MSA Welcome & Update

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

We are thrilled to share that our Commonwealth Corps members have completed the first half of their service year. Members are now starting to prepare for their life after service. They have been attending various Professional Development Trainings, building their resumes, and networking. This will provide members with essential tools to continue with their professional life.

Additionally, we want to acknowledge that this hasn’t been an easy year, and that is why we are grateful to still have had the opportunity to get to know the members that had to exit the program early due to unforeseen circumstances.

Looking ahead, MSA is currently undergoing a thorough review process to select our 2022-2023 host site partners with the support of staff and community volunteers.

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 few months.
Regional Environmental Council

The Regional Environmental Council brings people together to create a just food system and build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities through three core programs: YouthGROW, UGROW, and REC Farmers’ Markets. We currently have three Commonwealth Corps members: Amina Amour, Max Macort, and Christine Tosti. We love our CC members! This year, they have stepped up to support all of REC’s programs in a variety of ways. They have helped organize and lead weekly volunteer sessions at the YouthGROW Farm, supported school garden builds and community garden cleanups, and served at our weekly mobile market stops. Over the winter Max and Christine have helped us build 75 small wooden raised beds in preparation for the WooSox Farm opening day at Polar Park. Amina has also worked hard supporting a brand new school gardens and farmers market initiative that includes hosting a series of mobile markets at three schools in the school gardens network.

Having CC members has allowed us to increase our capacity for providing resources to our community partners. Not only do they work so well together, but they are a joy to have around, and have made an impact on each one of our programs and each one of our staff!

- Eliza Lawrence, School Gardens Coordinator

When asked to reflect on their service so far, Max said that getting to know the Worcester community has been his favorite part – “there are really amazing and inspiring people and organizations in and around Worcester that I never would have met if not for my service year.” Christine mentioned that she likes that she doesn’t feel pressured to be neurotypical at the REC, and is learning how to ask questions and be her neurodivergent self. Amina expressed that she’s really grateful for CC – “The service year so far has given me the opportunity to explore a completely new professional field and has led me to be able to make many connections with lots of amazing human beings!” This is our third year hosting Commonwealth Corps members and it continues to be a fantastic experience. Amina, Christine, and Max have contributed so much already this year. We’re really looking forward to our spring season together!

- Stacie Brimmage, YouthGROW Coordinator, REC
MEMBER SPOTLIGHT
CHRISTINE TOSTI

I had been struggling to find much relief from the healthcare system to manage my brain of anxiety, but I had been noticing the positive impact plants and animals had on me. I went to the REC’s seedling sale and started tending to my own little container garden this past spring and learned about the Commonwealth Corp positions while there. Ted, one of REC’s board members even offered me a ride home with all my seedlings when I thought I was going to have to carry them home on the bus! This was such a positive experience so I signed up to volunteer on the Oread St farm that summer, and finally applied for the service position, interviewed, and here I am! Recently, the REC moved to a massive warehouse location right next to their main farm. There is a full kitchen and I’ve been able to talk to fellow staff and CC members about using the space to cook easy meals and help each other eat healthy and filling foods. I threw together gnocchi and pesto from a CSA share at Red Fire Farm within minutes because of the easy access to a stove top! I don’t feel pressure to be neurotypical at the REC and am learning how to be my neurodivergent self, ask questions, and keep working towards social justice where our communities can come together and learn how to grow food together. To me, the REC is a Recovery Education Community (new acronym!) and they support people’s growth and learning. They’ve helped me significantly gain higher self-esteem and self worth which puts me in a much better position to engage with others.

NAME: CHRISTINE
HOMETOWN: FRAMINGHAM, MA
CURRENT HOME: WORCESTER, MA
HOST SITE: REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

"Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I can maintain my recovery"
MEMBER SPOTLIGHT
MAX MACORT

I really wanted the opportunity to get to know the Worcester community better. That has probably been my favorite part of my service so far - there are really amazing and inspiring people and organizations in and around Worcester that I never would have met if not for my service year. I feel like I’ve really found a community that I connect with and I hope to expand those connections beyond my service year. I think I’m most proud of the relationships I’ve formed with our youth. I like to think that I’m someone that they can turn to, and the best part of my service has been when youth reach out to me to share college acceptances and job offers. I’ve also really enjoyed learning how to grow food - one of my favorite parts of my service has been taking care of the plants on the farm and seeing the growing process through from seed to harvest. I feel like my biggest personal accomplishment has been becoming way more confident in my ability to learn new skills. Coming into my service year I had very little experience growing food or working with volunteers (which was pretty intimidating!) but it’s been liberating to learn these new skills, and to prove to myself that I can pick up new skills. Thanks to my service year, I have a much better idea of what I want to do moving forward, and more importantly, the kind of people I want to be surrounded by.

NAME: MAX
HOMETOWN: CANTON, MA
CURRENT HOME: WORCESTER, MA
HOST SITE: REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

‘Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I feel like a valued member of my community.’
MEMBER SPOTLIGHT
AMINA AMEUR

I was drawn to Commonwealth Corps because it felt like an amazing chance for me to grow my skill set and explore the new-to-me field of non-profits all while being able to serve my community by continuing to be involved with an organization I already loved, the Regional Environmental Council. Before I knew what the Commonwealth Corps was I felt like I was stuck and didn’t know how to change my life around, but because of this opportunity the CC has given me, I feel like I can potentially go on to many other amazing organizations once my service year has been completed so I can continue to serve my community I am hoping to make more of an impact in the spring and summer when we start running seedling planting workshops at different schools. I love that a lot of young people are able to start building a relationship with plants and growing food in their school’s garden at such a young age. It’s nice to think that these positive experiences of planting things in a garden and watching it grow and change throughout the year can potentially change someone’s whole connection to food. Serving with the REC has given me the opportunity to fall in love with gardening myself and to build upon my knowledge of plants and growing vegetables. I feel like this is the first time in my life where I am actually excited to get my hands in the dirt this spring and get my own backyard garden up and running!

