

Webinar Transcript - AmeriCorps Impact Webinar 4

Community-Based Research as a vehicle for civic engagement and community impact

Rose Johnson:

Welcome to Community-Based Research as a vehicle for civic engagement and community impact. Today's webinar, we'll examine three questions. How can we use participatory research approaches as a pathway for community engagement? What are the outcomes to doing this work for community researchers and their communities, and how can we engage national service as a partner to address community priorities? There will be plenty of time at the conclusion of the presentation to ask our panelists your questions. Please be sure to place advanced questions in the chat. We'll be collecting your questions for the Q&A time blocks towards the end of the webinar. And now, here to welcome us and set the stage for the discussion, is Dr. Andrea Robles, Research and Evaluation Manager with AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation.

Dr. Andrea Robles:

Hello everyone and welcome. I want to thank you for joining us to hear about a participatory research to action approach that we believe is both a process and an outcome for increasing civic engagement. Because we believe that an engaged citizenry is essential for a thriving democracy, in this Springs webinar series, we're highlighting research that provides context on our nation's civic life, and clues to how we might reimagine and reignite our civil society. In describing a participatory research project in Reno, Nevada, our speakers will discuss their roles, what they learned, and the ripple effects from the project for the participants, communities and partners. Next slide please.

As an Office of Research and Evaluation, we have several ways we support our agency's mission of increasing civic engagement and volunteering to strengthen communities. As you see on your screen, we categorize the work and into four main buckets. We identify national service and volunteering trends at different geographic levels and with different populations. We conduct research and build scholarship on civic engagement. We measure national service impacts and provide technical assistance for AmeriCorps grantees conducting evaluations, and we promote evidence-based models that have been evaluated to be effective in meeting program goals.

We also focus on translating knowledge and evidence so that it can be utilized to strengthen organizations and communities, improve our programs, and enhance our members and volunteer service experience. Our webinar series is one way that we make our research and evidence available. In this webinar, our speakers will be addressing the bucket shaded in blue. Before I turn this over to our brilliant speakers, I wanted to briefly describe how we arrived at developing and funding participatory research to action approaches at AmeriCorps. Next slide please.

Since 2002, we have partnered with the US Census to field a supplement on volunteering and civic engagement in the current population survey. Our last webinar described this work in some current findings in more detail. But just in terms of background, after about a decade of fielding the supplement, we started to wonder whether there were more ways, more effective ways to measure the concepts of civic engagement, social cohesion, and social capital. We started asking ourselves, were we using the correct questions or measures? Which other research designs could be used to supplement a national survey? So with these questions in mind, we turn to the National Academies of Sciences to conduct a scan of the literature, review our questions and measures, and make recommendations on how we

could improve our data collection efforts and increase our knowledge of civil society more broadly. One major recommendation was to compliment the national level survey with other studies that can allow us to tap into more complex relationships among these related topics. Next slide please.

More specifically, the National Academies of Sciences recommended using other research designs such as in-depth, longitudinal or experimental studies in conducting research at the subnational and local levels. To address these recommendations, we developed a research grant competition for scholars and graduate students at universities to conduct innovative research on these topics. More importantly for today's discussion, we decided that the best way to incorporate local level research was to directly fund scholars and communities conducting participatory research approaches in their communities. We looked for proposals that incorporated community engagement, research and action, and that the work was guided by some underlying principles that are associated with these approaches. In just a few minutes, Dr. Melissa Gouge will provide more detail about participatory research in general. Next slide please.

So why does participatory research suit AmeriCorps? I can name many reasons, and I can talk about this all afternoon, but just to summarize, participatory research is an equitable approach to community engagement, and this compliments the agency's mission. The heart of this approach is democratizing the research process so that communities can systematically identify their strengths and challenges, and we believe that AmeriCorps national service programs can connect with these communities to be part of the solution. So to learn more about these awardees and their studies, please see the link in the chat, specifically the 2018 cohort. The project you will hear about today is one of these fabulous grant recipients. Next slide please.

Our first speaker is Dr. Melissa Gouge, who's currently a research analyst at the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps, and manages our research grants and specializes in participatory research. Our second speaker is Dr. Jennifer Willett, who is the project director and principal investigator of the project at the University of Nevada, Reno, and is now the grassroots manager at All Voting is Local.

Our third speaker is Najeh Abduljalil, was a former youth scientist and a high school student on the project, and is currently an undergraduate student at Cornell University. Our last speaker is Tanya Gipson-Nahman, who is the region director for AmeriCorps NCCC Pacific Region. Dr. Emily McDonald, research analyst at the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps will facilitate the Q&A. During the presentation, if you have any comments and questions or have any great ideas you want to share, please put them in the chat. Melissa, I'm handing it over to you. Thank you.

Dr. Melissa Gouge:

Thank you so much, Dr. Robles. Good afternoon everybody, I am Dr. Melissa Gouge, and I have the distinct honor of presenting to you what participatory research is. Next slide, please. Also known as community-based participatory research, action research, participatory research, participatory action research, it goes by many names. Next slide, please.

