

# Research Insights: Using PhotoVoice to Explore AmeriCorps Seniors Experiences

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## BACKGROUND AND AIM

**BACKGROUND:** VCU and Virginia Tech are collaborating with Serve Virginia to implement a PhotoVoice project with AmeriCorps Seniors and AmeriCorps State and National service members in Virginia.



**AIM:** This project is using PhotoVoice, a participatory research method, to highlight the diversity of AmeriCorps Senior members and understand their varied motivations, experiences, and impact through photographs and discussions.

In Year 1, programs across 3-4 Virginia counties are being engaged. Some sites are meeting in person, others virtually.

## THE PROCESS

- In Year 1, we are focusing on engaging AmeriCorps Seniors **working with children and youth**, including Foster Grandparent and RSVP programs.
- Project Site 1: **10 Foster Grandparents**, aged 55-75 years who have been in service from 1 to 20 years.
- Service sites included public and faith-based daycares, after school programs, elementary schools, and as mail pen pals.

### **PROCESS:**

- Participants receive digital cameras, a stipend, and training on Photovoice, photography skills, and ethics.
- Focus of pictures and common themes are generated by group discussion & photo sharing.

### **CHALLENGES:**

- Need for meeting space hosted by site for in-person programs.
- Transportation issues requiring fewer meetings limited photos.
- Lack of experience with digital cameras

## PARTICIPANT IDENTIFIED THEMES

**“It Takes a Village”:** Participants saw themselves as part of the village that it takes to raise children in the community.

1. **Kids are our Future:** Participants saw their role as an opportunity to mentor kids, open their minds, and protect their well-being and future.
2. **Inspirations for Becoming a Foster Grandparent:** Positive experiences in childhood, love for children, desire to decrease isolation, and giving back to the community.
3. **Foster Grandparent Self-Care:** The need to practice self-care and protect volunteers’ well-being after busy days in classrooms and at sites.
4. **Experiences as Foster Grandparents:** Joys, takeaways, and the impact service has on them and the children at the sites.
5. **Helping Teachers:** Foster Grandparent makes a difference in classrooms by assisting teachers and bringing light to the education journey.
6. **We Need More of Us at More Sites:** There is a critical need to recruit additional Foster Grandparents to reach more children and engage seniors who are currently bored at home.



Thank you to our site partners, the Foster Grandparent participants, Carol Ayars, Analise Gammel, and the AmeriCorps Seniors Team at Senior Connections in Richmond, VA.

## OUTCOMES

Participants brought creativity, eagerness, and curiosity to the project.

- Produced a “Grandparents Give Back” Video Slideshow.
- Identified opportunities to:
  - Increase skills development in early childhood education to address difficult behavior and complex needs of children
  - Increase and support for Foster Grandparent interactions and well-being

**“This program gave me the opportunity to share my experience with what I do and have learned being a foster grandparent.”**

## Next Steps

In Year 2, we will conduct Photovoice at **three additional** sites in Virginia and develop a Photovoice **training manual** that will allow for scaling the project to reach program members across the state and nationally.

