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

Spring is finally upon us and our Commonwealth Corps members and host site partners have hit their stride in supporting clients, building programs, and coordinating volunteers throughout the Commonwealth. Members have provided over 30,000 hours of service from August through April in the areas of education, youth development, workforce development, and health.

In addition to their service, our member training sessions in March and April focused on how members can leverage the skills they've enhanced or gained this year towards their next steps, and ensuring members are able to make the most of their last few months of service.

While focusing on finishing strong with this year’s program and supporting members’ next steps, we are also excited to announce that MSA will be partnering with 16 agencies, half of which are new to the program, to host 42 members next year (see full list on page 10). Once again, we received a high number of applications, demonstrating a strong pool of organizations committed to creating meaningful change in their communities through service, and we are excited for another inspiring service term.

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Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell

The mission of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell is to inspire and enable young people, especially those who need us most, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens.

Our current Commonwealth Corps member, Raysam Donkoh-Halm, is serving as our Teen Enrichment Coordinator. The intent of this position is to provide our teens with access and resources to be an advocate for their community through community and civic service. A few goals include: developing a Teen Resource Guide listing local community service projects, involvement in community action projects, and involvement with cultural events.

Raysam has been a beacon of light for our teens by not only helping them connect with their community, but with themselves. Through his meditation program, our teens are learning new coping and resiliency skills that allow them to reduce their stress. Raysam has also led the charge to helping them identify their own bias so that they can connect with their community more deeply.

Without Raysam, our teens would not have had the opportunity to experience important activities and events in our Greater Lowell community including: the Confronting Gun Violence Against Kids Conference at UMass Lowell, Coffee with Cops, An Evening with Oprah, and most recently a town hall meeting with our Youth of the Year to discuss the renaming of a popular park in Lowell. Raysam has also assisted with video products for our Club such as: producing a Marijuana PSA for teens, 99 Perfect Partners Contest, and BGCA Youth Development Professional MVP Contest. Raysam also co-advises our Youth Council and was our Club representative on the working committee for the “MLK Moving the Dream Forward Together” event.

Raysam has an innate ability to connect with people without judgement and truly from a place of love. He wants all of our teens to learn valuable lessons that will help them be the person they want to be. One of the most impressive things I have seen from Raysam was when he adapted his approach after his Critical Thinkers Coalition did not go as planned. He asked the teens what they wanted to do and implemented this meditation program that teens look forward to every week. Teens, especially those that are at-risk, live stressful lives. The meditation program has allowed the most vulnerable of our teens to learn a life skill they can apply indefinitely to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression. Raysam also gets excited about the work of doing good. He is constantly talking with our teens and building relationships so that they can then in turn do the work. This is especially true for the Youth Council.

- Alisha Harrison, Program Director
Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell

“I got lazy with my Youth of the Year essay, and Raysam got on my back about it. Yesterday I wrote a whole essay. Sometimes you get a little bit lazy — sometimes you want to take a break ‘cause there’s so much going on. I am glad he is giving me that push.”

- Yvonne W., Club Member
RAYSAM DONKOH-HALM

What drew me to serve with the Commonwealth Corps was my connection I made with my site supervisor Alisha Harrison. She believed I would make a strong candidate and work well with the teens. To this day, she continues to support me and sets me up to succeed.

A major thing that I started at the Club is my weekly meditation sessions. It is very consistently attended by regulars and by other teens that are encouraged to try it out. Most teens report feeling better, less anxious, and appreciative of having a time in the day to relax and rest if they need it.

Something that has impacted me in a great way is being around a variety of young people coming from different family situations at the Club each week.

It gives me a connection to young people in my city that I would have valued more when I was around their age. I have fostered relationships, but more importantly I have built trust with some members at the Club because they know that I’m invested in their success.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have a better understanding of my role at the club and have a better resolve of how to do the most with the limited time that I have with the teens.

Members in Action

Top left: Massachusetts College of Art and Design CC Members Joey Fennell and Navid Haghighi-Mood interview a MassArt student for a video project.

Top right: Mount Wachusett Community College CC Member Rachel Vargeletis tables a STEM event for United Way Youth Venture.