And I'm going to be connecting it with community engagement or being involved in your community. First, let's start with what it's not. Participatory research is an approach or an orientation to research, not exactly a methodology. So hold on, what does this mean? This means the part does not have one formula or recipe or a rule book for conducting a study. Instead, we have a set of guiding principles that lead to long-term research strategies and goals that are part of a research to action process. These guiding principles are, research should be part of a democratic and equitable process. There should be power-sharing and co-learning. We must respect individuals knowledge, their lived experience and their perspectives. And sometimes doing participatory research, you're going to have to agree to disagree on some things.

So these guiding principles are the foundation upon which the three pillars of PAR rest, three essential components, as Andrea mentioned, of the PAR orientation to research, are community participation, research and action. These three you're going to hear all the time. So thinking about the theoretical roots of this, where does it come from? So seeking solutions to community identified problems through research, emerged from many people's work in many places, many times. Some of the folks that we often hear about are Jane Addams at a Hull House in Chicago, W E B du Bois, Paulo Freire and his concept of conscientization, Orlando Fals Borda, Myles and Francis Horton of the Highlander Folk School. Some of these historical are examples of research as community involvement and engagement. And like these scholars and activists from around the world who are credited with cultivating this orientation, this approach is unapologetically about bringing people into a research to action process who have lived experience, who bring their own perspectives, beliefs, and are interested in using knowledge to make positive social change in their communities.

Yeah, community engagement. There it is again. Just like traditional research, participatory research may lead to peer reviewed publications, books, conference presentations, policy or position papers, but unlike traditional research, this work can also lead to really deep and long-term commitments among folks in community with one another, skill development and empowerment of participation, and let's not forget, celebration. Next slide please.

So these guiding principles make up the long-term strategy to get us where we want to be using participatory research. The tactics we use in participatory research to get us there, are community building. Okay, first, we're working with an in community. What does this mean? Collaboration is key. People with lived experience, folks who have skills in diverse research methods, facilitation skills, engagement, engagement and more engagement to find that sweet spot or the magic moment of readiness to do participatory research. Community building with a research team, once you've decided you're going to kick off this participatory research work, community building is continuous.

This can mean sharing meals together, doing those cheesy icebreakers that everybody loves, offering transportation options like bus tokens, addressing power differences, offering financial incentives. What does it take to build relationships? You got to do that. In thinking about research, design and execution, working together to design your study, facilitators are needed to build skills and research methods, like sharing how to design and collect data via surveys, how to conduct focus groups, how to do community mapping or collecting oral histories or testimonials, and thinking about collaborative data analysis and interpretation.

Again, this involves, or may sometimes require some teaching and facilitation skills, because the community comprised research team is not only collecting data, but you've got to find out who on your team is interested in learning and applying data analysis skills to answer research questions. Community members are involved as much as possible and as much as they'd like in presenting your findings and developing action plans. So you've applied the principles, community's been involved, you've done the research, now what? We can't forget that third pillar. Beyond interpretation of the data, what do these findings mean, and how can we solve the problems that we've identified in our research questions? Participatory research is applied research. We got to work together to figure out what we're going to do with it. Next slide please.

So as you can see from this very, very brief introduction to participatory research, it's not the same thing, although it's often conflated with participant observation, it's driven by, with and for community. If your takeaway is just this, remember those three pillars upon which this research orientation stands, community participation is essential. It will look different in each instance. The more, the better. Research, traditional questions, designing the study, executing, analysis, these should all fit the questions the community is asking. You can use qualitative data analyses. You can use quantitative data

analyses. Your methodological toolbox using participatory research, is only as limited as your imagination. And that third pillar, this is action-oriented research. What are you going to do with the findings? Build coalitions, build sidewalks. Spoiler alert, are you going to create college access problems? Shout out, programs. Are you going to shout out to the 2018 grantees at Mississippi State University?

Now that you've got a little bit better taste of this, do you want to learn more about participatory research and the ways in which this orientation can and has led to community engagement from our grantees? You'll be able to access this video, or if you want to know a little bit more about AmeriCorps orientation to participatory research, we've got a one pager that'll set you up just fine. You'll be able to take a look at these materials just as soon as the recording and the PowerPoint is available on our website.

Now that you've heard us explain why we fund participatory research, and you've learned a little bit more about what it is, we get to move on to the fun part, discussing a case of participatory research funded by AmeriCorps. For today's presentation, hold on folks, we're going to head on over to the biggest little city in the world, Reno, Nevada to learn more about the intersections of community-based participatory research, community engagement, and community impact. On our journey to Reno, I am honored to open the floor to our former grantee and principal investigator, Dr. Jennifer Willett, who is presenting today with Najeh Abduljalil, a youth scientist involved in the project. Take it away, Dr. Willett.

Dr. Jennifer Willett:

All right. Thank you so much for that awesome introduction, Melissa. My name is Jennifer Willett, and I am the former program director of Making the Invisible Visible. So I'll jump right into our project. Next slide, please. And next slide, to start the presentation. All right, so Making the Invisible Visible Project, is a community-based participatory action study on climate injustice in Reno, Nevada in partnership with youth from impacted communities.

