

Keeping the Promise, Strategies for Supporting Member Development

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America's Promise makes five promises to the children of our country. In the same way organizations hosting AmeriCorps Promise Fellows make some "promises" of their own – to meet the objectives of the AmeriCorps program: Getting Things Done, Community Strengthening and Member Development. When organizations apply for Promise Fellows they are required to present a plan clearly outlining how they will meet these objectives. Massachusetts Promise, a state grantee, and City Cares, with Fellows assigned across the country, have developed approaches that utilize in-house resources, community connections and technology to provide rich development experiences for their members.

While Massachusetts Promise Fellows have the opportunity to work and meet face-to-face, City Cares' Fellows are dispersed around the country, and meet via conference call. Both organizations structure member development activities that provide Fellows with:

- (1) A sense of their role within AmeriCorps Promise Fellows and the national service movement, and
- (2) Opportunities for professional development.

City Cares' AmeriCorps Promise Fellow program manages member development and fosters a team spirit among members. Conference calls held throughout the program year help Fellows meet three critical goals: understating resources and tools to deliver on the Five Promises; exploring other unique strategies in the field; and applying the practical skills of service.

City Cares' Fellows hear from guest facilitators and other experts in National Service and the Five Promises who present information about other organizations that deliver on America's Promise. This relationship building often leads to networking opportunities for Fellows within their communities. City Cares Fellows also develop agendas for some calls, providing opportunities to develop presentation and facilitation skills.

City Cares' curriculum is designed to address key issues during relevant times of the service term in an effort to make the year a true "journey in service." For example, NYSD activities, mid-year reflection and goals assessment, "Life After AmeriCorps," and an end of year reflection activity are part of the year-long curriculum.

The Massachusetts Promise Fellowship Program enhances the Fellows' professional skill-set, develops the Fellows' understanding of service, youth development and project management, and allows Fellows to pursue individual education objectives. Fellows design an Individual Development Plan, where Fellows, with the assistance of their program director and host site supervisor, take a survey of their personal and professional development goals and create an action plan to meet developmental objectives. The Fellows then meet to develop a set of Fellowship-wide training and development objectives.

The Fellowship also hosts monthly meetings for all Fellows that are designed to meet the development objectives set by the Fellows. These topics include: team building, facilitative leadership, diversity, project planning and implementation, volunteer management, and youth development. The Fellowship listserv and Egroup allow Fellows to share best practices, develop project ideas, address challenges, seek advice, test ideas, and build networks outside of traditional meetings.

Massachusetts Promise Fellows can register for 6 credits/quarters of graduate and undergraduate credit at Northeastern University free of charge. They are allowed to register for any course or program that meets their developmental objectives. The University covers the tuition costs, as a part of their commitment to the program.

Such highly developed approaches to Member Development reflect an understanding and appreciation of AmeriCorps members' interest in career exploration and enhancement. It makes them more competitive to candidates "shopping" for service opportunities. The plans also support AmeriCorps' interest in developing members who are committed to life-long service.