

**Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service
SERVE Philadelphia Summer AmeriCorps VISTAs**

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Abstract

This summer, fourteen SERVE Philadelphia AmeriCorps VISTAs worked on a variety of projects across the city designed to increase access to educational opportunities and strengthen community volunteer networks. The VISTAs split up into groups to work on five main projects. Along the way, they collaborated frequently to help each other achieve their project goals.

The Education Outreach Team worked with PhillyGoes2College (PG2C) and the Graduation Coach Campaign (GCC). As PG2C representatives, they traveled across the city to give presentations and workshops at recreation centers, libraries, and other youth centers, regarding college attainment. For the GCC, they interviewed and filmed both Graduation Coaches and their students to assess the impact of the campaign and compiled the interviews into a final video showcasing the significance of GCC and adult mentoring in the community. Additionally, they developed digital videos that discuss the college-going process, to be posted on the PG2C website and YouTube Channel.

The Summer Activity Enrichment Coordinators created and implemented a curriculum for a six-week digital education course with the core goal of expanding youths' skills and familiarity with computer technology. They made bi-weekly visits to Shepard, Athletic, and Waterview- three of the nineteen recreation centers with Keyspots. Their curriculum touched on typing skills, video editing, blogging, digital comic creation, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Power Point.

The Summer Nutrition Coordinators developed an outreach strategy that would encourage teenagers to take advantage of the "Summer Free Meals" program in Philadelphia. The gap was most evident in the neighborhoods of Mayfair, West Oak Lane and Mount Airy. The Nutrition team worked to fill the gap, particularly amongst teenagers, in these three areas by distributing flyers, building relationships in the communities, and conducting research to find out how to resourcefully combat the issue.

"Let's Read! Let's Move" Philadelphia brought together ten Philadelphia Organizations to run a field day event that included reading, healthy eating, and physical activity stations. The ultimate goal of the "Let's Read! Let's Move!" initiative was to plan an event where kids could learn and have fun, while gaining information on how to keep moving, reading, and eating nutritiously every day of the summer.

The "Friends of Fairhill Square" Youth Engagement Coordinator united different organizations around the Fairhill area of Philadelphia, including the Providence Center, The Lighthouse, Taller Puertorriqueno, HACE, and Congreso. Together, they organized different events to be executed in the newly improved Fairhill Park.

Introduction

This summer, fourteen AmeriCorps Summer VISTAs (Volunteers in Service to America) worked under SERVE Philadelphia, the primary initiative of the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service. The VISTAs committed their summer to ten forty-hour weeks with the goal of increasing access to educational opportunities and strengthening community volunteer networks. The VISTAs worked in five teams: Education Outreach, Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators, Summer Nutrition Coordinators, "Let's Read! Let's Move!" Philadelphia Coordinator, and "Friends of Fairhill Square" Youth Engagement Coordinator. In addition to focusing on their main projects, the VISTAs frequently collaborated to help each other reach their specific team goals. These past ten weeks have been a valuable learning experience in teamwork and community outreach, opening the eyes of the VISTAs to the inner workings of city hall, as well as the important issues of Philadelphia.

VISTA Projects

Education Outreach Team

The Education Outreach Team worked primarily in the Mayor's Office of Education, serving the Mayor's two major education initiatives: PhillyGoes2College (PG2C) and the Graduation Coach Campaign (GCC). As PhillyGoes2College representatives, they traveled across the city to give presentations and workshops at recreation centers, libraries, and other youth centers. They discussed various components of college attainment such as the application process, financial aid, and the high school timeline. For GCC, they interviewed and filmed both Graduation Coaches and their students to assess the impact of the Campaign. They edited a final, comprehensive video that details the significance of GCC and adult mentoring in the community. Additionally, they developed digital videos that discuss the college-going process, to be posted on the PhillyGoes2College website and YouTube Channel.

The teams primary aim was to spread awareness about the significance of higher education, thereby promoting a college-going culture and mentality amongst Philadelphia youth. Through PhillyGoes2College, they hoped to fill the current void of informational support about college in the city. They hoped that by fostering confidence in the college-going and college application process, they would spark or renew interests in achieving higher education. Along the same lines, in creating digital videos for the PhillyGoes2College website, they wanted to spread knowledge. But rather than using human contact and interaction, they used digital media as a means for outreach. Lastly, through the GCC, their goal was geared towards assessing the impact of adult mentorships on higher education achievement.