What that means is that we wanted to do both research on climate injustice in Nevada, and conduct actions just like Melissa was saying, to address the needs we identified, but we wanted all of this to be led by youth in the impacted communities. And you can see some of the youth here in this picture. I have lots of pictures. And this project was really a mesh of mine and my original co-researchers experience and passions. I love working on climate injustice and doing research that leads to actions, and she loves working with youth. So we put our interests together and we thought the project would be fun and impactful to do. Fortunately, ORE agreed and we were able to carry out the project. I just say this as a foundational lesson, because I think that sometimes we overthink what we want to do next. You can really just do things that you think are going to be impactful and that you are interested in. It doesn't have to be overly complicated. Next slide, please.

Like I said, this project was intended to be led by youth in impacted communities, and they called themselves the Youth Scientist. But there was a process to get to that, and I think that's important to acknowledge. First, me as the researcher, I set the parameters of the project, which were fairly loose, but this was needed. Otherwise, it was just going to get way too big, in my opinion. So my parameters that I set for the youth is that we are going to document climate injustices with photovoice, with youth from Title I schools. Now, I know that you probably know that climate injustice is the intersection of climate change with social injustice, which means that we know the climate change disproportionately impacts communities of color and low-income communities. And that's why we identified to work with students in Title I schools, which are the schools with the high percentage of low-income students.

So the students who go to Title I schools by proxy are going to be most likely impacted by climate injustice. The other parameter that we had is that we were using photovoice. So Photovoice is a very easy to use research method that uses photography and then a structured interview with a

photographer to understand the meaning behind the photos. So the youth scientist took the photos, and the interviews were the data that we analyzed, and you can see them with their photos here. So once we formed the group, and I'll tell you how we did that, we trained the youth scientists on environmental and climate injustices, photovoice and research ethics, and within these parameters the Youth took over to lead the project. So they decided exactly what we were going to focus our research on, and the actions that we were going to do.

As researchers, we would step in at points. They needed more training at times, and we would provide that. We would also make suggestions like, if some of the students wanted to organize a field trip to go look at a climate injustice in their neighborhood, and then we'd work out the logistics. And a funny point the Youth discussed at one point of some civil disobedience, and we thought, okay, could we think about some other action steps before we get to that? But otherwise, it really was their project, and I don't say that as lip service. At one point, I had to go out on medical leave for three months, and they took over and charge forward, including some very important community education events and one of our largest fundraisers, they did this on their own. It was their project. And just to be explicit, this was on purpose. Impacted people know what is best to document in their communities, because they're affected by the problem. And impacted people know what the best solutions are, because they live in the communities. Next slide, please.

Just to discuss our next points. I need to go over a few findings so they make sense. Next slide please. One of the things that the Youth were interested in, in their neighborhoods was the dumping that was occurring just in their neighborhoods. You can see here, this car was dumped. Next slide please. Another thing that they were very interested in was the lack of infrastructure for climate resilience. For example, there's a couple things going on in these pictures. If you look on the left, you see a ditch. This is a ditch for flood water. So probably in your neighborhood you have a more structured drainage system that goes under the road. That's what I have. Here it's just the ditch which can overflow into the road. You'll also see here that we're by a school, and there are no sidewalks. So students, including the Youth Scientists as well as others, and adults have a choice to either walk in the ditch or walk in the road and potentially fall into the ditch, or not get to where they need to be. Next slide please.

And then a third thing they were very interested in, in addition to many others, was the intersection between homelessness and climate issues. We did discuss in many of our individual interviews that some of the youth scientists were very close to homelessness or had experienced it themselves. We also see it a lot in Reno, because it's an increasing issue here. Next slide please.

So in addition to working with the youth, this project could not have happened without our partners. So we have partners both help with the research part, and our actions. Our main partner was definitely Upward Bound, which is a college prep program that works with first gen students in Title I high schools. So they helped us recruit the students who wanted to work in this project. They also supported the students with what they needed, transportation, food, just to make this work for them.

And then they did all the thank list tasks, frankly, of organizing the logistics like, okay, we're going to be meeting in this room and we're ordering pizza to arrive at this time. So to keep it all functioning, because they're awesome at stuff like that. Our other partners were AmeriCorps, obviously. Now, we partnered very closely, obviously with ORE, but also NCCC and Nevada Volunteers to work on our actions, particularly our dream of having an NCCC team come to work on these issues in Reno. So we met NCCC and Nevada Volunteers through our site visit with ORE, and it seemed like some of the things we were finding, like lack of sidewalks, could be projects that an NCCC team could do. So we developed a team to set out to try to be awarded an NCCC team.

And one of the things that we did is, we visited NCCC several times to learn more about them. You can see some of the youth scientists outside of NCCC Pacific. We presented frequently to Nevada

Volunteers, and we worked really hard to make this happen. During that time of trying to get an NCCC team, we also relied on our partnership with Upper Bound to connect us to their connections, because they're connected in the community, particularly to churches and other groups. But to make all of this work, we had to keep expanding our partners out. So we had our core team doing the research, we had our larger team trying to do actions, and then we had community members who wanted to support us. But this was needed to get permission for the team from the local governments to write the application, to find housing and to make sure that the work that the NCCC team would do, would be fun and impactful for them.

