New AmeriCorps program aims to build public health workforce in Mass.

Jun 24, 2022, 5:39am EDT

A new program designed to help support the state's overburdened public health system, announced Thursday, will be paid for by a five-year, $400 million investment from the federal American Rescue Plan Act.

The Massachusetts Service Alliance said that Public Health AmeriCorps programs will be available to health centers throughout the state to meet the needs of local communities, while creating a path for people to enter into public health careers.

CASSIE MCGRATH

health careers.

The program, a partnership between AmeriCorps and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will recruit, train, and develop future physicians, nurses, social workers and other professionals in public health. It launches as providers around the state struggle to fill positions amid a workforce shortage.

Identifying needs that were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, groups including Boston Medical Center, Boston Public Health Commission, City of Lawrence, East Boston Community Health Center, Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center, Inc, Epilepsy Foundation New England and Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe are all slated to accept AmeriCorps members, who will begin their year of service on Aug. 22.

“Our communities are struggling to regain equilibrium and to respond and recover from this pandemic that has hit us all so hard. But no sector was hit harder than our health care providers. We need the energy and commitment of AmeriCorps members to infuse a much-needed boost to the health care field,” Emily Haver, CEO of Massachusetts Service Alliance said at a press conference on Thursday. “We hope the members that serve in these corps will be inspired to pursue careers in health care and even if they don’t, we know they will take what they learned from their service year to wherever their careers take them.”

Recruiting for the program has already started, with 105 positions available across the groups and over $2.7 million total going to run it, according to AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps members will provide health education; help patients navigate health and wellness follow-up; support health-related research; improve housing to lead to healthier outcomes; and assist with testing and vaccination efforts. The services will vary according to each community’s needs. They will also learn about health equity and social determinants of health, while supporting communities with behavioral health and nutrition through methods like community outreach.

For example, East Boston Community Health Center is getting $574,000 to fund 20 members who will serve as primary care connectors, supporting patients living with complex and or chronic medical and behavioral health conditions, identifying appropriate support services and navigating access barriers.
AmeriCorps members in Lawrence will be working with house inspections, focused on social determinants of health. Twelve members will work on this in Lawrence and Methuen under $345,599 in grant funding, according to AmeriCorps.

“The fact of the matter is whether it's a stroke, heart attack, gunshot victim, those issues really stem from what's happening in the community, and a lack of investment, and a lack of engagement from government leaders,” said State Rep. Jon Santiago, who's also an emergency room doctor. “I would argue that 80% of what I see in the emergency department is related to the social determinants of health. And so programs like this, that are investing in it, that are preparing a workforce and have been birthed out, that means the world to me.”

**Cassie McGrath**  
Reporter  
*Boston Business Journal*