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

Over the last few months, our Commonwealth Corps members and host site partners have continued to build organizational capacity and mobilize volunteers throughout Massachusetts. So far, members have provided over 23,000 hours of service, leveraged over $176,700 in cash or in-kind support, and directly benefited nearly 4,800 individuals.

Their projects have ranged from automating a resume course and developing a resume builder tool for youth in Boston, to offering a Parent University series to teach parents how to navigate the school system in Lowell. In addition to members’ own contributions, they’ve also engaged 475 community volunteers who have provided an additional 7,700 hours of service, furthering the impact of their projects.

Looking ahead, MSA is currently undergoing a thorough review process to select our 2020-2021 host site partners with the support of staff, board members, and community volunteers. We will announce next year’s partners in April, and are looking forward to continuing to support a diverse range of projects and communities.

As always, our thanks go out to our members for their commitment to service and our partners for their support. Please enjoy this issue’s highlights from the past two months.

MSA Welcome & Update

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Epilepsy Foundation New England

Epilepsy Foundation New England’s mission is to help people affected by epilepsy in New England. Epilepsy is a neurological disorder characterized by unpredictable seizures that are like electrical storms in the brain. Epilepsy is a spectrum condition with a wide range of seizure types and treatments. Young people with epilepsy are at high risk for poor quality of life; there is a dearth of services available to them. Research shows that social connectedness and skill building (e.g., knowledge of self-care, advocacy skills) are very meaningful in increasing quality of life as youth transition to adulthood. We created the Young Leaders Network to meet these goals in 2017. Today, there are more than 325 participants.

We are hosting two full-time Commonwealth Corps Young Leaders Network Coordinators, Shannon Hammond and Georgi Condon, to strengthen our Young Leaders Network programming in Boston, Worcester, & Springfield. Our members are supporting our rapidly growing Young Leaders Network program during a critical time of program development by recruiting and supporting youth, planning activities, and investigating resources with which to link youth.

For example, in November, Georgi Condon planned and implemented a Friendsgiving meal for about 25 youth. “This is way better than my family’s Thanksgiving,” said one of the participants. In January, Shannon Hammond planned a Network event at the Worcester Railers hockey game, attended by more than 30 people. “I had the best time tonight. It’s so great to hang out with friends,” said one of the attendees. Program evaluation data shows the positive effect on youth’s sense of wellness, social connectedness, and skills (communication, leadership, advocacy). The Young Leaders Network is dependent on Commonwealth Corps members to support growth and build capacity, including recruiting volunteers to support ongoing and future activities, as well as program expansion.

We value our members greatly, and I know they value their service and their growth through their contributions. Just today, Shannon shared a post on her Facebook about how doing a year of service with Epilepsy Foundation New England was one of the best decisions of her life. She feels she is making a difference, connected to a larger community, and inspired by our youth’s stories and growth.

- Chanda Gunn, Director of Youth Services, Epilepsy Foundation New England
I was drawn to the Commonwealth Corps program because of its focus on both professional and personal growth. In addition, I saw the value of taking a year to learn how to better serve others in my community, specifically a community with similar values as me. Serving in a community with the goal to enhance the mission of nonprofit work is invaluable. It can be difficult to live on a stipend for a year, but having a support system with similar visions behind me and serving my community has taught me many beneficial life lessons.

There are many service members who are fortunate enough to have a personal connection with the mission of their host sites and I was fortunate to be one of those people. I am a person living with epilepsy and serving with the Commonwealth Corps at Epilepsy Foundation New England has allowed me to be able to serve alongside a team of likeminded people.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am better prepared to adapt and advocate for people with disabilities.

An exciting moment during my service was leading an event at the DCU center for the Worcester Railers. Through this event I gained experience in networking and communicating the mission of the Foundation. My hope is that I will leave Epilepsy Foundation New England better than I found it due to my year of service with the Commonwealth Corps and the support I've provided to young people living with Epilepsy and their families and caregivers through the Young Leaders Network.

I have been involved with the foundation for three years and share a personal connection to epilepsy. I serve with the Young Leaders Network (YLN), a monthly group where young people can create community and support systems with people affected by epilepsy. I personally understand the issues the YLN members are experiencing and felt that I can make an impact on the young members of the EFNE community.

