Dear Commonwealth Corps members, partners, alumni, and friends,

As 2019 comes to a close, we are thrilled to share that our current members have contributed over 14,000 hours of service in their first four months of service. You can catch a glimpse of what they have accomplished so far in this issue’s program and member spotlights.

This time of year, we also put an extra focus on celebrating successes, discussing opportunities for growth, and planning for the rest of the service term. We always appreciate hearing members’ and supervisors’ feedback and ideas for future training sessions and opportunities.

Looking ahead, we recently released the Request for Proposals (RFP) for 2020-2021 Commonwealth Corps host site partners. More details are available at http://bit.ly/MSACCRFP. We hope that both new agencies and current/past partners will consider applying, and we invite interested applicants to contact us with any questions.

As always, our thanks go out to our Commonwealth Corps members for their commitment to strengthening their communities and our host site partners for their continued support.
Regional Environmental Council

The Regional Environmental Council (REC) brings people together to build healthy, sustainable, and just communities across Worcester through community farmers markets, youth programs (YouthGROW), community gardens (UGROW) and more. We applied to host Commonwealth Corps members for the first time this year to build connectivity across our programs, expand existing volunteer opportunities, and both enhance relationships within our organization and develop new ones.

Our three half-time CC members, Erika Akerson, Katie Flanagan and Max Marcotte, serve as volunteer engagement specialists for our UGROW and YouthGROW programs. Their contributions so far have already provided tremendous benefit for the REC and our community. They’re also developing meaningful and trusting relationships with our youth participants, gardeners, and volunteers that inform the systems and tools they are designing for community and volunteer engagement. The combination of direct service and systems building allows them to create tools and practices that are rooted in experience and we know will work for our community.

“Max has been a great asset to the REC’s UGROW team and the Community Gardens Network! He has been working hard to recruit and retain volunteers from local colleges, has been able to coordinate several large scale volunteer days, and has supported our open volunteer hours on our farm sites since starting his service year.”

- Pat Barnosky, UGROW Coordinator

“We are really lucky to have Katie serve with us. Katie is very reliable and has done a great job connecting with YouthGROWers during her short time serving with us. She is very confident and comfortable taking on new projects and has done an excellent job welcoming community members and volunteers to our farm. She’s an amazing host and works hard to make sure things go smoothly and that everyone is doing well.”

- Stacie Brimmage, YouthGROW Coordinator

Our CC members have already felt personally impacted by their service as well. Max has been able to obtain gardening skills, which he’s always wanted to learn to do, and become more mindful of sustainability, which is very important to him. Katie has also benefited from learning more about sustainability and has even incorporated it into her own life outside of service. She’s also learning about the politics of food and how that plays out in different communities, and about the impact that community engagement and education can have. Meanwhile, Erika has enjoyed having the opportunity to teach youth how food is grown and a build a stronger connection between people and the source of that food. CC members have been a great asset to the REC, and we are so grateful to have them here with us!

- Grace Sliwoski, Director of Programs, Regional Environmental Council
ERIKA AKERSON

The Regional Environmental Council aims to improve food sovereignty by directly working with the community. I joined the Commonwealth Corps because I wanted to create the opportunity for youth to connect with the earth and take an active role in growing their own food.

The school gardens program recently finished building a low tunnel for a garden bed at a school site, in collaboration with YouthGROW. The YouthGROWers sawed PVC pipe in half and used power tools to hold the protective structures in place. The new structure consists of three arcs spanning the seven-by-three foot bed, and is covered with a protective sheet. The school can now extend the growing season because the low tunnel traps heat, even as the ground outside freezes. It was empowering to experiment with different design methods and come to a consensus on what worked best. The signed-names of the YouthGROWers mark the garden bed and compliment the crops that now grow throughout November.

I've attended school committee meetings, conducted site visit interviews, and lead garden-cleanups. I have a better framework of our partnered schools, because I've met the parents, students, and teachers. My outreach ideas are more rooted in experience rather than guess work because I've talked with and listened to those community members. At the same time, my site visits have required me to be more active and independent. I am taking on new positions that push me to experiment on how to build a stronger civic network.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I'm able to blend my passions, by working with my community to cultivate green space in the city.

I was drawn to serving with the Commonwealth Corps because of my prior experiences with the Regional Environmental Council. I had volunteered and interned with the organization before and saw the Commonwealth Corps as an opportunity to become even more involved with the REC. The flexible schedule that a half-time position allowed was also a huge draw, as I was able to structure my service days to revolve around my college schedule. Lastly, another aspect that I appreciated was the opportunity to serve alongside other members at the same site.

