

Public Health AmeriCorps Program Experiences on Recruitment, Retention, and Workforce Pathways

Background Information:

Public Health AmeriCorps (PHA) is a partnership between AmeriCorps and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that has enabled the recruitment, training, and development of a new generation of public health leaders who are ready to respond to the needs of the nation by serving their communities. Public Health AmeriCorps has two main goals:

1. Address public health needs of local communities by providing support in state and local public health settings and advancing equitable health outcomes for underserved communities.
2. Create pathways to public health-related careers through onsite experience and training, and recruiting AmeriCorps members who reflect the communities they serve.

Creating programs that specifically tackle public health needs while simultaneously building a foundation on which to build public health careers takes innovation, resourcefulness, and a keen understanding of the communities and individuals involved. In Fall 2023, the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) at AmeriCorps sought to gain a better understanding of PHA funded programs that focus on these unique opportunities and challenges. ORE interviewed select AmeriCorps program partners (PHA grantees) and experts in the field to gain insight about their experiences, learn more about how they engage members, their successes and challenges with recruitment, and the employment pathways they see for members in the field of public health. These individuals, which included program directors and managers, participated in a one-hour, recorded interview.

Below are some of the key takeaways from those voices from the field.

Key Takeaways:

Member Recruitment

Each organization participating in this interview has built a unique program that successfully engages members in service and delivers distinct professional experiences in a variety of public health settings.

AZ Serve of Prescott College is based out of Prescott College but looks for recruitment opportunities everywhere in Prescott and Tucson, AZ. Academic institutions such as Prescott College and Arizona State University are natural targets for recruiting members to their program. AZ Serve has found that PHA can fulfill many students' internship requirements, which has been key in recruiting from this population. This program also looks for people who are already volunteering in the public health space and works with these sites to develop AmeriCorps positions. This has been especially effective at recruiting retirees for AZ Serve. Additionally, since there is no match funding requirement for host sites, AZ Serve is able to cultivate robust partnerships with governmental and nonprofit agencies.

Baltimore Corps is an organization based in Baltimore, MD, whose mission is "to enlist talent to accelerate social innovation in Baltimore and advance a citywide agenda for equity and racial justice." The Baltimore Corps program has two tracks: a Community Health Worker track and a Certified Nursing Assistant track. PHA members choose which track they wish to pursue and spend their service term working in these spaces while getting certified in their respective discipline. Baltimore Corps uses their vast network to recruit potential PHA members which consists of alumni, local hospitals, governmental agencies, and nonprofits. The organization

focuses on individuals who are looking to gain entrance into the field of public health, especially those that are interested in getting certifications as a Certified Nursing Assistant or Community Health Worker.

Appalachian State University Public Health AmeriCorps is based in the Department of Public Health and Exercise Science at Appalachian State University. Members of this program work with local health departments in 25 rural counties in North Carolina to lead the dissemination and implementation of Psychological First Aid (PFA) interventions to communities, organizations, and professionals. Appalachian State University focuses recruitment on campus, targeting students that want hands-on experience in the field of public health. This program has also found that students with internship or practicum requirements are an excellent source from which to focus recruitment efforts.

Flexibility with members was cited as the most important strategy for effective member recruitment. All three organizations discussed how offering flexible service hours and work locations were the key to onboarding and retaining members. Another best practice in member recruitment was strategic partner engagement. Prescott College looked at organizations that were already doing work in the public health field when they were looking for sites to place members as well as from where to recruit members. Baltimore Corps utilized its network of partner sites, external partners, and previous members to spread the word for their program. Appalachian State University described how its approach to member recruitment highlighted the real-world experience Public Health AmeriCorps offers its members and that they will not just be sitting behind a desk or handing out pamphlets, but actually performing real, on the job public health work. All three organizations used social media in their marketing outreach efforts. The specific messaging used in marketing materials included the length of the service term, the stipend, the different pathways in their program, and the education award upon completion of the term. Two organizations targeted students that have an internship requirement for their degree program, and stated the ability to have the member stipend while completing an internship requirement was key to attracting these candidates. One organization noted that Career Fairs (in person and online) were excellent ways to recruit potential members. AZ Serve of Prescott College explained how the ability to pass down the education award to a grandchild is very appealing for members that are retirees and how this has been key in attracting this demographic.