NAME: AMINA
HOMETOWN: WORCESTER, MA
CURRENT HOME: WORCESTER, MA
HOST SITE: HOST SITE: REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

‘Because of the Commonwealth Corps I am able to explore new and exciting professional paths that I felt were inaccessible in the past all while being able to aid the food justice movement in my hometown that I love dearly.’
Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro South

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro South’s mission is "to nurture strong minds, healthy bodies, and community spirit through youth-driven, high-impact programs in safe and fun environments. Every day, we are helping youth build great futures for themselves, their families, and their communities." The CC members’ service to the organization has embodied what our mission is for our community. They have helped to oversee day-to-day farm operations—consisting of but not limited to seeding, transplanting, and harvesting crops. They were tasked with creating a volunteer intake and communication process to ensure the ongoing retention of our volunteers at the farm. They have worked to also create partnerships with organizations throughout Taunton and Brockton that have deep ties to the community and serve families who we may not be able to reach on our own. This partner intake and communication process has been a critical piece of the work the CC members have created from the ground up and is critical to our mission of getting fresh produce into the hands of families throughout the communities we serve.

This was our first year acting as a host site for CC members, and it has completely transformed our Farm and Food Access initiatives within our organization. Jeanne darc Bernard, our full-time CC member, began her service year in August and did, unfortunately, choose to resign her role in January. While Jeanne darc was with us, she expressed such passion for the projects and the connection to her personal passion around public health. Jeanne darc brought the public health lens to all of our decision making conversations around processes and best practices, which added a layer to our conversations and considerations that may not have been present without her insight.

The farms were new to our operations as an organization, so we had a plan and ideas as to how it would all come together, but the CC members have been critical in making it as successful as it has been. Their willingness to learn about the completely new to the farm operations, and step outside of their comfort zones to connect with others who have similar passions in serving the community and in providing equitable access to fresh produce, has been instrumental in the expansion of our program.

- Lauren Utschig, Executive Director

Jeanne darc was the initial creator and connector of our volunteer and partnership intake process, and without her beginning that work, we would not have had a foundation to expand upon it. Amarr Reid came on board with us in September as a half-time CC member. From day one, Amarr has brought his positive energy and self-starter spirit. Amarr’s background in the culinary field has helped with the connection to our Nutrition Department within the club. Amarr has worked with our Nutrition Director around developing recipes that families can easily create at home with the grocery bags we provide to them during our monthly pantry.

One of the most pivotal moments during the service term was the Farm team’s presentation during our October all-staff training day. Through their training, they opened the door to conversations around the farm and how it could impact our members and their families, they made the farm accessible to our frontline staff, and also created an environment where the staff understood what part they could play in the organization’s effort to combat food insecurity. Being part of CC will have a lasting impact on our organization and on the community because the service that the CC members have provided for the organization is so intrinsically tied to the community itself.

There is much more work to be done, but we wouldn’t be able to move forward with it if we hadn’t had the foundational efforts from the CC members this service year.

- Lauren Utschig, Executive Director
What drew me to the Commonwealth Corps? I honestly think it was the work and the people. You get to meet people from all over and learn on new ways to serve this kind of work! My passion to serve people is growing and Commonwealth Corps is helping the process. My accomplishments so far are that we have successfully started harvesting produce for families in need from the freight farm. We are currently on our second freight that I had the chance to set up from start to finish. I’m at the point that this has impacted me to want to own one myself. This has all impacted my life because it has allowed me to see how impacted the world is and my community is as well. I got the chance to connect with some old connections I made thru the pandemic that has allowed me to make change in my community. I was a member of the Boys & Girls Club in Brockton when I was going up. So to be back where it all started for me and help making change and providing a healthy food option for these kids is amazing. I always had a fear for my health growing up, one reason I became a chef. Now I get to use all my knowledge from the culinary world to create recipes and give them to families. At the end of the day, I took this service time to strengthen my humanity and help make the world a better place!

‘It has been a pleasure to work with Amarr this year. His unfailingly positive attitude and deep commitment to learning about all aspects of the Club has really added value to our partnership with MSA.’

- Kate Messier, VP & Chief Program Officer at B&G Clubs of Metro South
Upcoming Events

Member trainings: Career Exploration and Skill Building

- 3/15/22, 10-11:30 am - Meeting/Training Facilitation: This is a great training for members interested in facilitating a member-led training this service term. Register here.
- On your own time, before 3/31: Resume and Cover Letters: Watch recording, complete a resume review with another CC member (virtual or in-person). *Please register here before 3/15.

New Community Advisory Committee!

We are excited to share with you that we have started meeting with the new Community Advisory Committee (CAC). The Committee Members include current members, alumni, host site staff, and community partners that have a shared commitment to the mission of CC and a desire to help improve the program’s ability to carry out that mission in an equitable and inclusive way. The 10 Committee Members’ valuable input will be used in making real decisions and changes for the program. Responsibilities of the CAC may include:

1. Review CC priorities and track progress regarding the program’s commitment to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
2. Advise overall decision making of the CC program
3. Review CC policies and procedures and make suggestions for changes
4. Provide suggestions and ideas to inform program design and implementation
5. Support and inform recruitment and promotion efforts for the program

The CAC will help inform and shape CC for each program year and for years to come. You can read our CC Commitment to Equity here, and the Priorities, Learnings, and Action Steps here.
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.

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

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

Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro South

Facebook: @BGCmetrosouth
Instagram: @bgcmetrosouth

Regional Environmental Council

Facebook: @RECworcester
Instagram: @recworcester