



VOCAL NEWS

Literacy Volunteers of Illinois



The Pandemic Strikes With a Vengeance

Just a little over two months ago we gathered in early March for our quarterly member meeting. As we learned of all of the service activities and accomplishments of members for the past three months and plans for the coming months who could have known what the next week would bring! By the following Friday we were packing up our files and equipment to work from home for what was to be a 2-week shutdown of the Literacenter as fear of a looming pandemic was beginning to grow. Now some eight weeks later, after the issuance of a Stay at Home order and two extensions of it, the Center like all of Illinois remains closed and will be for at least the next several weeks. The Coronavirus has wreaked havoc on our country, indeed, the world, which has impacted all of us in a multitude of ways. As we learn to cope with what is now the new “normal” we need to support each other as best as we can.



As for the VOCAL program much of our activities for the remainder of this program year are up in the air. We have already had to cancel two “First Friday” training sessions and are unsure about the June Quarterly member meeting, except to say it will likely be virtual. Our summer activities are “iffy” as they involve baseball – who knows if that will even begin - and restaurants, which will be forced to follow strict “social distancing” guidelines. While the May “Life After AmeriCorps” training has been canceled, plans are underway for a series of virtual sessions on various topics.

With the closing of all non-essential businesses, the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Serve Illinois Commission are allowing AmeriCorps members to work remotely. Both recognize that some host sites’ services cannot be extended remotely and that not all members have assignments that can be performed that way either. To address that programs have been given leeway in assigning alternate service locations and host sites for members. Members also have an option of ending early without losing any of their educational award, if over 50% of the hours committed to are performed. And, unemployment benefits are also being extended to AmeriCorps members idled by their programs or host sites.

While we may soon return to our work sites and move about with some semblance of “normalcy” the road to full recovery will be long and painful. AmeriCorps members in Illinois under the leadership of the Serve Illinois Commission have stepped up to the challenge, as have AmeriCorps members throughout the country. In recognition of this the *Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act* (S.3624) was recently introduced in the US Senate, which would expand AmeriCorps and Senior Corps to increase national service’s ability to aid in COVID-19 recovery efforts. The Act would grow AmeriCorps to 750,000 positions over a three-year period; boost the living allowance so that individuals regardless of financial situation can participate; increase the education award to cover up to two years of public university tuition; ramp up Senior Corps tele-working technology, and more. Both Sen. Durbin and Sen. Duckworth are co-sponsors of the legislation.

- Dorothy M. Miaso Executive Director

In This Issue ...

Member Perspective
Page 2

National AmeriCorps
Week—Page 3

Member Spotlights

Centro Romero
Page 4

Centro Sin Fronteras
Page 5

Literacy Chicago
Page 6

Virtual Meeting
Page 4



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Member Perspective on COVID 19

Over the past few weeks, the country has undergone a transformation, as many organizations have taken steps to confront the spread of COVID-19. While the implications of the virus are far-reaching and the resulting Shelter-in-Place’s ultimate impact on literacy organizations remains unknown; the immediate effects have been the cancellations of a host of events and in-person training sessions at LVI and host sites, as well as the closing of all of our offices.

Yet, despite all of our in-person programming and plans being thrown into question, members are working tirelessly at their host sites with their supervisors to ensure that their organizations could continue to provide as much of their top-notch programming as they could, and transition to remote working. From the issuing of the Stay at Home order through today, members remote duties ranged from contacting tutors and students, finding resources for their volunteers, creating and adapting lesson content for their websites, social media, and more.



For example Gabi Mulder, a VOCAL AmeriCorps member serving at Literacy Works, assisted with adapting their tutor essentials trainings to be online and have potential volunteers meet virtually 1-on-1 with instructors, and adapting much of their other upcoming lessons as videos for their website. Fortunately, working together, most of the materials were online and utilizing apps like Slack, they have been able to transition to remote working smoothly. Despite the situation, she works hard to schedule, promote, and track down instructors to ensure that organizations can continue to get more volunteers during this time of need. Even with COVID-19, many adults need literacy and assistance now more than ever, and thanks to Gabi’s hard work, Literacy Works is able to continue to help meet that need.

Likewise, that go-to spirit has shown through our other members as well. Whether it be catching up on backlog work that they couldn’t get-to because of their daily duties on site or avoid getting overwhelmed by anxiety and fighting on during these uncertain times, AmeriCorps members have continued to accomplish and serve. They keep an eye on tomorrow, and look forward to the day that they can meet with friends and clients in person again, as well as going to cultural events or even the gym.