Collaboration with other organizations and groups was essential to achieving these goals. This process included coordinating times with other libraries and centers to accommodate the VISTAs for presentations and workshops. For the GCC, coaches had to be flexible with their schedule and take time out of their day to conduct interviews. Fellow VISTAs were also needed to participate in the development of the PhillyGoes2College YouTube channel. Overall, although there were minor missteps in communication, many Philadelphians were still very cooperative and welcoming to the VISTAs. Ultimately, everyone involved was dedicated and committed to helping the team achieve their summer goals.

As the Education Team worked to spread awareness throughout Philadelphia, they did experience some hardships. At times, in their efforts to promote the initiative, they encountered unreceptive youth and disorganized leadership due to miscommunication amongst site directors. Nevertheless, the Education Team always conquered the challenges they were faced with and were mostly successful in bringing clarity to situations, planning effectively when disorganization did occur, and converting negative atmospheres into positive ones. The leading issue regarding creating the digital videos was finding time to film each Summer VISTA's individual piece, as they had their own projects to tend to. However, because the Summer VISTAs are very supportive and caring, communication remained a continuum, filming times were rescheduled, and ultimately all videos were executed. Furthermore, the most challenging aspect for the Education Team was the Graduation Coach Campaign, as it was sometimes difficult to reach the Graduation Coaches, largely because the planned times for interviews were during work hours. Thus, on several occasions, coaches and/or their mentees had to cancel or postpone scheduled appointments. Even so, the Education Team was still able to finalize a comprehensive video.

Despite several challenges, the comprehensive work produced, and the professional skills gained, made their efforts worthwhile. The Education Team promoted the PhillyGoes2College Initiative to over two thousand students over the course of the summer. As they created various workshops, spoke at presentations, and tabled for college fairs, they also raised awareness regarding the vitality of obtaining a college degree. They witnessed middle and high school students, foster youth, and other young adults reconsider their initial thoughts about attending college. Throughout the summer, the team experienced students expressing their sincere gratitude for the information provided and the words of encouragement shared. Although the team did create the digital videos, because they were final projects, the team was not able to assess their impact. And though the team experienced challenges with the Graduation Coach Campaign, they found that adult mentorship significantly affected youths' motivation towards achieving success in higher academia.

Through this VISTA internship, the Education Team has grown in many ways. Firstly, they have gained insight into the dedication and motivation required to promote a college-going culture in Philadelphia. In addition, they have refined their skills in public speaking, time management, creativity, and networking. They have all matured as young adults and have discovered their ability to succeed when faced with challenges. Moreover, they have discovered the value of teamwork and innovation, as well as how different personalities may work together to reach one common goal.

Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators

The Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators were responsible for developing and implementing a digital workshop during summer camps at four different recreation centers with

public computing centers, known as Keypots. The sites included Athletic, Waterview, Shepard, and Kingsessing Recreation Centers. The curriculum focused on teaching youth various computer uses and skills, including an introduction to outside social media websites, ten-finger typing, Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, blog creation, digital comic creation, and video editing. The team was divided into two groups. Each group visited two different recreation centers on a bi-weekly basis for six weeks. In addition to their goal of expanding youths' computer skills, they wanted to raise awareness of the existence of Keypots in the community, especially amongst the adult population. They began developing a database of various organizations in the community who they could partner with in order to achieve this outreach.

The most challenging aspect of this project was building relationships with the recreation centers. Most of the recreation centers were very excited about having the VISTAs teach the youth about computers, but there were some who lacked this enthusiasm, making the VISTAs feel unwelcome. Another challenge during this project was trying to bring a structured program into recreation centers whose camps lack structure and organization. This sometimes made it difficult to work with the children who reflected the overall attitude of the camp and were not used to working in a more structured environment. Unfortunately, the lack of structure and communication that was at Kingsessing Recreation Center is what ultimately led to the decision to pull the program from that center.

Despite these challenges, the growth in the youth's computer skills made it all worthwhile and the VISTAs felt as though they were able to accomplish their goals. They were thrilled to see that the campers began to expect them to be at their camps during the designated times each week and they were excited about what the lesson for that day would be. The children began to be more interested in creating a blog or video, instead of logging on the computer and

going directly to Facebook. Additionally, the VISTAs succeeded in creating a database that has laid the groundwork for reaching adult computer users. This work of bringing volunteer-led education programs to recreation centers will be continued after their summer term of service is done, as one of the VISTAs will continue on as a year round VISTA with Parks and Recreation.

As a team, they learned how to incorporate everyone's ideas and be very open-minded when it comes to dealing with different perspectives. This entire process has taught them how to be flexible and adaptable. Things do not always go as planned and they had to learn to adapt the curriculum for that day. These are traits that they will need as they continue in school or the work force.