Bottom: 826 Boston CC Member Durane West helps students get in touch with their inner animals and write journals.
Program Spotlight

Children's Services of Roxbury

Children’s Services of Roxbury’s (CSR) mission is to bring peace of mind to children and families across Massachusetts. In 2018, CSR partnered with MSA for the first time to strengthen school readiness of preschool children from Greater Roxbury, including a high percentage of homeless children and DCF-involved children.

Through service, our Commonwealth Corps member, Shakia Atkins, has successfully supported preschool children to demonstrate school readiness gains in both social/emotional development and literacy skills, helped caregivers increase engagement in their child’s early childhood education, and increased access to books at the children’s homes and at school.

Boston-native Shakia is a dedicated mother who has considerable experience and skills in childcare, administrative work, and sales. Amicable and easy-going, Shakia brings a distinctive optimism and dedication to her service.

Shakia’s impact was recognizable almost immediately. Within her first weeks at CSR, Shakia led a group of children on a trick-or-treat walk in the Roxbury community. In just a few minutes of observation, Shakia was sorting candy, adjusting costumes, giving prompts and directing traffic. As hectic as it can be assisting with managing a group of excited, sugar-happy preschoolers, Shakia was calm, collected, in control, and smiling. Amazingly, that smile has seemed to remain throughout her service.

In addition to supporting the Early Education and Care Center, Shakia is also playing a principal role in developing CSR’s 1st Annual Super Readers Book Drive and literacy celebration. Not only will the book drive bring much needed resources to the Early Education and Care Center, its success will also serve as a pilot for meaningful volunteer engagement opportunities in the future.

The Early Education and Care center team members have openly embraced Shakia’s presence and are enthusiastic about the possibility of post-service employment opportunities.

“Shakia is the perfect fit. Her presence in the daycare center is definitely appreciated by the classroom teachers and the children. We would be fortunate to have more volunteers with Shakia’s attitude and dedication.”

- Tennelle Smith, Sr. Family Partner, Children’s Services of Roxbury

- Harry Harding, Vice President, Innovation and Strategic Partnerships, Children’s Services of Roxbury
What drew me to the Commonwealth Corps was the opportunity to grow my passion in childcare. I chose to serve as a member to help my community and myself to expand engagements throughout the districts with a positive impact.

One of my first accomplishments was supporting CSR’s fall Peace of Mind event, which tried to set a world record for the largest human peace sign by inviting families to come out and enjoy themselves.

Another event I am excited about is our book drive. Our goal is to successfully purchase 650 new multicultural books for the children to take home, and with some to be used in the child care center. It has been challenging to put together and also to have everyone be on the same page with the budget needed to host the event. This experience has given me the connection to meeting wonderful people with the same approach to benefiting and giving back to the community.

Serving with the Commonwealth Corps has changed my life for the better. It’s something I felt within myself and in my heart. It has been a very humbling experience for me to serve full-time with younger children and then come home to my own two young children. As I grow and mature, I have learned to appreciate everything I do and learn from all experiences that I encounter. It has also been a pleasure to connect with individuals throughout the Commonwealth Corps at past trainings.

My experience as a CC member has given me many opportunities to develop my professional skills, knowledge, and certifications in my childcare career. Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am am able feel good about myself in helping those in need, building knowledge, and engaging in the community to make this world a better place.

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Springfield WORKS

The mission of Springfield WORKS is to increase the number of people working in Springfield from 58% to 75%. Jobseekers will find and retain a job, which leads to a long-term career at a sustainable wage, and employers will be able to hire and retain qualified workers that meet their needs.

Our two Commonwealth Corps members, Elizabeth “Beth” Baron and Keith Peters, have been leading targeted outreach, job workshops, and trainings on Springfield WORKS tools and strategies to coaches, mentors, case managers, and community leaders who are vital to sustained employment. They have also developed new recruiting strategies to find and connect under-employed and unemployed residents to workforce development training programs.

The Springfield WORKS initiative has over 40 partners but limited capacity outside of in-kind partner participation. We learned that workforce development training seats were going unfilled. Our two full-time service members have expanded our partner reach and are advancing our recruiting practices to become more systematic. These new partners have expanded our city’s ability to find the hard to reach under and unemployed population.