Through collaboration with my fellow REC CC members, we have been able to streamline volunteer tracking, improve communication with current and past volunteers, and brainstorm various methods of volunteer outreach. We have attempted to strengthen the REC's relationship with volunteers through improved communication, fostering more cross-program volunteer opportunities, and hosting an end of the season volunteer appreciation celebration at the farm. I hope that we can continue our effort to better systematize volunteer programming and engagement in a way sustainable for the organization after Max, Erika, and I finish our service terms.

So far, serving at the REC has provided me with much stronger gardening knowledge which has already benefited me personally. In addition, serving with CC at the REC has expanded my knowledge and awareness of food justice, improved my ability to work with and manage groups, and given me tools for successful workplace collaboration. The increased responsibility I have been awarded through this service opportunity has instilled many new skills in me which will undoubtedly benefit me in the future.

KATIE FLANAGAN

AGE: 20
HOMETOWN: MORRISTOWN, NJ
CURRENT HOME: WORCESTER

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I see a future for myself in nonprofit work.
MAX MARCOTTE

I had seen the work that Regional Environmental Council had been doing in the community and wanted to become involved, which led me to the opportunity to serve as a Community and School Garden Volunteer Engagement Specialist with the Commonwealth Corps.

Although there are already 60+ school and community gardens in our network, we haven’t stopped expanding the scope of the programming. This week we built accessible raised garden beds at Coes Pond with the help of volunteers and all of us are very excited to start the new garden in the spring. What was special about this build project was receiving help from volunteers at Seven Hills, who will also be the primary growers and caretakers of the garden. We’re looking forward to the space transforming from an empty area next to a parking lot into a beautiful green space for all to enjoy, and hopefully even eating some of the veggies we harvest at the cafe next door!

My community ties and pride have expanded enormously since beginning my service with the Regional Environmental Council. Though I had originally hoped to expand my farming skills and environmental sustainability practices - which I have - the connection I feel with my home, and my desire to go out and be engaged in community events has developed in a way I was not expecting. Not only am I involved with the REC, through them and the people I have met, I have become more involved with other organizations doing good in Worcester I had never interacted with before.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have strengthened my community ties and sense of belonging in my city.

I served as a Commonwealth Corps Environmental Educator with the Buzzards Bay Coalition. I decided to serve with the Commonwealth Corps because of my combined passions for the environment and working with youth. My service year set me on the path I am on today and enabled me to experience the impact a small group of individuals can make to affect a cause, which, in this case, was protecting clean water in Buzzards Bay. It helped me understand what “giving back” means and that nonprofit work serves an essential function in society - a function that would otherwise go unfulfilled without the critical work of nonprofit organizations.

After my service year, I spent two years as an elementary school teacher before returning to the Coalition as the Senior Educator. I was fortunate to supervise several CC members over the course of the three years I was there. This enabled me to see the continuing impact of this service program on an organization and a community.

CASSIE LAWSON

Last year, I transitioned to working at an environmental organization called the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), where I am a grant writer. I’m able to leverage the grant writing skills I learned at the Coalition to secure funding for a variety of AMC’s programs, many of which also help connect youth to local natural spaces. My Commonwealth Corps experience played an important role in the path that led me to where I am now.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, you and I, together, are equipped with the skills and experience to continue this important work. If you choose to continue on a journey of nonprofit work or a life dedicated to serving others, you will affect innumerable lives and communities. And you and they will be better off for it.
Springfield WORKS

The goals of Springfield WORKS are to increase the number of people working in Springfield from 58 to 75 percent, 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.

This year, our Commonwealth Corps Members, Eneida Molina and Julia Ortiz, are collaborating with partners to align programs and services that meet the needs of working families. Members are implementing new recruiting strategies to find and connect under-employed and unemployed residents to workforce development training programs.

The Springfield WORKS initiative has over forty partners but limited capacity outside of in-kind partner participation. Workforce development training seats were going unfilled and yet residents expressed lack of opportunity for training and work. Two full-time service members are implementing a systems approach to help partners identify clients who are “ready, willing, and able” to work. These partners have expanded our ability to find the hard to reach under and unemployed population.

“Julia Ortiz is a pillar in the Springfield Community. Her commitment to improving the lives of others transcends the work she does at Springfield WORKS and benefits the Springfield Community as a whole. She is an inspiration to everyone who meets her.

Eneida Molina is a dedicated service member who gives generously to help non-profits and workforce development programs deliver on their mission. She is particularly helpful to Dress for Success Western Mass, where she uses her talent to prepare women for their interviews.”

- Margaret Tantillo, Executive Director, Dress for Success of Western Mass

At Dress for Success of Western Mass (DFS), Eneida is combining her talent in fashion with helping woman gain confidence in a job interview or for their first day of work. Eneida’s compassion and personal interests help women nail the interview or make a good first day impression.

Julia Ortiz has served residents of Springfield in various professional positions for many years. As the more experienced member, Julia became a mentor to Eneida, who is new to service. This mentor/mentee relationship helped both of them grow. At Julia’s suggestion, they both joined Toastmasters to gain public speaking and leadership experience. This experience will help both of them develop new ways to communicate information that tells our story and draws new partners into the mission.