“The best strategy has been being flexible with position hour commitments to accommodate for the modest benefits. We need to be realistic with how many hours a week individuals have to dedicate to service and meet them where they are at.”

- Sarah Haber, Arizona Serve of Prescott College”

“We have a lot of great connections in Baltimore so we were able to work with a lot of different partners to spread the word. Utilizing our network, utilizing our ourselves and really spreading the word was a huge recruitment piece for this opportunity.”

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“Making sure we are all on the same page and we are all using our resources.”

- Ra’Shaun Shaw, Baltimore Corps





"There are a lot of applicants in need of internships. AmeriCorps can give them that opportunity and pay them at the same time. That is "next level!"

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"PHA shows how we can be very intentional with service in a new way."

- Jennifer Schroeder Tyson, Appalachian State University

Member Engagement and Retention

All organizations emphasized the importance of sincere relationship building and open communication to engage members and ensure their service term is an enriching experience. All organizations provide members with opportunities for professional development and networking. Two organizations offer engagement opportunities amongst the cohort members to help connect them to each other and the work. All organizations discussed the challenges of the modest stipend and stressed the importance of being candid and transparent about how difficult this can be for the member. Two organizations shared that they provide members with additional resources to help make ends meet during their service term.



"A really excellent retention element for our program has been to meet the person where they need to be met, and that isn't always sitting behind a desk or showing up to an event, it looks very different for every person."

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"The cool thing about PHA is that research and implementation is part of the program."

- Jennifer Schroeder Tyson, Appalachian State University

"Open communication and creating opportunities for the members to come back together through professional development days and hands on service projects across all 15 sites has been key."

- Brandi Roberts, Baltimore Corps



"Most programs require students to complete an internship in order to fulfill their degree requirements. By providing AmeriCorps support to these positions, students can earn a stipend for the internship. It is a small step in closing the gap to barriers in education."

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"Cater the experience to the candidate and compromise to make sure both the candidate and site are getting their needs met."

- Sarah Haber, Arizona Serve of Prescott College



"What helps is open communication, constant communication and relationship-building with members so they feel comfortable talking to program managers when there is something going on. It is important to really get to know them."

- Ra'Shaun Shaw, Baltimore Corps

Building the Pipeline for Public Health Jobs

All three organizations work to ensure their members have a service experience that provides a sound foundation on which to build a career in the field of public health. Each organization supplements the service term with unique learning opportunities that reinforce public health and leadership skills: Prescott College hosts a 10-week course wherein the member earns a Certificate in Civic Leadership that also counts for 4 college credits; Baltimore Corps provides an education component to service and pays for either a Certified Nursing Assistant certification or the course that prepares one to take the Community Health Worker certification as well CPR certification and trauma-informed care training; and Appalachian State University provides RAPID-PFA, CITI Training, FEMA ICS training, QPR Training and also maintains Coursera licenses so that its members may pursue additional training in topics that most interest them. Additionally, all organizations provide members with additional professional development through soft skills training, public health expert presentations, and other professional development trainings.



“These opportunities and trainings caused members to feel more connected to the community and most of them that maybe did not initially want to be in health care, because of this experience, they want to stay in health care and do great things for their community.”

- Ogeyi Akuma-Ukpo, Baltimore Corps.

“Many of our members were hired on by the sites they served. It really ties the bow on what it is that we are doing here. We are creating these pathways to future employment or future opportunities for these individuals to into the field that they want to.”

- Sarah Haber, Arizona Serve of Prescott College



“We pay for members to become a Certified Nursing Assistant or to take the course to get certified as a Community Health Worker.”

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“Part of the site training is to extend an offer of employment or use their network to help the member identify the next step.”

- Brandi Roberts, Baltimore Corps

“We are trying to give space for people to grow and potentially be ready for their career after this.”

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“We are really intentional about leadership in our project.”




