

National Service and Community Health Centers:

A Partnership Built to Last

By Anastasia R. Sonneman

Twenty years ago, the National Association of Community Health

Centers (NACHC) took on a brand new and relatively unknown public-private partnership. This partnership was AmeriCorps, a federal-run program created to address the nation's most pressing social issues, by leveraging the desire of Americans to serve their country and gain professional experience.

The formula seemed viable: private organizations, mostly non-profit, applied for federal funding which they then had to match. The combined funds were used for recruiting, training, and placing full-time volunteers into underserved and often economically challenged communities to fill widening gaps of service.

The gamble was worth it. Two decades later, AmeriCorps has flourished into a celebrated program with bipartisan support and proven results to reduce dropout rates, provide critical disaster relief, and increase access to and knowledge about using healthcare. It is a win for the communities served, but also for the AmeriCorps members who learn the value of civic engagement and develop into the public service leaders of the future. Today, over 80,000 Americans make a commitment to serve in AmeriCorps every year, throughout 15,000 locations, including over 200 community health center sites through NACHC's Community HealthCorps.

The Start of Something Big

Created only a year after AmeriCorps, NACHC's Community HealthCorps program started out as a small planning grant. The program's purpose was simple and in line with NACHC's overall mission: To increase healthcare access for the nation's medically underserved and enhance workforce development for community health centers. The idea was launched by placing full-time AmeriCorps members directly into community health centers to provide the services that staff and/or community volunteers did not have the resources to accomplish,



President Clinton swearing in the first class of AmeriCorps members in 1994.

yet were still essential to ensure a healthy future for patients. The spirit of the program is embedded in the key commonality found at the heart of both AmeriCorps and community health centers — the mission to serve.

“[Community HealthCorps] takes advantage of an incredible spirit of volunteerism that we know exists in this country and pairs that with the health center mission,” explains Jim Macrae, Acting Administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration, “creating not only a set of volunteers to do incredible work, but also a set of future leaders in the Community Health Center Program.”

Community HealthCorps started out in 1995 with nine community health centers and 100 AmeriCorps Members. Community HealthCorps Members focused on providing enabling services such as case management, specialty care referrals and

health insurance enrollment, often times giving the additional attention and support to a patient in need.

Twenty years later the program has grown five-fold, annually engaging 535 AmeriCorps members to serve over 200 communities in partnership with 36 health centers, primary care associations, health center controlled networks and one university throughout 17 states and the District of Columbia. Although the mission has remained unchanged, the important role that Community HealthCorps Members play has grown and developed over time.

“Members’ roles have expanded as clinic teams realize their value in helping achieve improved outcomes for targeted groups of patients,” reflects Allison Dubois, COO of one of the nine founding Community HealthCorps Program Sites, Hudson River Healthcare in Peekskill, New York. “While Members focus on the similar types of activities as



One of the first teams of Community HealthCorps Members serving with Hudson River HealthCare in 1995.

they did in the beginning, their roles have grown to encompass more of the social determinants of health, like financial literacy.”

Making a Measurable Impact in Communities

The program’s focus has narrowed in the last ten years to four key areas: increasing healthcare access, improving health-related financial literacy, assisting older adults and individuals with disabilities to live more independently and reducing childhood obesity. That move has allowed NACHC to better track Community HealthCorps’ overall impact and measure patient outcomes.

Community HealthCorps Members provide over 500,000 health-related engagements to thousands of health center patients a year. Just last year, members helped over 39,700 individuals with education about the impact of health decisions



Community HealthCorps Members serving with Central Valley Health Network running a health fair in 2013.



Community HealthCorps Members serving with Sea Mar Community Health Centers and Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic celebrating the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps in 2014.

on their personal finances. Over 65 percent reported an increase in knowledge on how being insured, managing chronic conditions and using preventive care impacts their economic opportunity. Members enrolled nearly 18,000 individuals into health insurance and supported another 14,000 older adults and individuals with disabilities to live more independently. It is hard to measure impact on the numbers alone, however.

“Through their service,” says Community HealthCorps National Director Gerrard Jolly, “our members help to lift the cloak of confusion that often covers the healthcare system and help individuals create simple, realistic care plans to which patients can confidently commit.”

Cultivating the Future of Community Health Centers

Equally significant is the impact of Community HealthCorps, whose over 7,000 burgeoning alumni

make a substantial contribution to the health center workforce. After completing a service term with Community HealthCorps, more than one third of alumni choose to pursue a career in community health or public service. Chris Shea, CEO of Cherry Health, a health center in Grand Rapids, Michigan and home to one of the largest Community HealthCorps program sites in the country, sees this trend in action.

“Many of our Community HealthCorps alumni are hired as staff at Cherry Health. [Not only do they] bring the skills necessary to do the job, but [it’s] because of Community HealthCorps, that they bring a sense of inspiration, leadership and mission — to assure our patients a healthier future.”

In its twenty years of service, Community HealthCorps has proven that Community Health Centers are indeed the perfect home for AmeriCorps. It is only fitting that the program celebrated its 20th

anniversary in the same year as the 50th anniversary of the Health Center Program in 2015. Looking ahead NACHC hopes to continue growing the program, setting a goal of placing a Community HealthCorps program site in all 50 states within the next ten years.

“We know the challenges addressed by our AmeriCorps Members are not limited to the 16 states in which we currently operate,” says Jolly. “We’ve talked with many of the community health centers in those states that have the patients with the most critical need but have the fewest resources to serve them. Community HealthCorps can be that resource that keeps on giving by identifying community assets and cultivating partnerships to strengthen the capacity of community health centers.” ♦

Anastasia R. Sonneman is NACHC’s Program Specialist, Communication and Public Engagement, Community HealthCorps® For more information, visit: www.communityhealthcorps.org.