MSA’s dedication to their mission has provided us with the opportunity to experience how member service has a long lasting impact in our community. It’s also allowed us to build cross-sector partnerships and expand our service mission to help jobseekers find and retain meaningful work that leads to a long-term career at a sustainable wage.

- Anne Kandilis, Director, Springfield WORKS
ENEIDA MOLINA

I was first exposed to volunteering and community work by my older brother. He worked in many organizations throughout the community and I always found myself wanting to give a helping hand. Every volunteer experience I’ve had so far has been extremely beneficial and allowing me to network with community leaders and find new ways to get involved. When came across the Commonwealth Corps position with the EDC, I decided to feed my curiosity and see where it could lead me. I was most interested in the opportunity to see how an organization like this works from the inside and how I can incorporate my passion for helping others into my career. My supervisor, Anne, gave me a chance and I am forever grateful.

One of my favorite parts of my role is serving in the boutique at Dress for Success, a global nonprofit organization that provides professional attire for low-income women, to help support their job search and interview process. I feel like I’ve been able to help these women feel good about the way they look and give them more confidence.

I also participate in Toastmasters, to work on my own confidence and improve my public speaking. My goal is to feel like what I say is convincing, so that I can get community members to be more willing and able to accomplish their career goals.

I’m being exposed to resources that I would have never come across if it wasn’t for the mentors I’ve met during my service so far. Now, I’m even more excited about developing a plan for my career goals and gaining confidence that I can achieve them all. I really look forward to further exploring this side of me that I never really had the chance to focus on before. It makes me super excited about my future.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I’ve actually had the chance to really focus on making future plans to keep good boundaries and get my career needs met.

JULIA ORTIZ

Julia holds a great deal of pride for Springfield and loves to share it with others. Back in September, she coordinated and led “A Taste of Springfield” for members and staff, which included lunch at a local restaurant, Nadiim’s Mediterranean Restaurant & Grill, a walking tour of various landmarks and shops, as well as the opportunity to meet several local government officials, including Springfield City Councilor, Marvin Edwards. Thank you so much, Julia, for this unique and fun-filled afternoon!

I joined the Commonwealth Corps because I was looking for help in figuring out my next career step and creating a foundation to navigate to the next level. I was most excited by the opportunity to serve with Springfield WORKS to educate my community – community work is the way I’ve lived all my life – and I knew this would give me the opportunity to see the other ways people are moving through social services systems and accessing different resources and financial supports.

From MSA: Unfortunately, Julia recently had a medical emergency that has taken her away from her service indefinitely. On behalf of MSA and the entire Commonwealth Corps community, we want to wish Julia a smooth and speedy recovery. We know she’ll be right back to helping her community as soon as she is able.

AGE: 36
HOMETOWN: SPRINGFIELD
CURRENT HOME: SPRINGFIELD

AGE: 51
HOMETOWN: SPRINGFIELD
CURRENT HOME: SPRINGFIELD
WriteBoston

WriteBoston is a nonprofit that aims to empower young people with communication skills for successful futures. We offer coaching and professional development to teachers, and run Teens in Print (TiP), a youth journalism program that publishes Boston’s only citywide student newspaper. TiP operates afterschool and summer programs, runs workshops in schools, and provides post-secondary supports to Boston middle and high schoolers—using a mentorship model and journalistic lens.

Thanks to a partnership with the Commonwealth Corps, TiP has expanded over the past few years to serve more youth. We’ve continued that growth this year with the help of our two Commonwealth Corps members, Annie Kelley and Elvis Alvarado, who have joined the TiP team in piloting a new program model. Our new tiered structure introduces younger and less experienced writers to TiP through lower-commitment programs, and emphasizes strong wraparound supports.

Though Annie and Elvis have only been with us for four months, they’ve already become an integral part of the small but mighty TiP team. They’ve enthusiastically jumped into direct service and behind-the-scenes roles to ensure that each young person we serve has the support they need to thrive.

Annie has focused on deepening our work with college-bound students, serving alongside TiP staff to offer customized college and career supports to local schools and nonprofits. If a student needs more individualized support, Annie meets with them one-on-one. Her guidance has ensured that many students walk away with a strong resume or a polished personal statement, ready to move on to college or meaningful work.

Elvis, meanwhile, has dived headfirst into TiP’s afterschool program. His recruitment efforts across the city and the curriculum he’s developed and delivered has engaged a whole new cohort of middle schoolers. These budding young journalists are the first to ascend our new program tiers, they intend to write for the student newspaper in the new year. In addition, Elvis’ experience hosting his own podcast has propelled him into a key role as advisor to TiP’s newest project: a student-led podcast.