“Beth and Keith have provided invaluable services to the Mason Square and Springfield library communities by not only helping our patrons find jobs, but by helping our patrons sharpen their skills to get higher quality jobs. Their presence in the library and in the city is appreciated and needed. Their presence at our weekly C3 meetings (a civilian-led meeting where citizens can interact peacefully and productively with law enforcement) shows their commitment to the community, and their programs at the libraries show dedication to their jobs. We thank them for all of their help.”

- Victoria Palmatier, Springfield Public Libraries

Keith has provided a wealth of information about and enthusiasm for the Springfield Community. This, combined with his passion and commitment to improving the lives of people who are underemployed or unemployed, has contributed greatly to efforts of Springfield WORKS. Beth has diligently supported the Springfield WORKS/Leadership Pioneer Valley (LPV) team to discuss, review, and edit a community survey project to address the un/under employment in Springfield. Despite some challenges, Beth was able launch and distribute the survey successfully.

Both members have grown in confidence and skills by building relationships in the community through partner meetings, trainings, and community workforce development workshops. This experience has helped them develop new ways to create and communicate information that tells our story and draws new partners into the mission.

MSA’s dedication to their mission provided us with the opportunity to experience how member service can have a long lasting impact in our community. They’re building cross-sector partnerships, and expanding our service mission to help jobseekers find and retain meaningful work that leads to a long-term career at a sustainable wage.

- Anne Kandilis, Springfield WORKS Initiative Director
Economic Development Council of Western MA
Beth Baron

Last summer, I chose to serve as a Commonwealth Corps member because I felt I had something to offer to my surrounding community in terms of passion and leadership that would hopefully leave me and my community enriched by the experience.

A couple of the important things I am currently on the path to accomplishing are a community outreach survey to assess the challenges and barriers Springfield residents are experiencing while seeking meaningful work in the area. Another tandem piece to that work is collaborating on some marketing and social media messaging to tell the story of the obstacles which residents are facing as they try to establish career pathways, particularly with respect to the cliff effect experienced when residents rapidly lose their benefits at a rate higher than the compensation they are receiving from their jobs. Allowing for employers, residents, and jobseekers to gain a better understanding of the obstacles is something I hope to have made an impact on before my service ends in June.

I think the most exciting example of how my service has impacted me so far has been the enormous amount of support I have received from those doing similar, meaningful work in the community. I have been encouraged by all the relationships I have cultivated with employer partners, residents, coaches and mentors, and community activists who work tirelessly to make our little portion of the world a better place for everyone living here, and especially a hopeful place for the children in the City of Springfield. My service has changed me, sustained me, and energized me to keep moving forward.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have a greater understanding of the significant challenges facing our communities and the importance of realizing that a community problem requires an active community response in order for us all to witness significant change.

Keith Peters

One highlight of my service has been delivering many presentations about the SkillSmart Jobs Portal and how anyone in Springfield who wants a job will be able to find one, retain the job, and increase earnings through career growth. Another highlight has been hearing the success stories of those whom I have impacted and made a difference in their quality of life.

I have been in challenging situations myself and I enjoy helping others to avoid that and receive the right assistance they need. I am very passionate about helping people, and I believe with the right resources, people can be amazingly resilient. It gives me great joy seeing how just a little help will bring such relief to people who are really struggling.
Greater Lawrence Family Health Center

Greater Lawrence Family Health Center (GLFHC) is a federally-qualified health center in Lawrence, MA, whose mission is to improve and maintain the health of individuals and families in the Merrimack Valley by providing a network of high quality, comprehensive healthcare services. We have been privileged to have Mariela Ureña as our Commonwealth Corps member this year. In line with our organization’s mission, Mariela’s service has been focused on supporting a number of innovative healthcare services in our center.

As our Commonwealth Corps Maternal/Child Health Coordinator, Mariela’s primary focus has been on supporting our Centering Pregnancy and Centering Parenting programs. Centering is a nationally-recognized model for providing prenatal care and well-child care in a group setting. Patients are seen in groups for two hours with two physicians who perform exams and facilitate discussions around topics related to pregnancy as well as early childhood development. Evidence has shown that patients who participate in this program have lower rates of preterm birth, neonatal intensive care unit admission, and pediatric obesity.