Summer Nutrition Coordinators

The main goal of the Summer Nutrition Coordinators' project was to develop an outreach strategy that would encourage teenagers to take advantage of the "summer free meals" program under the umbrella of Mayor Nutter's initiative *Fun, Safe Philly Summer*. Last summer, about 2.5 million children received free meals, but 40,000 other eligible children did not. The gap was most evident in the neighborhoods of Mayfair, West Oak Lane and Mount Airy. These three areas had the greatest discrepancy between those who utilized free meals during the school year and those who did not utilize free meals over the summer. The Nutrition Team worked to fill the gap, particularly amongst teenagers in these three areas by distributing flyers, building relationships in the communities, and conducting research to find out how to resourcefully combat the issue.

Over the course of the summer they successfully managed to circulate their outreach materials in the community as best they could. The Nutrition Team successfully passed out over 5,000 flyers and door hangers in the targeted neighborhoods. The team went door-to-door, as

well as visited recreation centers, corner stores, local delis, pharmacies, churches, health centers and other community centers to ensure that eligible children knew about the free summer meals program. Although the outreach was an overall success, along the way, there were several challenges. Firstly outreach, by definition, can be very time-consuming. With only three VISTAs on the team, as well as a couple of volunteers, they were not able to reach as many people and community establishments as they initially hoped. Secondly, the team struggled to build relationships with youth around the Philadelphia area in order to get in touch with the community directly.

Because teenagers were the Nutrition Coordinators' main focus group, another aspect of the Nutrition Team's project was discovering where teens hang out, the best way to reach them, and the most effective way to disseminate information. To accomplish this, the team reached out to, and collaborated with, a variety of organizations, such as the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, the Archdiocese, the Mayor's Press Office, the Department of Parks and Recreation, and Philly Rising. By the end of their outreach, the team was able to build a relationship with three outstanding youth interns from the Philadelphia Youth Network's WorkReady program and built a long lasting relationship with important stakeholders. A second goal of the team's summer project was finding out why teens specifically do not utilize summer free meals. To achieve this, they conducted a research project primarily consisting of interviews. Their research pool included teens that currently utilize summer free meals and those who do not. The team is hopeful that their research can be used in the future to improve the summer free meals program on a structural level.

Similar to the Education Team and Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators, the Summer Nutrition Coordinators found that collaboration was essential to their work. For

instance, towards the beginning of the summer, they coordinated meetings with various organizations to learn more about the summer free meals program, where outreach would be most effective, and what efforts had worked in the past. The Hunger Coalition, in particular, was able to provide them with a template to use for their flyers. This was done to ensure that the public received consistent information. They were also able to collaborate with the Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators, who had done neighborhood outreach before them. Before starting any outreach, the Nutrition Coordinators turned to them for advice and feedback on their existing plan.

Above all, they have certainly accomplished their goals. In terms of outreach, the coordinators were able to make personal connections and spread awareness throughout the communities about receiving free healthy food. Likewise, with their research project the team was able to gather good information that will determine what it is the city can do next summer to improve the free summer lunches for children of all ages.

Nearing the end of their summer project, this team has gained many skills, including strong communication skills. Much of their project relied on information gathered from associates at other organizations around the city. Thus, it was very important over the summer to build strong relationships and to be proactive. Furthermore, it was very important for the nutrition team to learn how to turn a vision into a practical working plan. They often had to think three steps in advance and do a lot of problem solving. Although communication was a developed skill, such development did not come without mistakes. This experience alone has not only shown the Nutrition Coordinators the complex qualities of city government, but it has most importantly shown them the immense need for enduring relationships between the city, the community, and volunteers.

Let's Read! Let's Move! Philadelphia Coordinator

“Let's Read! Let's Move! Philadelphia” is a summer campaign that is a combination of Michelle Obama's “Let's Move! Campaign” and the Corporation for National and Community Services' “United We Serve: Let's Read! Let's Move! Campaign.” The goal of “Let's Read! Let's Move!” is to promote summer reading, physical activity and healthy eating. To support these pillars, Philadelphia's goal for this summer was to organize a field day that addressed literacy, nutrition, and physical exercise. On August 1st, the “Let's Read! Let's Move! Philadelphia” Coordinator brought together ten partners to run a field day event that included reading, healthy eating, and physical activity stations. Kid-friendly resource tables on staying fit and healthy were available during the event. In addition, although the ultimate goal of the “Let's Read! Let's Move!” initiative was to plan a successful event where kids could learn and have fun, the broader goal was to have kids gain information on how to keep moving, reading, and eating nutritiously every day of the summer.