Photography has been a part of my life for the past eight years. Recently, I have been taking photographs for several EFNE walks, galas and an expo. This has been a wonderful opportunity to expand my photography skills while also giving the community memories through visual representation. The photos also allow EFNE to market and showcase current and exciting events. Moreover, I had the great opportunity to lead YLN meetings, allowing me to share my experience with epilepsy and create a lasting connection for the members. Connecting members with one another through a variety of activities is a key component of the YLN goals.

We’ve had several YLN events throughout the service year. The one that has resonated with me the most thus far was a retreat I attended in October. The group participated in bonding activities like hiking to a waterfall, riding a ski lift and making blankets. I got to watch friendships between members grow stronger and new ones be formed. While at the retreat, I was able to make new connections myself, making lasting memories with the YLN members. This was an experience I will never forget.
Hernández After School Program

The mission of the Hernández After School Program (HASP) is to work collaboratively with families, school staff, neighborhood residents, suburban partners, businesses, and nonprofit groups to help meet the educational, social, emotional, cultural, and recreational needs of the Hernández School and neighborhood families.

We are hosting two full-time Commonwealth Corps members who are able to greatly increase our capacity to offer students high-quality after-school opportunities. One member, Fani Rosa, serves as the Lee Conmigo Coordinator to implement a peer-literacy mentoring program for students at our school. The other, Valorie Steier, serves as the Community Coordinator, to recruit and manage HASP volunteers, write grants, and assist in scheduling and running after-school field trips.

When Fani entered our program she was switching sectors after nearly 10 years in the restaurant industry and had no professional experience with youth. In just a few months, she has taken immense strides to develop positive relationships with students and improve the literacy program we started last year.

Fani has also generated interest in reading for many of our youth and promoted leadership and accountability through example. She holds one-on-one meetings with youth, leads orientations, and provides mentoring for those struggling in academics.

As the Community Coordinator, Valorie brings in volunteers throughout the school year that engage in literacy program tutoring, homework help, and mentoring for our students. These volunteers are crucial to our program by assisting staff and being role models for our students to connect with. Valorie has also had the ability to support our many other direct program volunteers, sharing her wisdom as a recent college graduate, while also taking concrete steps to network about her next stage in life, be it farmer or state department employee.

We are extremely fortunate to have both Fani and Valorie on our team and part of the Hernandez After-School Program. Upon completion of their service year, our Commonwealth Corps members will have left a tremendous mark and a long-lasting impact on our students, program, and community. Frederick Douglass said, “once you read, you will be free forever,” and students that acquire passion for reading in our program are gaining the ability to learn, imagine, and create ideas that can be applied to many areas of their future self.

- Jeffery Mestre, Program Coordinator, Hernández After School Program
VALORIE STEIER

I sought a role in a fast-paced, challenging environment, offering something a little different from what I’ve done before, and something effectuating positive change. I saw opportunities for personal and professional growth as a Commonwealth Corps member, so far I’ve gotten what I was looking for, from improved skills in organization, management, and conflict resolution, to my own personal understanding of freedom and grassroots movements.

I had a large role in organizing our annual Gingerbread House Night through gathering volunteers and fundraising for our entire HASP community - we decorated the cafeteria, held a raffle, set up tables for friendly competition, and supplied food for everyone. It was a huge success, and we have our awesome community to thank.

Another part of my role at HASP has been coaching kids in our running club that’s sponsored by Sole Train, as well as our debate club. I’ve learned to take initiative and be assertive in both roles. These skills are something I’ve wanted to cultivate on a grander scale, and I’m glad I can ascertain a point in my life where I’ve developed them in a professional setting.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am learning that a sense of community makes it easier to balance chaos and hardship with laughter and optimism.