At GLFHC, twelve groups per year are led by resident physicians under the supervision of a Centering-certified preceptor with Mariela’s support. During groups, Mariela helps to lead facilitated discussions around health concerns. She has been exceptional in coordinating a complex schedule and ensuring patients who miss groups receive appropriate follow-up. Patients love her and ask after her when she is not around. Her support has been implicit in the success of this program as we have expanded it. Her goals at the moment are to further stimulate volunteerism to make our program even more sustainable.

The Commonwealth Corps has allowed us to further strengthen a large and complex program that has positively benefited patients. Supporting this complex program has also contributed to Mariela’s own growth and development. She continues to be an integral part of our team and each week finds new ways to contribute to the health of our patients.

“I don’t know what I’d do without her!”
- Edie Nunez, RN, Maternal Child Health Nurse Coordinator, Greater Lawrence Family Health Center
MARIELA UREÑA

I moved to Lawrence from the Dominican Republic shortly before starting my service. When I came to this country, it was all new for me: new city, new people, and most importantly a new language. I’ve always thought that one of my greatest abilities is to help and serve others. In my home country, I used to help people in hospitals, providing different services, so when I saw the opportunity to continue serving through the Commonwealth Corps with the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, I did not think twice about applying to be part of the team.

What has impacted me the most during my service has been being able to observe my own development. When I started my service I was very shy and I almost did not like to talk much because I was afraid that others would make fun of me if maybe I said something wrong (which never happened). Today I look at myself and I feel happy with the person I am and the ability I have to lead a prenatal group on my own. Sometimes I still feel some fear with new challenges, but I trust myself and I know I will achieve it.

I think that one of the things that has impacted me and the community the most is to teach that we can always give the best of ourselves and learn something about the situation we’re in, although sometimes we do not believe it. As my English has improved, I have also loved helping people who come into the Center and need help with an interpretation or maybe they do not understand what they are saying.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I discovered that I can always achieve everything I set out to do, no matter when or where.
Upcoming Events & Important Reminders

End-of-Year Member Performance Evaluations due to MSA
Friday, 6/21 by 5pm; submitted by host site via online form

2018-2019 Celebration of Service
Thursday, 6/27 10am-3pm at the MA State House (Boston)

Official Last Day of the Service Term
Saturday, 6/29. Some members may finish sooner

Final Stipend Processed (with Completion Award, if eligible)
Tuesday, 7/9. Should be deposited/received by end of week

Remember to check the CC Resources Page regularly for more details and links to registration/submission forms.

2019-2020 CC Host Site Partners

The Commonwealth Corps is a state-funded service internship program that engages Massachusetts residents of all ages and backgrounds in direct service and capacity building to strengthen communities, address unmet needs, and increase volunteerism. This coming program year we are partnering with 16 agencies across the state to host service members.

Please help us spread the word about applying to become a 2019-2020 Commonwealth Corps Member, or consider applying yourself at http://bit.ly/JoinCommCorps!

Economic Opportunity/Workforce Development Focus Area:
Chelsea Collaborative (East Boston, Everett & Revere; full-time)
Economic Development Council of Western MA (Springfield; full-time)
More Than Words (Boston & Waltham; full-time)

Education Focus Area - General:
Coalition for a Better Acre (Lowell; full-time)
Friends of the Rafael Hernandez School Inc. (Boston; full-time)
Girl Scouts of Eastern MA (Boston, Middleboro & Andover; half-time)
Phoenix Charter Academy Network (Chelsea & Lawrence; full-time)
United South End Settlements (Boston; full-time)
Westport River Watershed Alliance (Fall River, Taunton & Westport; full-time)
WriteBoston (Boston; full-time)

Education Focus Area - Early:
UTEC, Inc. (Lowell; full-time)

Health & Nutrition Focus Area:
Peer Health Exchange (Boston; full-time)
Regional Environmental Council (Worcester; half-time)

Youth Development/Violence Prevention Focus Area:
Epilepsy Foundation New England (Boston, Lowell, Worcester & Springfield; full-time)
Girls Inc. of the Valley (Holyoke, Springfield & Chicopee; full time)
Massachusetts College of Art and Design (Boston; full-time)