So this was really a labor of love for all of us. In addition, I've mentioned the community members who wanted to help us. We had, and this was an even larger circle, we had a great relationship with people like [inaudible 00:23:50] Tea Shop, a dance center where we could hold fundraisers and educate the community on our work, and we also worked with organizations that we wanted to support with our work, like organizations that worked with our homeless population. Next slide please.

So with all of our partners and all of our supporters, our big team, we completed a lot of actions. We did a ton of community engagement and education, including meetings with government officials like the governor staff, all the way down to the school board and the sheriff's office. We raised a lot of money for homeless groups that the youth scientists cared about. We also donated a lot of survival kits to homeless individuals, which you can see Najeh in the bottom right corner with all of our survival kits. And I'll let Najeh talk more about this, but our county also began working on infrastructure projects, and we'd like to think that our pressure helped. Next slide please.

Now, the thing is that our primary goal was to get the NCCC team and what all of our partners are working on, and COVID threw a wrench in that. We were able to obtain permission for the NCCC team to build a sidewalk, that you see here, through our local government connections. We also found housing through upper bounds connections with churches, and then we designed other projects, like a community cleanup day, with other community groups that we wanted to work with. Unfortunately, the team was set to arrive when COVID started, and subsequent rounds couldn't replicate all of that magic of getting all those pieces together. But I will say the NCCC came out to Reno dozens of times to try to make this work, and we really, really tried, and just COVID got in our way there. Next slide, please. Last slide.

All right, so my lessons learned from this project is, anyone could do this. This is a very doable thing. But local impacted people are the experts of their situation. Don't just partner with them, help them learn to lead. It makes the project better. So if you think about the original goals of this project, were to document climate injustice and do an action. I am a trained researcher. I have connections here. I could have done that on my own, and it seems a little bit easier for me to do it on my own, but it would not have been what the community wanted. I'm not an impacted population, so I wouldn't have researched the right things. I'm not an impacted population, so I wouldn't have designed the right solutions needed. So even if it seems a little bit more difficult to get this all off the grounds, I know that you want to make a tangible impact in your communities, and this is how you do it. You work with them and let impacted populations lead.

Secondly, it takes a village. Our team was huge by the end, and we needed that support to make our actions happen. So I think that we asked people that we never thought would get back to us, and they did, because they wanted to help us. People want to support the work that AmeriCorps, you all are doing. Relatedly and third, working in partnership with all of the AmeriCorps programs are really helpful, because each program has different resources they can bring to the table. So if you're not working with all of the programs, I suggest that you reach out and start getting to know the programs that you don't

know yet. Fourth, one project is not make or break. The work will continue with your relationships. I'll let Najeh tell you what he's doing now, but I can give updates on others on the team.

Our main contact at Upward Bound was Jen Sims, and she was a counselor. She's not a counselor there anymore. She's a director and she has embedded programs like this throughout Upward Bound. I'm not on faculty at the university anymore. I now work on voting rights, but I still work with Upward Bounds. We just collaborated and held a Democracy Academy for Upward Bound students, and then they went to the legislature with me, as you can see here, and they lobbied on bills that they care about.

And then the youth scientists are all doing really well. Almost all are in college, many at very prestigious universities, many with significant scholarships, and all wanting to continue making changes in their communities. And then fourth, I love that Melissa already brought this up, because I agree. Even when you're working on serious issues, it's important to have fun in what you're doing and bring joy to the work. This can be a lot of work, but this project sustained over three years. Us keep trying to make it work camera away, and make it successful, because we all loved what we were doing and we had a lot of fun working together, from the top at ORE, all the way down to the youth scientists and our community partners, we all found joy in this project. So that's key to remember. Thank you, and I will pass it back.

Najeh Abduljalil:

Hi all, my name is Najeh Abduljalil. Thank you for sharing that, Dr. Willett. I'm always happy to see you. I don't see you too often anymore, but I'm glad to be sharing what I'm doing, and my experience with Make the Invisible Visible. Once again, my name is Najeh Abduljalil, I'm the founder and executive director for Research for Change, South Central New York. And it's really inspired by Dr. Willett's group back in Nevada, and that it brought together a group of high school students coming from the Title I schools to choose what they wanted to examine in relation to climate justice. And I really liked that aspect of the project, and that I gave us freedom and allowed us to be creative and what the problems we wanted to look at, and how we wanted to solve them.

And my project here is a little, has more parameters set in place. That's because we have a smaller budget, but I'd like to have the same creative spirit in which the students are leading the Research to Action project. Next slide, please. Next slide. Next slide.

One moment that really inspired me from the project, and what really excited me, was the point in which we looked at a problem in the community, which was the lack of infrastructure or the infrastructure neglect in the Sun Valley neighborhood. And I worked with the team to use photovoice to take pictures of this problem here. It's not my picture here, I think this is one of the Kevin Munos picture, one of the youth researchers. And we discussed these images, and we discussed what was going on in the area as we were looking over our photographs.