As an initiative that receives no funding, and is solely run out of the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement by one person, challenges were present. Some challenges were managing time, partnerships, and resources. The August 1st event was planned solely through resources offered by other partners. Some examples include SHARE Foods, who provided vegetables, and Urban Blazers, who facilitated a dodge ball game. In addition, working with ten partners, three of which were City offices, the Coordinator often received conflicting feedback from different organizations. With an eye towards success, the Coordinator had to consider all feedback and work towards consensus. In the end, it was clear that the partners worked great together!

The Coordinator completed her goals for this summer, but she wishes that she could have done more. This summer only included one event. Ultimately, she wanted to include more

activities and stations in the event, but there simply was not enough time and effective resources to do so. The Coordinator believes that if she were to plan this event again, she would definitely plan farther in advance during the initial months and keep in closer contact with previous partners of “Let’s Read! Let’s Move!”. Nonetheless, she succeeded in promoting reading, exercise, and healthy eating in the Philadelphia community. More than 150 youth and their parents attended the event and tried different activities, new foods, and had a general day of fun!

The most important step towards collaboration, especially as it pertains to this project project, was reaching out to others. The Coordinator suggested roles for certain VISTA members based on their skill sets and personalities, and she allocated certain activities to organizations based on their mission statement and interests. For example, a fellow VISTA, seemed to show particular interest in running a sports event. It turned out that she knew everything about *Capture the Flag* and was delighted to be asked to facilitate the game. There was a similar experience with a non-profit partner, Urban Blazers. Although they were particularly excited to be on board with the event from the start, the Coordinator took it one step further, asking them to bring a bit of their organization’s outdoor spice to the event. They suggested bringing crayfish for kids to touch and learn about. Thus, Urban Blazers found a way to become creatively involved in the event, which also allowed them to take partial ownership of the event. Without the partners and the VISTAs’ willingness to be involved, and without their addictive energy, the August 1st event could have never happened. With the Coordinator’s planning skills, and the partners’ help with facilitation, they molded the perfect event!

The Coordinator learned a lot from her summer project. Firstly, she knows that no one will know anything about your program or needs unless you reach out to them. Outreach is also very important for clearly stating your purpose and ideas for partnership. Other partners can then

catapult off your ideas and form new ideas as to how they can contribute. It is also important to know what your partner is capable of supporting. Out of this experience, one skill the Coordinator has particularly developed is an ability to leverage partnerships and resources to make a zero-budget event happen. She learned to always do background research on an organization online, through others, or through interviews. In addition, having to organize so many partners helped improve her time management skills. A lesson learned from working with numerous different-minded partners is that when some organizations really want to play a major role during the planning process, the best way to avoid drawn-out deadlines is through direct communication. Face-to-face communication is the most effective way to get things done.

“Friends of Fairhill Square Park” Youth Engagement Coordinator

The main goal of Ashley Rodriguez’s summer project, “Friends of Fairhill Square,” was to unite different organizations around the Fairhill area of Philadelphia. These organizations were the Providence Center, The Lighthouse, Taller Puertorriqueno, HACE, and Congreso. Together, they had to come up with different events to be executed in the newly improved Fairhill Square Park.

One important success of this summer project was that all participating organizations were willing and ready to work together. Everyone who represented an organization from the Fairhill area was willing to contribute in improving the park and neighborhood. On the other hand, one of the many challenges Ashley faced for this project was the lack of structure in her schedule. For instance, Providence and the Lighthouse would sometimes require her assistance at the same time. Another challenge she found was that each organization was not on the same page when it came to a summer event schedule. For example, events that were to take place at the park

were postponed due to park construction not being complete. Nevertheless, Ashley and all the other organizations are on their way to accomplishing their goal of reclaiming the Fairhill community.

Ashley was able to collaborate with other organizations due to her previous connection with the community, as well as her previous experience working with an organization involved in this project. This made the process of communication much easier. She also relied on her fellow Summer VISTAs for support. Since the relationship with the other VISTAs initially started as a friendship, there was no miscommunication with the rest of the VISTAs. Everyone was willing and ready, and it was easier to communicate and get things done.

Over the course of this summer, Ashley has further developed her organizational skills and communication skills. Moreover, she has learned to not rely on other individuals for tasks that can be accomplished on her own. But in a case of collaboration, she was always happy to oblige.