In the meantime, as we all face the challenges ahead, when asked about what message they would want to send to their fellow AmeriCorps members, they wanted to assure everyone that “trying your best right now is enough. And it’s okay if your best right now does not look like your best a month ago. You’re doing great.” Truly encouraging words, and every one of our members continues to live our shared dedication to service and helping communities, however they can.

— Colin Herzog
Team Leader



AmeriCorps Week: Referral Fair and Cards for Kids

As noted in our previous issue, from March 8-14, we celebrated National AmeriCorps Week. In the process, we continued the proud tradition of having a Information and Referral fair at the State of Illinois Thompson Center. From 8:30 am—4:00 pm on Monday, March 9th, we had members tabling in the atrium, promoting their host sites' programs and volunteer opportunities. Working in two shifts, our members worked to promote the VOCAL and Jump Start programs with Literacy Volunteers of Illinois, participating in World Relief's local chapters, Centro Romero and Instituto Del Progreso, Literacy Chicago, Literacy Chicago, Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, Centro Sin Fronteras, and Association House,. With some appearances by program alumni like Max Frasier and Illinois Community College Board Ben Greer III, the tables had a fair number of stoppers-by; one of our members even impressed one of the interested people enough that they submitted a \$20 donation on the spot. Ultimately, it was a successful day, and we look forward to returning next year.



Additionally, on Wednesday, March 11th, some VOCAL members assisted Chicago Hopes' AmeriCorps members creating cards for children in hospitals all over the world, for an organization called Cards for Kids. Working from 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm, members made cards, using construction paper, crafting tape, and plenty of ingenuity. Examples of messages were written out for suggestions, with multiple phrases in Spanish listed for reference, as they wanted cards to reach even more children. Ranging from "Tú es brillante" and "El cielo es el limite!," there was a consistent spirit of encouragement.. There were many creative approaches, with some constructing elaborate cards, featuring fold-out designs, crafting friendly characters, and other AmeriCorps members drew out various designs. Ultimately, AmeriCorps week was successful, both in raising awareness of our host sites, our members, and additional ways to contribute to different causes.



Member Spotlight: Nayla Rodriguez

Nayla Rodriguez is a first-year AmeriCorps member serving as a Family Literacy Coordinator at Centro Romero. Originally from Cuba, she went to St. Augustine College for Social Work; she heard about AmeriCorps from friends while looking for a job afterwards.

Among her duties are giving ESL presentations to mothers, teaching ESL classes, and helping with childcare. She finds it rewarding to do social work, but it can be a challenge keeping up with the fast pace sometimes. When she isn't on duty, she enjoys spending time with family and getting more experience in social work. After AmeriCorps, she wants to continue her work in social work at a hospital or school.



Centro Romero is a non-profit organization providing options and opportunities for low-income Latino and other immigrants. Services offered include ESL and Spanish Literacy, Family Literacy, Immigration Services, and various programs for youth and women. Through education, Centro Romero emphasizes the development of the whole family unit, the creation of community leadership and self-reliance.

Member Spotlight: Olivia Terry



Olivia Terry is in her first year of AmeriCorps service at Centro Romero, where she serves as the Adult Literacy Volunteer Coordinator. She is from Chicago and went to Western Illinois University for Agricultural Business. Prior to joining AmeriCorps, she worked at Centro as a youth coordinator and while she was there, she heard about them looking for an AmeriCorps member. While at Centro, she matches tutors and students for GED, Citizenship, and ESL lessons, finds subs for teachers and helps work with materials and information for instructors.

With the many people she helps and the many programs Centro has, it can be a challenge to find space for the volunteers and tutors to meet in addition to all the other programs. Still, she loves helping tutor-student matches click, and the opportunity to learn Spanish. When she isn't serving, she likes to read, dance, and meditate. While currently she is undecided about her goals post AmeriCorps, but she serves because she sees the need in the community and, in her words, "it is the thing to do."

Virtual Member Meeting

Monday, May 11, 2020

3:00—4:30 p.m.

Join with Google Meet

meet.google.com/wgp-bbjf-ugp

Join by phone

1- 518-519-0068

PIN: 864409370

Simple rules to follow—

We would like to see everyone, so please use a desktop, laptop, tablet or phone with a camera, if none of those are available to you, dial-in by phone.

Background noise can be heard when your mic is on or phone line is open so please mute your microphone/line while someone is talking. Unmute to talk.

If you don't have a mic -

There is a chat function where you can type questions that everyone can see and anyone can answer.