And that brought us to our next phase in which we wanted to advocate for an improved space. And I found that moment in which we identified an issue as a team, discussed it, and then we took it to the Sun Valley General Improvement District for change. I found that moment as a way to find power, because not a lot of high school students, especially coming from Title I schools, low income backgrounds, have a sense of power and making change in their community. And now this was something that inspired me and many others on the team to become more civically engaged. Prior to this, I did not have a clear interest in bringing my issues to change makers in the community, but this provided a seed in inspiring my drive towards this career. And while we joined the conversation here, we shared our perspective, and I can't 100%, or I'll add a little bit more about this.

But as Dr. Willett explained earlier, these were ditches filled with needles, broken glass, and it wasn't really safe for people to walk within these ditches, so they had to walk in the street instead. And these

provided a hazard, which there are about two accidents between 2016 and 2019, one of which was fatal. So that was a significant point we had in introducing sidewalks here, especially near the Sun Valley Elementary School, to ensure the youth walking to school are safe. And I felt like advocating there for those students, was a pivotal moment in helping me decided what I wanted to do. Because in high school, I wasn't entirely sure, and I felt this experience is something I want to share with other students, and allow them to choose their paths like it was forwarded to me here. And next slide.

So my group, Research for Change, South Central New York has three parts to its philosophy, which is space, energy, and emissions. So I'm a urban and regional studies major at Cornell University, and my research interest or my area of interest is construction waste. And I look at that in the context of space, energy and emissions. Next slide please. Next slide.

You don't have to play the video yet. So 600 million tons of waste annually is from construction and debris. So that takes up about half of what's in the US dump sites, that outpaces the amount of household waste. And it is significant, especially it makes sense with how large those chunks are going into the sites. That's a significant part of dump sites, and a lot of it can be reused. It's good material. And next slide, please. And that material, it's a lot more efficient to recycle instead of producing new material, for example, for aluminum. It takes 5% of the energy to recycle it, instead of reusing that material, and that similar figures are true for concrete and steel. Next slide please.

And this is really neglected, but 11% of carbon emissions resulted from the production of building materials. And this is an area that should be targeted for the road to reach us 2042. Do you want to claim the goals that were set back at the COP27 conference in November, and the carbon emissions from vehicles and from the farming industry, this area should be examined as well. And the solution to this is strategy such as deconstruction, instead of demolition to reuse the materials and buildings instead of throwing them into dump sites. And if you could go back to that video and you can play, I'll let you know when it can be cut off.

Or I'm actually running out of time, so I'll have to wrap this up. But essentially, those are the points that were covered in the video. And yes, I'm excited to do this project here. I learned a lot from Dr. Willett's project in my experience there. And I'd like to continue writing more grants to have our full funding. Right now we're at 70% of our budget. We've got a great deal of awards here in New York, and if you'd like to know more about the project, I'm excited to tell you more about it. And the link for the video can be provided. Okay, and the video, I was told that we can play the video. I have extra time built in. Thank you.

So this video is made by the city of San Antonio, and it's the solution of using deconstruction instead of demolition, which is the action that I want to advance. I want to advance deconstruction policies. You can go ahead and play the video. I'll turn off my mic.

Audio from Video Played by Najeh Abuljalil:

This is the story of two homes. They both provide their family shelter and places to make memories, but in time, some may think the lives of these homes are over. The first house gets demolished. It's lumber, windows, doors, bricks, all of it is buried in a landfill and will decay for hundreds of years. This is a waste of more than 41 tons of energy that was used to create the materials that went into the house. That's equivalent to driving your car nearly 93,000 miles, or almost four times around the world in greenhouse gas emissions. Construction and demolition waste is the largest source of waste sent to landfills nationally, more than double the household trash we throw out. Wasting building materials by demolition leads to deforestation. It destroys ecosystems and decreases our air quality.

In the past decade, the demolition of homes in San Antonio has created over 169,000 tons of waste. That's equivalent to over 100,000 hippos, but it doesn't have to be this way. Remember the other house,

it's on the path for deconstruction, meaning its building materials will be taken apart and reused, like an organ donor. This home's parts will give new life to other buildings. Its bricks and lumber were used as affordable alternatives to repair a home. Its windows were installed in a bakery. Its beautiful old growth wood is now the flooring in a trendy new restaurant, and with a fresh coat of paint, its front door is now the top of a family's dining room table.

It's estimated that reuse, refurbishment and upcycling generate about 300 jobs for every 10,000 tons of material. Meaning that on average, deconstruction employs six times more people than demolition. Deconstruction produces jobs in manufacturing, retail, and building trades, creating a cycle of reuse for building materials. We can protect the future of our older homes and buildings by using materials from their past. This nurtures a healthy environment, continues the legacy of our city's built heritage, and keeps quality materials out of our landfills. San Antonio can lead the way for cities across the world, and it starts with our buildings today. Don't demolish. Deconstruct and reuse. It's the earth friendly alternative.

