer at MTW
DOMITILLE BURICATU

I was drawn to the Commonwealth Corps program because I wanted to find the next step following my Peace Corps service. Back in March of 2020, I had 6 months left in Colombia and was looking forward to all the projects I had in store. Due to the start of the pandemic though, all 7,500 volunteers around the world were evacuated in the span of a week, and I was left with no job and no career plan. I applied to be a Corps member because it seemed like an amazing way to keep building on the skills I had learned in Colombia, especially when I noticed the open position at More Than Words, a very socially-minded business. I also knew I wanted to eventually go to grad school, but I had no idea what I wanted to study.

"Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I figured out what I want to study in grad school, and am now enrolled in the Masters of Public Policy at UMass Amherst!"

I was drawn to Commonwealth Corps due to my desire to help people. I felt very strongly about serving in a mission driven environment and I was able to find that through serving at More Than Words through Commonwealth Corps with a community of like-minded individuals. I serve as an Employment and Partnership Coordinator at More Than Words, an organization that serves system involved youth by empowering them to take charge of their lives by taking charge of a business. I have been able to support our young adults with finding the next step when they graduate from More Than Words, navigating a tumultuous job market and securing appropriate, meaningful employment.

I have further developed our partnerships with community organizations allowing us to further support our young adults into our graduate program. Serving at More Than Words has allowed me to first hand see incredible perseverance despite immense hardship. The young adults we serve have faced systemic inequality that has continued to motivate me to want to change and improve the systems that disproportionately affect our young adults of color and create a never-ending cycle of poverty. I am pursuing my Masters in Public Policy in the fall with a new lens of supporting young adults with lived experiences of the systems I seek to change.

"Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been able to support our young adults with finding the next step when they graduate from More Than Words."

RACHEL DOVEK

I feel like I’ve come a long way from the plan-less Domitille of March 2020! Since starting at MTW, I’ve had the chance to implement a new system to track case management using analytics in the Career Services department, with my Commonwealth Corps colleague. I’m also really grateful for the relationships I’ve built with young adults and staff here. MTW has created this amazing environment that makes it possible to build genuine, trusting relationships with anyone, and I’m so happy to have experienced it. My service has impacted in 2 big ways: first, my confidence in building relationships. I learn something from my youth every single day, and use that knowledge in all aspects of my life. Second, I am happy to announce that I am enrolling at UMass Amherst to start a Masters in Public Policy this summer! I wouldn’t have been able to do that without the amazing support of MTW and Commonwealth Corps.
WriteBoston is a nonprofit that works with students and teachers to help young people tap into their communication skills. We believe that youth perspectives matter, and that skillful communication opens the doors to college and career success. Our student journalism program, Teens in Print (TiP), builds students' communication and secondary skills through an afterschool program, a Summer Journalism Institute, and one-time workshops. Thanks to a partnership with the Commonwealth Corps, TiP has expanded over the past few years to reach more students. We've continued that growth this year with the help of two service members, Lucy Levin and Sophia Salazar, who joined the team in August for the launch of our virtual afterschool program. At the start of the school year, we weren't sure what our afterschool program would look like. We didn't know if students would engage in an online newsroom after a full day of virtual school. We're proud to report that each cycle, we've worked with 30-40 students, equivalent (or slightly higher!) than the number of students we'd work with in person. Thanks to Lucy, Sophia, and the entire TiP team, our virtual newsroom is a space where students can connect with peers and writing mentors, explore topics they care about, and publish their work for a wide audience.
MEMBER SPOTLIGHTS

LUCY LEVIN

After graduating in May 2020 as a journalism major, I didn’t know exactly what direction I wanted to take my career in. However, serving at WriteBoston as a Commonwealth Corps member gave me the opportunity to spend a year combining two things I love — creative writing and getting to know my community. At a time when students have so much on their plates besides just school during the pandemic, spending the year helping to amplify their voices and perspectives with writing while also taking advantage of my own professional development opportunities through Commonwealth Corps seemed very worthwhile. Teens in Print, WriteBoston’s after-school journalism program, ran its first all-virtual school year of programming for 2020-2021. I’m really proud that I’ve been able to build a new curriculum to introduce my favorite genres of writing (personal essays, flash, poetry) to students and see them produce great pieces!

I was drawn to Commonwealth Corps as an opportunity to use my skills I’ve used as an educator abroad in a U.S. domestic setting, and to learn more about how youth and the broader education sector are reacting to the pandemic. My primary tasks as a Corps member have involved facilitating in-class partnerships and workshops with virtual classrooms and youth-serving after school programs across the Greater Boston area. Topics I’ve facilitated include college application writing, opinion and advocacy letter writing, and single workshops regarding fake news and understanding the first amendment. I’ve had the privilege of meeting high school students from Boston and beyond, and gotten to know their stories, what they care about, and what they want to see changed in the world.

As a Commonwealth Corps service member, my encounters with the tough questions of how to engage with students in a period of uncertainty will only last through the length of my service. But for career educators, this moment in time will have a seismic effect on the education landscape for years to come. While I am not certain I will land in a career path in K-12 education, what I’ve learned from youth as a service member is that the world has and will continue to shift, and younger generations will lead. Turning to youth voice first is a lesson I will take with me wherever I go.

SOPHIA SALAZAR

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I feel motivated to turn my passions into my career.