Member Spotlight: Sophia Rodriguez

Sophia Rodriguez is a first-year AmeriCorps member from Chicago, who serves at Centro Sin Fronteras as the 5+1=20 Youth Coordinator. In addition to serving full-time, she is also a nursing student attending Malcom X City College. Before becoming a member, she was a volunteer at Centro, and they recruited her to be part of their corps. Among her duties is teaching 5+1=20 classes (5+1=20 refers to 5 main diseases that can reduce life expectancy by 20 years, such as diabetes), as well as registering and enrolling students.. Between her duties with Centro and being a nursing student, a challenge is balancing the two.

Despite that challenge, she is proud of the work she is doing to improve health in her community and finds it rewarding. After AmeriCorps, she will complete her studies for a nursing degree and pursue a Masters in special education. When she has free time, she likes to swim, dance, spend time with her sister, and shop. At its core, she serves because she is passionate about helping the community, having new experiences, and meeting new people.



Centro Sin Fronteras (Center without Borders) was founded by Pastor Emma Lozano in 1987 to keep the legacy of her brother slain community activist Rudy Lozano alive. It is one of Chicago's oldest existing Mexican organizations. The mission of Centro Sin Fronteras is to provide outreach, education and services to principally low-income immigrant populations. Based in Pilsen at the Lincoln United Methodist Church, Centro Sin Fronteras offers services at various locations in numerous Chicago communities as well as some suburban communities.

Member Spotlight: Zilagi Velasco



Zilagi "Zi" Velasco is a third-year AmeriCorps member from Chicago. She and her family had been involved with Centro Sin Fronteras for years, and when they were recruiting AmeriCorps members, she was nominated. Her first year was as a part-time member, then a full-time member, and, back again as a part-time member.

For the past three years Zi has served as an Assistance and Database Manager at her host site. Generally, her duties include helping with health classes, assisting legal DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) renewals, general database and grant assistance, and keeping the facility tidy for clients. While she enjoys assisting the community, part of the struggle she undergoes is fighting against misinformation and miscommunications that people may have, particularly with DACA. Still, she finds it rewarding to help educate people about how to live healthier lives and make the better aware of their legal rights. She is keeping the future open after AmeriCorps, and when she has downtime, she enjoys cleaning, playing flute, and taking walks around Chicago. Ultimately, she serves because she sees need in her community and wants to make change.



Centro Sin Fronteras members at 60 Years of Struggle a tribute held last Fall to honor Rev. Walter "Slim" Coleman's longtime commitment to social justice and the struggle to achieve it. Left - CeCe Garcia, Miriam Perez, & Sophia Rodriguez with Tribute attendee and speaker Congressman Bobby Rush. Right - Members Sophia, CeCe and Miriam with Gabe Perez, Pastor Emma Lozano, Rev. Coleman, Dorothy Miaso.



Member Spotlight: Keay Crandall

Keay Crandall is a first-year AmeriCorps member, serving at Literacy Chicago. Originally from Michigan, she came to Chicago to attend Loyola University where she majored in Anthropology and minored in Chinese Language and Culture. She was working on a research project with Literacy Chicago for school and was also volunteering there when they began their hunt for a new AmeriCorps member, they asked her if she would be interested—and, she was.



At her site, she substitute teaches, registers students, and helps get resources for tutors and students, handles communications and newsletters, and plans events. While she finds it greatly rewarding to develop rapport and relationships with students and volunteers, she also enjoys seeing students' progress. Still, there are challenges that include finding resources for student needs beyond literacy, and dealing with shared space with other organizations and avoiding students and other organizations' events from interfering with each other. When she is not serving, she likes being outside and swimming, reading, and learning Mandarin. Ultimately, she serves because she is passionate about her host site and feels responsible to those that they serve; she wants to continue to help provide access to literacy for everyone.



Literacy Chicago is a nonprofit organization that empowers individuals to achieve greater self-sufficiency through language and literacy instruction. For five decades, thousands of adults have participated in the broad range of programs offered including basic literacy, GED preparation, ESL, Workforce Development, and Citizenship. Literacy Chicago takes a learner- focused approach to instruction and relies heavily on the efforts of volunteer tutors,, and frequently offers ancillary classes such as health, digital, and financial literacy,



Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and mandates issued by the state, the UIC Administration cancelled all large campus gatherings at their campuses. This has forced the cancellation of our 29th Annual On the Road to Literacy Conference that was to be held on April 18th. Thank you to everyone who assisted in the planning and all who were planning on attending. We look forward to hosting you all at another time !

LVI SOCIAL MEDIA



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Upcoming Dates

Week of May 12th-14th

Virtual Night of a 1,000 Stars

Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition Facebook

Happy Birthday!

April

Kayla Thomas

4/30