Najeh Abduljalil:

Thank you for allowing me to share. I hope that explained my research and what I plan to do with the high school students that I'll work with here in New York, and I'm excited to update anyone who's interested on my project here.

Tanya Gipson-Nahman:

All right, thank you, Najeh. That was so inspiring, and loved to see that update of the sidewalks and how that work has inspired you to continue on and identify your future path. I just want to thank Andrea and Melissa, and everyone from RE, and Dr. Willett for engaging us in this project. So my name is Tanya Gipson-Nahman. I'm the region director for AmeriCorps NCCC, the Pacific region, and we are located in Sacramento, California. Next slide.

So first I want to tell you a little bit about NCCC, the National Civilian Community Corps. We're a program within AmeriCorps, the broader agency, and I want to talk a little bit about how we operate and how we function and how engaging in this research project really helped us. So next slide please. And go ahead and click through all of the items. So just the basics of AmeriCorps NCCC, who we are, how our program operates. We are a 10 to 11 month program for 18 to 26 year olds. Members join our program and serve, get assigned to teams. And on those teams they do service projects throughout our region. And those service projects can be anywhere between six to 12 weeks in lengths, and teams travel around our region and doing a variety of different things depending on community need. Next slide please.

We have four campuses across the region. So when the members apply to AmeriCorps NCCC, they get assigned to one of our campuses. We are obviously in the Pacific region, and there's nine states, including Alaska and Hawaii that we cover in our region, and obviously Nevada is one of those states. Next slide. So the way that we operate in identifying the service projects where our teams will serve for their work, what we really offer to a community or to an organization, is people power. We have a team of eight to 10 members that will arrive in a community, and they can get a lot of work done. They work full-time, at least 40 hours a week, and then for a short amount of time. So we're really looking for projects that are that short-term, high impact work, or we're looking for organizations or communities that if we just had a few extra people on hand, what could we accomplish together?

However, being located in Sacramento, California, we are not in every other communities where we serve. We don't know what those local issues are. We don't know what those priorities are. We have three staff that support, do outreach in our entire nine state region. So it's really impossible for us to

know what are all the pressing needs in all of those states. So we really rely on local organizations and institutions to define what those needs are, whether that's an individual organization or a coalition of organizations and community members in an area, to define what is the priority work that needs to be accomplished in that. In of the nine states that we serve in our region, Nevada has historically been an underserved state for NCCC. We have found it to be a little bit difficult to do outreach and to identify sponsoring organizations that are able to host an NCCC team.

Some of the things that the sponsoring organization needs to provide if they want to host a team, is housing. We are a full-time residential program, so our teams, wherever they serve, traveling around our region, need a place to live and stay and cook and eat together. And so, the sponsoring organization that's hosting our team, has to provide that housing for them. And then they also need to provide any training or supervision that is required of our team to accomplish the work. So it's a great asset to have an NCCC team, but it's not nothing to host a team. It takes a little bit to put all those pieces together to make an NCCC project work. Next slide, please.

So when Melissa and Andrea came to us, NCCC funded, I think about four to six projects nationally of these community participatory action research projects. And Melissa and Andrea came to us and said, "Hey, we've got one in your region, let's go visit it. Let's see what it's all about." So we traveled to Reno. The top picture there is a picture of us. Well, actually both pictures are us meeting with the youth scientists. I think at that point in their research, they had just taken some of their first round of photos, and we're starting to get into the research methodology, and they presented to us about some of the findings and the photos and the issues that they were starting to see. So that got us really excited, because again, us as outsiders of a community, not local to the issues, having that local knowledge and that local passion and connection to the issues, was really critical for us to be able to know, well, what is going on in the Reno area? What are those issues and what can we do together?

So as Jennifer mentioned, our staff traveled out there many times to meet with different organizations and institutions to make sure that if we were to send a team there, that they'd have all those pieces in place, so that housing, that training, supervision, and what would they be working on together? We also received a lot of support and had a lot of great meetings with Nevada Volunteers, the state service commission that is in charge of other AmeriCorps programming. And then we were able to engage with the youth scientists in other ways. As Jennifer said, we had some scientists visit us at our campus. They did a presentation about their research to our staff, and they were able to also engage and learn more about AmeriCorps and what we do. So as Jennifer mentioned, ultimately, the pandemic through a wrench into everything.

And since then, I think housing costs have continued to skyrocket, so that housing piece is a real barrier for us to be working together. However, I do think there were a lot of other benefits of this partnership, just getting us more familiar with Reno, Nevada and the issues going in the state. Some of the unique policies and laws that govern communities and how they operate, was very enlightening, insightful. Dr. Willett was extremely informative as educational when we went to visit her and telling us all about the state, and then hearing from the youth scientists themselves and understanding what the issue areas were, has continued to inform our outreach and our work in the state.

So while ultimately the goal of getting an NCCC team to work on this particular project didn't happen, there were still a lot of really great benefits on both sides for this project. So I wanted to say thank you to everyone, ORE and the youth scientists and Dr. Willett for this great partnership, and we continue to look forward to trying to find opportunities to work in the area. I'm sorry, I think I'm passing it over to Emily though.