In the short time they’ve been with us, Annie and Elvis have proven themselves as valuable assets to our programs. With their support, TiP’s impact has reached new heights. as of November, our weekly programs are serving 53 students—an organizational record! We’re grateful to Annie and Elvis for the mentorship and expertise they offer our students, their willingness to jump in and help our staff, and their general enthusiasm for WriteBoston’s mission. With these two capable Corps members by our side, we’re reaching more youth than ever before, ensuring that communication skills are never a barrier to a student’s success.

- Carla Gauldron, Teens in Print Program Director, WriteBoston

“Annie and Elvis have a great rapport with students and the talent of drawing them out.”

- Linda Garmon, Teacher, Madison Park Technical Vocational High School
ELVIS ALVARADO

The act of direct service is not only eye opening and rewarding, it is also challenging in the sense that it pushes one to reach deep within themselves and choose to commit to something larger than them and find personal satisfaction in working towards the greater good. Service is a humbling and exhilarating experience and those who are able to reap the benefits of it are better equipped to express compassion and empathy while remaining focused on diligently pursuing goals that will actually create change. The Commonwealth Corps ability to connect its members with programs that have identified specific problems within communities of need has allowed me to reconnect with my community, find fulfillment in service and develop my professional skills.

In just a few months of service, I have been able to engage with students from across the city of Boston and help them develop their media literacy skills. I have also been able to help students navigate the college application process through individual essay support and facilitating workshops that emphasize students’ ability to not only access, but thrive in higher education.

Through serving students from various backgrounds I have been pushed to further my understanding of inclusive practices that ensure the greatest number of students are getting valuable information that is not only practical, but also intellectually stimulating. The value of these skills cannot be minimized and will prove themselves to be useful as I plan to remain within educational spaces and help students maximize their potential.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been able to reaffirm my passion for education and connect with our future leaders.

Before becoming a Commonwealth Corps member, I was interested in working with students in an educational role outside of the classroom, and through this program, I was offered an opportunity to do just that. As a Commonwealth Corps Youth Program Associate at WriteBoston, I serve directly with students in my community by helping to support their writing growth.

During the school week, we facilitate a college-readiness class at the Dearborn STEM Academy in Roxbury. We see a cohort of students who are currently applying to college, or who are anticipating applying to college in the future. We cover topics such as financial aid, the personal statement, college interviews, and more. We also partner with youth-serving non-profits throughout the city to offer college readiness support to multiple students from high schools across Boston.

As someone interested in working with students in the future, I am fortunate to go into schools to interact with students and broaden my understanding of the Boston Public School system. In particular, I am grateful that I am able to connect with students outside of a conventional classroom setting. Specifically through personal statement support, I am able to get to know students on a personal level, as I ask them questions about their essays and get to hear their future aspirations. I love working with students on their personal statements because I hear a new story every day and a new perspective from each student. Although the personal statement can be formidable to students, I enjoy the collaborative process that creates an essay. Together, we figure out how to formulate their thoughts and dreams into a genuine essay that reflects who they are.

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I am able to support students.

ANNIE KELLEY

Because of the Commonwealth Corps, I have been able to support students.

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Member Development

MSA provided a variety of training and professional development opportunities throughout the last few months, including: Living on a Budget, Serving Vulnerable Populations, and Understanding Systemic Inequity and the Basics of White Supremacy Culture.

During these sessions, members were able to discuss complex topics and bring new knowledge, skills, and perspectives, while also reflecting on the first half of the service term with their peers.

Members also took advantage of outside professional development opportunities related to their individualized goals, and started to connect with their CC alumni mentors.

Members should always check the CC member portal regularly for additional details and registration information on upcoming training sessions and events.

Members in Action

Top left: UTEC CC member Whitney (center) and volunteers get ready for a family cooking night host by CC members.

Top middle: Regional Environmental Council CC member Max tables a volunteer recruitment fair.

Top right: Westport River Watershed Alliance CC members James and Jess clean up a beach with a volunteer.

Bottom: Girls Inc. of the Valley CC members Natalie (top left) and Caitlin (top right) celebrate with their 4th graders.
Upcoming Events & Important Reminders

January CC Training Sessions - "Sustaining Your Service and Yourself"
Thursday, January 9, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. at One Beacon Street (Boston)
OR
Friday, January 10, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. at Girls Inc. of the Valley (Holyoke)

2020-2021 Host Site Partner Application Due
Wednesday, January 15, 2020 by 5 p.m. via online application system

Midyear Host Site Partner Meeting for Supervisors
Friday, February 7, 9:30 a.m. - 4 p.m. at Bentley University (Waltham)

Midyear Mindfulness Retreat for Members
Friday, February 14, 10 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. at The Edwards House (Framingham)

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

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.

WISHING YOU JOY AND PEACE IN THE YEAR AHEAD

Julianne, Stacey & the MSA Team