FANI ROSA

Everyday that I’m here is exciting. It’s hard to pick one story because they all have been great. It could be something as small as me teaching something to one of the kids and later on they utilize what they learned. Or that all the kids really get excited when they see me and know how positive I try to be and you can see them embody that as well. This experience has challenged me in many ways, but one specific way is teaching me patience.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been exposed to this unique school and met some amazing humans along the way.
Westport River Watershed Alliance

The Westport River Watershed Alliance (WRWA) is a nonprofit environmental education and advocacy group which was established in 1976 to protect and conserve the natural resources of the Westport River and its 100-square mile watershed located at the entrance to Buzzards Bay in southeastern MA. WRWA’s primary purpose and goals are to promote the environmental integrity of the Westport River watershed and its environs on Buzzards Bay and Rhode Island Sound; advocate the wise use and preservation of the natural resources to the aesthetic, recreational, and economic benefit of the citizens of the area; and educate the general public in regard to the interrelationship of our water, soils, plants, animals, and people.

WRWA is hosting two full-time Commonwealth Corps Environmental Educators, James Austin and Jess Mattos. Through their service members teach the Watershed Education Program (WEP) topics to over 2,500 students in grades PreK-12, in Fall River, Dartmouth, Westport, Fairhaven and Taunton. They have also developed new website content, social media posts, creature feature videos and displays and pamphlets for the new River Center.

“Our Commonwealth Corps members, Jess and James, have added to our organization by bringing in new community members through creating successful family outreach programs we have never had the chance to offer before.”

- Deborah Weaver, Executive Director
Westport River Watershed Alliance

Having Commonwealth Corps members this year with the opening of the River Center has brought so many new faces through our doors. The family outreach programs have been a huge success with many community members excited about this addition to our programs. Jess has been instrumental in creating fun and interactive stations for our new Discovery Series. Visitors have commented how fun and informative the programs have been so far. James has put in many hours updating our classroom lessons to make sure the lesson reflect the latest activities and technology we use in the classrooms. His attention to detail has been extremely helpful in completing this large project. In addition, members have been recruiting high school youth as volunteer docents to assist with programs in the River Center.

Jess and James have both shown great improvements in teaching science lessons to a wide age range of students as well as a great variety of topics. The difference in their skills from the beginning of the school year until now is quite an accomplishment. They use different methods to keep students engaged and on track while teaching lessons. Being a part of Commonwealth Corps Program has brought our organization’s mission to a new part of the community. These new community members are potential WRWA members, volunteers and the support needed to continue our mission for future generations.

- Shelli Costa, Education Director,
Westport River Watershed Alliance
JAMES AUSTIN

AGE: 24
HOMETOWN: FOXBORO
CURRENT HOME: WESTPORT

After discovering Commonwealth Corps, I decided to serve because of a combined passion for the environment, and educating different school and public audiences about environmental stewardship. In addition, I wanted to create a foundation to work towards future career paths. I have recently graduated with a master's degree in environmental education, and viewed the role of an environmental educator as an opportunity to share my passion with students, and to help them develop their own interests and wonders for the environment.

As educators, we’ve led several lessons about watershed wildlife, environmental mindfulness, and watershed health. We’ve delivered curricula to over 300 students in grades PreK-3, as well as local high school students. Another large project with WRWA is our “Discovery Explorers Series,” where we open our new River Center to the public, and teach about a focused topic for the morning. This series of public outreach events has provided opportunities to connect with the local community, as well as reinforce learning about the environment through several education exhibits and interactive tools. This includes a VR sand table, three aquarium display tanks, a digital microscope, and bi-monthly educational displays.

So far, my service experience with WRWA has helped me refine my public speaking and communication skills. It’s challenged me to use age-appropriate vocabulary to explain broad scientific concepts to different class grades, and to ask questions to help guide student thinking. In addition, I’ve grown skills in monitoring water quality, husbandry for aquatic creatures, and gardening. I hope to use these skills to help foster a sense of environmental stewardship in others.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have a greater sensitivity to the language I use with different audiences.

What drew me to the Commonwealth Corps was the opportunity to serve my community and the environment while helping out my host site, the Westport River Watershed Alliance (WRWA). I originally went on the WRWA website to see if there were any volunteer opportunities and I found out about Commonwealth Corps there. I was then drawn to CC because they provide a bunch of trainings that help you develop professional and personal skills. Also having recently graduated college, I felt like it was a good transition from school to getting into the nonprofit world.