Emily McDonald:

Thank you so much. Hi, my name is Emily McDonald. I'm honored to be a small part of showcasing our amazing grantees and partners that took part today. And so, I wanted to invite all of our panelists back to answer some questions, if y'all would like to come back on camera. Awesome. So the theme for this webinar series is Reigniting Civic Life, and our panelists showed us how a project in Reno connected all of them, and all the ripple effects of the amazing work. So Najeh used what he was learning in Reno, hearing that over to participatory research in his college career. Jennifer, continuing to do our work in Nevada, and Tanya connecting with communities for NCCC projects. So I wanted to ask our panelists, and Jennifer, we can start with you, in what ways did that research spark a sense of urgency to bring about change in the Reno community? And then more broadly, what's that relationship between participatory research and civic engagement?

Dr. Jennifer Willett:

Yeah, I think that a lot of people, like Tanya was saying, we want to do good work in communities, but we aren't exactly sure what to do. And I think that is the same within NCCC, it's the same with the university, it's the same with local government sometimes. So if there are people working on things and identifying it, and the thing about working in a community with community members, it's not like they're just exploring every possible problem that you could work on. They almost immediately know what they want to work on. The sidewalk issue was the first thing we talked about, and what we ended up working on a lot, because they see it and they want to fix it, because it's going to make their lives better. And then when we started showing up at community meetings, at local government meetings, meeting with the governor, meeting with the school board, there was, I feel like all of a sudden urgency around these issues that have been existing for decades probably.

And I didn't know any of these issues when I started either. So it's not like I fought anyone, but that's the beauty of working with people who see these things and can identify what needs to be changed in the community to make their communities better. And I think, more broadly, we live in a data-driven society hopefully. Not everybody agrees, or they used data that's not real. But when you can bring data, which is what we had, that was the core of what we were doing, we were doing research. If you can bring data to decision makers, that makes it more powerful too. So if you're going to the local government and you're complaining about sidewalk, okay, it is urgent, but it's a complaint. But if you're bringing data with you, it just levels it up a little bit to get more eyes on the ground and to get a plan moving with it.

Emily McDonald:

Awesome. Najeh, what about you coming in first as a student, how did you see the relationship between participatory research and being civically engaged?

Najeh Abduljalil:

I think our community needs assessment. It did not tell us what was there, because it was a lot of the things that we saw every day. But it allowed us to look at those examples of issues in our community and allowed us to reflect on them, and to think about solutions collaboratively. And I think this movement towards participatory research is something helpful in allowing different groups of people, regardless of where they come from, to think of solutions and collaboration.

Emily McDonald:

Tanya, do you want to share any thoughts?

Tanya Gipson-Nahman:

Yeah, I think there was a comment earlier in the chat about service learning. How does this participatory research and service learning coincide. And service learning is a really important component of our program in AmeriCorps. We teach members about it, and we encourage them to engage with those topics when they're out doing these various service projects across the region. So I think, connecting with research that already has some of that built into it, of not just looking at an issue, but engaging people with the solution.

One of the conversations I think Andrea and I had at one point was, sometimes research can be very academic, and you spend a lot of time and you publish a paper, and then that paper sits on a shelf somewhere and no one ever sees it or engages with it. And I think this approach really brings those two pieces together. I think everyone would like their research to be acted upon or done something with. And so, this approach is really engaging people with understanding the issues in their communities, but engaging them with the solutions. And NCCC and AmeriCorps fits so nicely with that, because that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to leverage community, leverage people into engaging and making change. So I think it's a really nice tight fit.

Emily McDonald:

Thinking, all of our panelists are coming from different types of institutions. So Jennifer was in higher education, Najeh is now in higher education, nonprofits, Tanya, Melissa, and Andrea and I from government. And I wanted to ask you, your work demonstrates how participatory research brings together both people, but also as you're pointing to Tanya, these different types of institutions, and can facilitate community-driven solutions. So what lessons do you hope your peers in your respective fields take away from the work that you're sharing today? Jennifer, we can start with you again.

Dr. Jennifer Willett:

Sure. And I see some of my cohort grantee friends like Carol on here, so I think that she would agree. I think that I was an assistant professor, I was on a tenure track. What was really important was getting a grant and writing a paper about it. But what I hope that people take away from it is that you can do that. One, you can get funded to do participatory action research. Whereas I think a lot of people think you can't do that, but you can. This grant funds that type of work. And then I think that it is important to get out of the ivory tower and go work in your community.

You have skills, higher education folks have skills that can benefit local communities. And now you've got this exchange of ideas. Because like I said, if I would've just done this by myself, I wouldn't have researched the right thing. So now you've got relationships in the community, you're researching the right thing, you're doing good things with your data, you're bringing money, which is what the university wants. And so, this can all work. Whereas I think that there's maybe an assumption that it can't work. This can work. You can do participatory action research, you can make a difference in communities as a higher education professional.

Emily McDonald:

[inaudible 00:58:43] to that. Najeh, do you want to share some thoughts on that?