Besides the joy I get from building relationships with my students and supporting them through writing processes from pitch to publication, the biggest impact that my service year has had on me so far has been empowering me as a professional. In past positions, I’ve felt pretty shy. The team at WriteBoston and Commonwealth Corps welcomed me with open arms and encourage me to bring my best self to the virtual office. Over the course of the past seven months, I’ve started sharing more of my ideas at team meetings, training sessions, etc., and feel people actually listening. My confidence has grown a lot as a professional, a mentor, and a change-maker.
Family Health Center of Worcester

Family Health Center of Worcester is a full-service health center open to all residents of Worcester and surrounding areas. The mission is to improve the health and well-being of all residents in the Greater Worcester area, especially culturally diverse populations, by providing access to affordable, high quality, integrated, comprehensive, and respectful primary health care and social services, regardless of patients’ ability to pay.

The focus of our members is on patient engagement and hospitality and these two things are more important than ever as we begin to turn a corner toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, comment cards and hospitality baskets have not been something existing staff have been able to prioritize, yet they both make a big impact on patient engagement.

In late summer/early fall, HOAP was given 200 tote bags filled with face masks, hand sanitizer and other safety supplies, and health education information. These tote bags were being distributed to patients at the main health center site.

Before distributing the bags to HOAP patients, the service members suggested adding additional items to the bags to customize them for this particular patient population. The members worked together to inventory items that were available in the donation closet at HOAP and with the help of the HOAP staff, they added socks, hats, hand warmers, prepackaged snacks, and COVID-19 information to the bags. Patients expressed gratitude to receive the bags and it was a tangible contribution to our patients on behalf of the service members.

Patients were particularly grateful for the hand warmers included in the bags, as there are fewer places open to the homeless community to go during the day to stay warm than in the past, due to COVID-19 protocols and restrictions.

“The focus of our members is on patient engagement and hospitality and these two things are more important than ever as we begin to turn a corner toward the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

- Family Health Center of Worcester
The opportunity to be able to serve with Commonwealth Corps came at a time when I personally think I needed it most. Throughout the summer I had been longing for something new. Thinking of ways on how I could really make a change, and impact the lives of others. As to seeing that helping others is something I’ve always wanted to do for as long as I could remember. As I learned more I later found out that I would be able to serve others in the community that I grew up in. Being offered the position at Family Health Centers HOAP Program really ignited a fire in me that had been waiting to come alive. The thought of serving others in my community and being able to make a difference and especially those of marginalized populations hit close to home and I knew this is what wanted to do. Through Commonwealth Corps I have been able to raise awareness and important health concerns that I am very passionate about. During my service year a project I have been given the opportunity to work on hosting a mental health day.

To be a help to those in need drew me to the start of my service year. In a point of time I indeed found myself in the shoes of the patients that arrive at HOAP. Being able to figure out when will your next meal be, or finding space in which you can spend the night I was there. I took the time and dedication to serve because I wanted to make an impact on my community, help transform little by little the lives of the less fortunate. At my host site, I believe one of my major accomplishments has been building the foundation of this program at Family health center. Planting the seeds of new projects from dental hygiene to bringing up awareness to mental health.

This service year with Commonwealth Corps has been such a beautiful blessing to be able to help the community, who helped me when I was in the same position, learning to sit, listen and understand the stories that this community has to share is a beautiful experience. From providing food, dental hygiene as well as personal hygiene products, has always put a smile on the beautiful faces of Worcester. As my service year comes to an early end so quick. I appreciate the time I spent helping my community, being here to make a change and break the stigma on homelessness. I leave here with a mind full of knowledge and heart full of appreciation for my Commonwealth Corps and at the Family Health Center. Remember to always focus on the finish line and not the obstacles. You got this, never give up.

“Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am able to make an impact in my community.”

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am able to make an impact in my community, and the power to create change and help others. I have learned to embrace change and neither fear it nor run from it. With change comes the opportunity for something great.”

Being able to host this event helps us raise awareness within my organization and community to understand those battling with Mental Illness and let them know that we are here to help. Being involved with Commonwealth Corps has also allowed me to help find that voice within myself and to be heard. Teaching me not only how to advocate for myself but others as well. Learning how to speak up has also helped me develop communication skills that I did not have before. From personal development trainings to coming together with other CC and being able to develop a sense of belonging, and sharing experiences, and learning from others has also been a great honor. I cannot wait to see what else Commonwealth Corps has in store as we all finish off these next few months strong.
Upcoming Events

Member trainings: April - Preparing for Next Steps

- Friday, 4/16 10am -1pm - Finishing Strong and Preparing for Life After Service
- Monday, 4/26 10am-11:30am - Salary Negotiation Workshop

Whether you’re a current member, alum, host site partner, or supporter, we invite you to stay connected with the Commonwealth Corps on social media.

If you want to know more about the work that our host sites partners do, connect with them on their social platforms.

PAACA
@InsightSCYC
@insight_youth_services

More Than Words
@mtwyouth
@mtwyouth
@mtwyouth

WriteBoston
@teensinprint
@teensinprint
@onefamilyinc

FHCW
@FamilyHealthCenterofWorcester

We’re always happy to share photos, stories, and updates from members, alumni, and supporters. Please send them to Marlene, our Commonwealth Program Assistant at mrojas@mass-service.org.