Helping come up with events and organizing our monthly Discovery Series is something I have accomplished while serving. Our first event was “Winter Wonders” which covered topics like hibernation and adaptation in the winter, and this month we will be hosting “Groundhog Greetings.” These events help engage the community, educate kids about different topics and animals, and creates awareness about the Westport river and watershed. I’m hoping to develop the skills involved in planning these events more during my time serving as well as volunteer recruitment.

Serving with WRWA has been a great learning experience for me. Some of my favorite experiences serving with WRWA have been teaching what I’ve learned to the elementary-age students we serve. They are so energetic and curious about what we bring to them, whether it be learning about coastal environments or birds with our feathery focus program. All of this classroom experience is helping me improve my ability to manage and lead groups.

JESS MATTOS

AGE: 30
HOMETOWN: FALL RIVER
CURRENT HOME: WESTPORT

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been able to serve an area that I care about and meet different people from all over the state who do the same.
I have always wanted to help people who were less fortunate than myself. This is what led me to study economics - to understand the way the world works. Coming out of college, I wasn’t exactly sure of what my next steps were. I knew I wanted to do something where I was making a valuable impact, putting my skills to good use, and growing (or gaining new skills) in the process. The Commonwealth Corps promised all those things so I saw it as the perfect next step in my journey.

As a CC member with Springfield Works, I helped job-seekers in the community navigate and complete job applications. During job workshops, I helped them discover their own skill sets and match them to potential job requirements. I also was part of important leadership discussions with cross-sector organizations on how to attract and retain qualified workers. A great highlight was being able to create a presentation for key stakeholders showing why many mothers have a weak labor force attachment so it becomes harder to attract or retain them.

I’m currently finishing up my master’s program in Applied Economics at UMass Boston (May 2020). I’m working at the school’s Latino Institute doing research and data analysis. I’m also a teaching assistant for the Economics Department (currently in macroeconomics). I am also currently writing my thesis/capstone on the correlation between the Earned Income Tax Credit and mother’s income stability.

My experience as a Commonwealth Corps member helped me solidify my plans going forward and moved me to pursue a masters in order to continue advocating for those who are disadvantaged or overlooked by the system. It has especially driven my desire for change among low-income families, as they’re the most vulnerable in this economy.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have gained practical, transferable skills and helped discover solutions to both individual and city-wide problems.

**Members in Action**

Top left: Westport River Watershed Alliance CC member James leads the aquarium station at their “Winter Wonders” event.

Top middle: UTEC CC members Whitney and Lexus engage parents and their children in making family trees.

Top right: Epilepsy Foundation New England CC member Georgi paints with a young leader at their “Plaster Fun” event.

Bottom: Regional Environmental Council CC members Max, Erika, and Katie hold a volunteer appreciation event.
Winter Development

Both members and supervisors received training this winter on sustaining members’ service projects after the program ends, as well as on preparing members to sustain their own professional development post-service. Supervisors gathered together with MSA in early February to celebrate and learn from their experiences so far this year, and ensure a successful second half of the term (bottom left).

In addition to a training on “Sustaining Your Service and Yourself” in January (top), members also had the opportunity to attend our midyear member retreat, “Mindfulness in Service and Leadership,” with Brenda Fingold (bottom right).

We also had our first member-led training of the year, when Epilepsy Foundation of New England CC members Shannon and Georgi presented on “The Benefits of Peer-Led Youth Programs.” Members are encouraged to share topics of interest with each other through presentations, training sessions, webinars, or podcasts.

Stay Connected

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.

We’re always happy to share photos, stories, and updates from members, alumni, and supporters. Please send them to Julianne at jdefilippis@mass-service.org.

Upcoming Events & Important Reminders

March CC Webinar, "Recruiting the Right Volunteers (Part 2)"
Friday, March 6, from 12 p.m. - 1:30 p.m. via GoToWebinar

March CC Training Session, "Leveraging Your Skills for the Future"
Friday, March 20, from 10:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. in Boston
OR
Friday, March 27, from 11 a.m. - 3 p.m. in Bridgewater

April CC Training Session, "Finishing Strong"
Monday, April 6, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. in Worcester (with Service Project)
OR
Thursday, April 16, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. in Boston (with MSA Special Event)

Remember to check the CC member or host site portal regularly for more details and registration information.