Najeh Abduljalil:

Yes. I think the important lessons I took away from the Nevada group and put it together my group here in New York, was that I think the strategies that you use are to be able to speak to everyone really easily. It should be really easy to send your message through methods like photovoice. And I think, using

photography and interviews is more digestible to changemakers, and it's an easier methodology to work with for youth researchers in sharing their stories and sharing what they see in their images, their issue. And I think that's one big takeaway I took away from the Nevada project that I'd like to continue. And I think having those moments in which you can come together and discuss plans for your actions and discuss what you saw in your issue, for example, the sidewalks, and brainstorming solutions and examining other ways of the issue as a problem for different communities, was helpful in helping make the invisible visible, reach its goals. And hopefully it'll be helpful in my group in reaching its goals of reducing construction waste within New York.

Emily McDonald:

I love that example of data, and really having a visual for us to bring to our partners and really using the visual to bring about change. Tanya, did you want to speak to the government side? Melissa, feel free to jump in as well.

Tanya Gipson-Nahman:

Yeah, I think what this engagement with this project really highlighted for me, was just thinking creatively about who potential partners might be. We rely heavily on community organizations. I think we naturally gravitate towards the nonprofit field when we're looking for partners or maybe local and state government. But I think, taking a look at university partners and also the work that they're doing to engage where it's happening, to engage community members, it's such a nice nexus, that I don't think before this was a natural place for us to go to in terms of looking at partnerships. So I really appreciated how this one opened our lens a little bit about who could be a partner with AmeriCorps.

Dr. Melissa Gouge:

Emily, I'll just hop in with a comment that being in federal grant making space doing this work, again, to mention what Jennifer was saying, that in ways we are able to demonstrate within federal space, this work can be funded. It produces fantastic results. It produces lots and lots of deep, thick connections that are really improving people's lives. So hopefully in some ways doing this work here at AmeriCorps will provide us some ability to have influence among other grant makers, perhaps in the philanthropic sector and in federal government to continue to fund this work. It's really important.

Emily McDonald:

So like Najeh say, it is amazing to work with them. We have one question from the audience. Shauna said, could you please speak to strategies for facilitating participation in community-based research among marginalized communities? Whoever wants to jump in first. Jennifer, do you want to jump in?

Dr. Jennifer Willett:

Sure. I think with this project, obviously I had a partner, Upper Bound, who was embedded in the community, so they could facilitate introductions, recruitment, and best ways to work in the community. I've done other projects where I facilitated it all myself, and that just takes a lot longer to do. But I think that a really key point and something that I know Najeh believes in, Andrea and Melissa believe in too, is that a portion of the funding, I did this as part of my job. So a portion of the funding went to the community. And what that meant is that Upper Bound got a portion of the funding to work on this, since if you do work, you get paid.

And then the youth scientists were also paid as part of their participation, because they're doing a job. And marginalized community members' time is very valuable. So I think that if there's only a certain amount of money, almost all of the money should go to them. And this definitely facilitates and gives time and buys time so people have time to work on the project, versus taking another part-time job. And I think that, that also might be the difference between service learning as well. We've always been in agreement as part of the team from already down that the youth scientists are being paid, whereas I think service learning is more volunteer based too.

Emily McDonald:

Thank you for addressing that. Najeh, did you want to share any thoughts about doing this work with marginalized communities and approaches?

Najeh Abduljalil:

Yeah. I've also reached out to Upward Bound here in New York. It's a little bit harder to get in touch with them, but I was able to connect with them here and I was able to identify groups of students that I can work with. And we're not in our recruiting phase yet. We're still completing our compliance with the Institutional Review board to do our research and to work with the high school students, but once we get there, we have a few sources which we cannot recruit from. And we're going to start our work at a Title I school, Binghamton High School. And I think, working with partners and doing research on where you can work with folks, is where you can start. And I'm really happy to have had a great help from Dr. Willett and other facilitators on the past project in connecting me with Upward Bound here in New York.

Emily McDonald:

Awesome. Thank you all so much. So thank you so much for engaging in the chat. We're about at time, but thank you so much for our panelists. I'm going to pass it back to Rose.

Rose Johnson:

Thanks Emily. We're now at the close of our webinar. We would like to thank our research panelists for their presentations, Tanya Gipson-Nahman for the AmeriCorps reflection, and Dr. Emily McDonald for facilitating the discussion. To our audience today, our webinar objective was to explore how we use participatory research approaches as a pathway for community engagement, the outcomes to doing this work for community researchers and their communities, and how we engage national service as a partner to address community priorities. We hope we hit our mark and you join us for our next webinar in the Reigniting Civic Life series on Thursday, June 8th from three to 4:30 PM EST.

I would also like to extend a thank you to our Mathematica and Guardians of Honor colleagues for their technical support and coordination. This webinar recording and support materials will be posted on the americorps.gov website, under Impact Webinars within the coming weeks. Please feel free to share with your colleagues and networks. We will also be sending out a post-webinar survey, so please let us know your thoughts on this webinar and any ideas for future webinars. Thank you and have a wonderful rest of your day.