Conclusion

The SERVE Philadelphia Summer AmeriCorps VISTAs in the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service all believe in the value of strengthening bonds and opportunities in the community. Although the projects varied, each team worked towards a common goal. Working together on each other's projects created new ideas to teach and gave new meaning to individuals who may not have understood the importance of education, technology, health, exercise, reading, or community enrichment prior to these collaborations. In just ten weeks, the VISTAs have been able to complete a number of projects for the betterment

of others and the work will not stop there. They will each continue to use their skill set and understanding of public service to serve the city of Philadelphia and else where.



VISTA

Volunteers In Service To America



MARKET ST. EAST

Our Team...



Summer Nutrition Team



- Conducted targeted Summer Meals outreach in Mayfair, Mt. Airy, and West Oak Lane
- Surveyed 20+ youth at recreation centers: why teens do and do not utilize the summer free meals program

Olivia Kachingwe, Tyquil Gorgan, Chanelle Greene

Summer Enrichment Activity Coordinators

- Organized a Spiderman themed community volunteer fun day at Francisville Recreation Center
- Created and implemented a six-week youth digital skills program in 4 recreation centers with public computing centers, known as Keypots.

*Onika Washington-Johnson, Amira Young ,
Jessica Wong, Keisha Smith, James Chandler,
Shane Jenkins*



Friends of Fairhill Square Park

- Fairhill Square Park is located at 4th and Lehigh in North Philadelphia.
- United local organizations, including:
 - *Providence Center*
 - *The Lighthouse*
 - *Taller Puertorriqueno*
 - *HACE*
 - *Congreso*
- *Together, they organized different events to be executed in the newly improved Fairhill Square Park.*



Ashley Rodriguez



The Education Team

Projects included:

PhillyGoes2College (PG2C)

- *Designed and conducted presentations and workshops regarding college attainment, reaching over 2,000 youth*
- *Created media on why to go to college*

Graduation Coach Campaign (GCC)

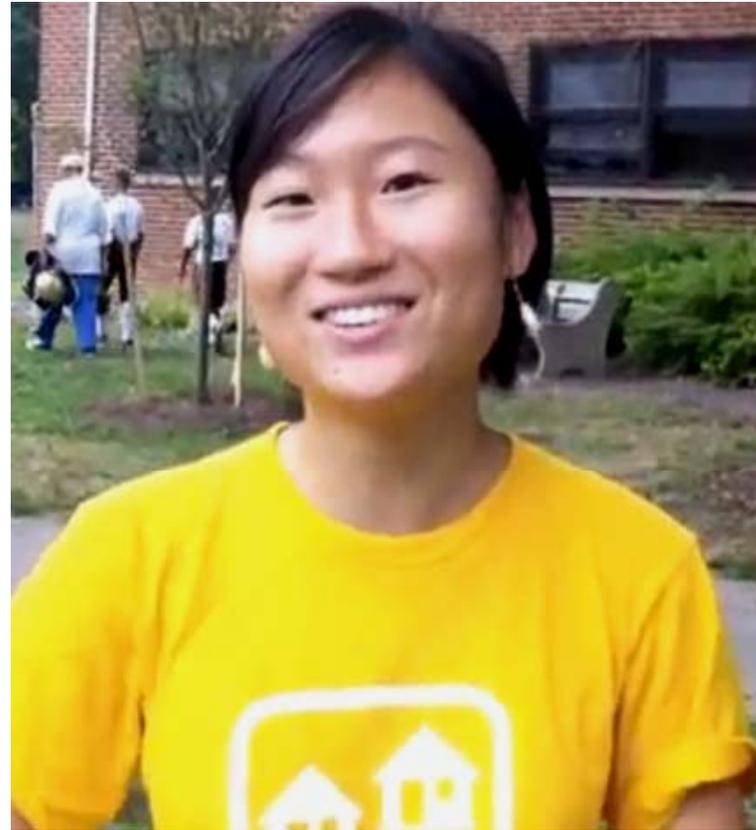
- *assessed the impact of the Campaign through interviews with Coaches and their coachees*

Perpetual Baffour, Amanda Hill, Shakiya Canty

LET'S READ!
LET'S
MOVE!
PHILADELPHIA

LET'S READ! LET'S MOVE!
PHILADELPHIA.

- A campaign dedicated to combat summer learning loss and childhood obesity
- Three Pillars: Literacy, Exercise, Nutrition
- Planned signature event in partnership with “Fun, Safe Philly Summer - 8/1 Hunting Park Field Day
- Developed partnerships to bring local resources to the community



Yuan Huang