- Jennifer Schroeder Tyson, Appalachian State University



Summary:

The conversations with practitioners working in the field of public health provided insights on member recruitment, engagement, retention, and career pathways. These insights from experts in the field suggest that engaging in public health work is a major pull for recruiting members, with many members viewing AmeriCorps as an opportunity to explore potential career pathways in this field. That said, recruiting members requires a great deal of flexibility and resourcefulness on the part of organizational leaders when stipends are low and organizations want to recruit from within the communities they serve. Experts in the field are actively creating opportunities for members to develop a foundation for a public health career through recognized certifications, continuing education, and professional development.

These “voices from the field” offer situational awareness of the opportunities and challenges facing organizations working in the field of public health. It also serves as a supplement to other current evidence-building efforts of ORE at AmeriCorps in this space, including:

 Recovery Coaching Research	 Return on Investment Studies
<p>AmeriCorps funds research that seeks to fill critical knowledge gaps on recovery coaching as a promising treatment strategy across AmeriCorps-supported organizations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life Cycle Evaluation: Recovery Coaching Bundle: overview and evidence snapshot A Promising Response to the Opioid Crisis: CNCS-Supported Recovery Coach Programs 	<p>AmeriCorps commissioned the following ROI studies to measure program performance and build an evidence base for future resource allocation decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmeriCorps Senior: Foster Grandparents/Senior Companion AmeriCorps Urban Safety Program Detroit Birth & Beyond Home Visitation Program
 AmeriCorps State and National Grantee Impact Evaluations	 AmeriCorps Public Health Impact Studies
<p>An AmeriCorps evidence brief that highlights the impact of AmeriCorps-funded Healthy Futures programs and interventions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check out the Effective CNCS-Funded Healthy Futures Programs brief 	<p>A webinar highlights AmeriCorps’ potential to help with community health programs addressing the opioid crisis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> View the How AmeriCorps Investments are Addressing the Opioid Crisis webinar
 AmeriCorps ORE Research Grantees	
<p>AmeriCorps’ ORE provides research grants to researchers, scholars, and dissertators at higher education institutions to advance the field’s understanding of civic engagement, volunteering, and national service, and civil society more broadly. A few of the ORE Research Grantees that have specifically studied the intersection of civic engagement and public health include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appalachian State University Case Western Reserve University University of Texas at Austin Virginia Commonwealth University and Virginia Tech 	

AmeriCorps ORE is grateful to the program leaders and field experts who offered their time and knowledge to help us better understand their work and experiences and hope that we can take these lessons to continue supporting AmeriCorps' strategic goals related to public health and civic engagement.

Sarah Haber
Deputy Executive Director
Arizona Serve



Arizona Serve is an AmeriCorps program of Prescott College connecting passionate people with transformative community projects that aim to combat poverty. As an intermediary organization, Arizona Serve recruits/places AmeriCorps members to serve with local nonprofits in Yavapai and Pima County AZ.



Ra'Shaun Shaw
Sr. Recruiter
Baltimore Corps



Dr. Brandi P. Roberts
Sr. Director of Community
and Service Learning
Baltimore Corps



Ogeyi Akuma-Ukpo
Program Manager, Community
Health Pathways
Baltimore Corps

Baltimore Corps works to enlist talent to accelerate social innovation in Baltimore and advance a citywide agenda for equity and racial justice. Baltimore Corps envisions a city empowered to develop, retain, and connect its leaders to achieve an equitable future for all its residents.



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Public Health AmeriCorps at AppState is a Public Health AmeriCorps project in rural Appalachia aimed to develop future public health leaders and help meet public health needs in these communities by providing needed capacity and support to advance more equitable health outcomes and improve mental health interventions to support public health preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. The mission of Public Health AmeriCorps at Appalachian State University is to foster meaningful relationships, develop public health professionals, and bolster community resilience and preparedness in western North Carolina by addressing local public health inequities through service, volunteerism, and evidence-based interventions.

About the Office of Research and Evaluation

The [AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation](#) assists AmeriCorps and its partners in collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data and insights about AmeriCorps programs and civic life in America.

About AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Each year, the agency places more than 200,000 AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in intensive service roles; and empowers millions more to serve as long-term, short-term, or one-time volunteers. **Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](#).**