

Commentary: Kentucky AmeriCorps Getting Things Done for the Commonwealth

By Joe Bringardner

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Every year, AmeriCorps grants are awarded to eligible organizations proposing to strengthen local communities. Members serve faith-based and nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and local and state government agencies. To maximize efforts, AmeriCorps members even recruit local volunteers in your community who collaborate to help fulfill local needs and become stakeholders in their programs' missions.

This year, AmeriCorps programs will provide more than 1,200 individuals the opportunity to provide intensive, results-driven service to meet community needs related to education, substance abuse prevention, health, and the economy in more than 450 service locations in every part of Kentucky.

In Jefferson County, REACH (Ready to Extend A Caring Hand) Corps pairs disadvantaged students with caring adults, who counsel them to improve attendance, class participation and grades.

In Western Kentucky's seven-county Owensboro area, Senior Connections members provide services to 6,000 older adults at various sites with the goal to reduce the rate of hospitalization and improve nutrition and socialization. Volunteers are placed with non-profits, faith-based and community-based agencies.

Based in Hazard, the Teach for America-Appalachia program aims to improve educational outcomes for more than 3,500 students. Volunteer members work in schools, serve as guest lecturers, student remediation volunteers and help students with applications to college and technical school.

The scourge of substance abuse is being addressed by some current programs. Operation UNITE Service Corps AmeriCorps members tutor at-risk students in math at poor, rural elementary schools in Eastern Kentucky. Members also teach students, parents, guardians, and school staff about drug and opioid awareness and prevention and are active in their county's anti-drug coalition.

There are countless other examples of the great work being done AmeriCorps in local communities. The program has a rich history in the Commonwealth: Over 23 years, more than 11,000 Kentuckians have served more than 17 million hours and have qualified for Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards totaling more than \$40.8 million. After completing a full term of service, AmeriCorps members are eligible for an education

award, currently \$5,775, which can be used to repay student loans or cover tuition.

From an economic standpoint, AmeriCorps is a good investment in workforce training. Recent studies show a strong connection between volunteering and employment, particularly in rural areas, where volunteers are 57 percent more likely to find employment. In fact, eight out of 10 alumni say AmeriCorps helped them get a job.

The need for Kentucky AmeriCorps and its varied programs is significant. In the 2016 national grant competition, Kentucky received \$2.2 million more than the previous grant year, reflecting the unmet needs in communities across our state. Including the federal AmeriCorps grant funds, local match funds and education awards, the value to Kentucky for this year alone is more than \$15 million.

Governor Matt Bevin speaks often about “servant leadership” and the great rewards of dedicating ourselves to helping others. AmeriCorps members do just that. They are resourceful, determined and civic minded.

AmeriCorps is full-time, short-term service – one or two years – that provides members a living allowance, health insurance, child care assistance, and eligibility to have up to 100% of the interest paid on their student loans. You can learn more online at <http://chfs.ky.gov/ServeKY> or by calling 502-564-7420

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