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**ACM LEADERSHIP CALL NOTES**

**Connecting Children's Museums to Service through the Corporation  
for National and Community Service**  
**Tuesday, March 30, 2010, 1:30 p.m. ET**

**Guest Speakers:**

- Elson Nash, Acting Director, Learn and Serve America & Associate Director, Corporation for National and Community Service
- Cathy Saunders, Director of Education, Providence Children's Museum (RI)
- Joe Olson, Vice President of Visitor Experience, Minnesota Children's Museum (St. Paul)

**Moderator:** Mark Wright, Director of Partnerships, National Children's Museum (Washington, DC)

**I. Welcome and Introduction of Speakers, Mark Wright**

Moderator Mark Wright, an ACM Board Member and the Director of Partnerships for National Children's Museum, introduced the guest speakers. Wright said that the goal of today's call is to discuss the possibilities for children's museums to get involved in national service.

**II. Overview of the Corporation for National and Community Service,  
Elson Nash**

Elson Nash talked about the 2009 Serve America Act, which brings the Corporation for National and Community Service into the 21st century by reauthorizing and expanding the mission of the Corporation. The Corporation's budget has reached the billion dollar mark, and the organization administers multiple service programs. Newest developments are three funding programs that focus on nonprofit capacity building. United We Serve is a nationwide service initiative and campaign that has been embraced by President Obama and the First Lady. Service opportunities also happen around the country in conjunction with Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Six thousand participants are expected for the National Conference on Volunteering and Service in June.

Nash described the Corporation's signature program, AmeriCorps. Organizations should think about AmeriCorps as a way to engage young people as an extension of their program, building human resources.

- AmeriCorps participants get a living stipend and student loan reimbursement.
- AmeriCorps VISTA members bring high-level program coordination skills to the organizations in which they are placed.
- AmeriCorps NCCC members are deployed for short-term service projects and are based on college campuses in five locations: Denver, Colorado; Sacramento, California; Perry Point, Maryland; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Vinton, Iowa. AmeriCorps NCC

service projects are focused on the following areas: natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, energy conservation and urban and rural development.

Nash said that to get involved with AmeriCorps, museums should contact their state commission. The state service commissions are appointed by each state's governor. Museums can connect with the state commissions to apply to host an AmeriCorps team or a VISTA member. If a museum needs a team of young people to come in for a short-term service project, such as a National Youth Service Day, you can request an AmeriCorp NCCC team from one of the five campuses (each team is assigned to a region of the country).

Nash gave an overview of the Corporation's grant opportunities:

- The Corporation offers competitive grants for service projects through institutions of higher education.
- The new Summer of Service grant program engages middle school students for 100 hours in a service opportunity, for which the participant gets a \$500 stipend.
- The Youth Engagement Zones initiative is about strengthening young people's engagement.
- Elder participants can serve through Foster Grandparents program or the Senior Companion program, in which seniors assist other seniors. Volunteers 55 and older can also participate in service opportunities through the RSVP network.
- The newest grant program that the Corporation is announcing today is the nonprofit capacity building fund, which is focused on intermediary organizations that provide technical assistance to other organizations.
- The Social innovation Fund targets high-performing organizations that have a unique innovative idea that they want to scale up. The grant helps the organization to look at the evidence-based model of what they do and expand it to a larger-scale program.

The Corporation offers online technical assistance and training through its Web site, [NationalService.gov](http://NationalService.gov). Nash encouraged call participants to explore the online Resource Center that includes best practices, grant opportunities, research and other free resources. The site also lists the state contacts through which museums can apply for AmeriCorps or VISTA members. Finally, Nash mentioned the national conference on service, which will be held in New York City in June. The conference offers learning and networking opportunities, as well as entertainment.

After the call, Nash will make available via the ACM Web site a PowerPoint presentation that outlines the service and grant opportunities offered through the Corporation.

### III. AmeriCorps at Providence Children's Museum, Cathy Saunders

Wright introduced Cathy Saunders from Providence Children's Museum, which has hosted an AmeriCorps team for 13 years. Saunders provided some background on Providence Children's Museum. In 1997 the museum moved to a downtown location to connect with a broader audience. The AmeriCorps program allows the museum to send educators out into the community to bring increased access to community members. The museum works with Head Start, elementary schools and afterschool programs, as well as with community center programs to offer afterschool programs year-round for children ages 6-11.

Saunders discussed the **benefits** to the museum in hosting the AmeriCorps program:

- The most significant benefit is that the program gives the museum the capacity to have a presence in the community that it would not otherwise have. AmeriCorps team members work out of thirty sites that reach a total of 1,500 children each year.
- AmeriCorps team members make the best floor staff because they are full time and gain a lot of experience during their one-year term of service.
- The museum harnesses the talent that AmeriCorps members bring in, such as engaging them in developing programs or conducting exhibit research. Currently there are three alumni of the AmeriCorps program that have stayed on at the museum as permanent staff members.

Saunders mentioned some of the **challenges** of hosting the AmeriCorps team:

- The 13-member team is managed by 1.5 staff members. Saunders acknowledged that is an incredible amount of work to train team members. First they go through two to three weeks of pre-service training. Through the rest of the year, they participate in a weekly brown bag session and one-to-one supervision. She compared AmeriCorps to an apprenticeship.
- It can be challenging to find space to accommodate the team. At Providence Children's Museum, space is a premium, so they set up a designated AmeriCorps corner where team members share 3 computers. When the museum committed to having 13 members, they placed four members in a satellite program so there would be enough space to accommodate everyone.
- Both the AmeriCorps host site and the team member are penalized if a member drops out mid-year, so museum staff must work together with a team member who is having trouble or who they are having trouble with. As the supervisor, Saunders is obligated to help sort out their needs. Team members are making sacrifices in participating and expect a rich experience in return. The museum has to provide some interesting, rewarding projects, and team members need to know that they will get to these projects with time to help them to get through the grunt work that is involved. Saunders wants AmeriCorps team members to feel respected for their contributions to the museum, so she asks other museum staff to avoid calling team members "kids."
- Hosting an AmeriCorps program is supported by a federal grant, which means that there is a lot of paperwork and a lot of requirements. For each application and re-application, there is a lot of anxiety at the museum about whether the program will be funded for another year.

When considering taking on an AmeriCorps program, Saunders advises weighing the costs and benefits. The following questions are important to ask:

- Why do you want a team?
- Who will they serve?
- What will they do? (And what will they do for 35 hours a week?)
- What model of service program do you want — a service-only program, in which team members start service right away, or a service and job training program, in which you hire people from the community who may not come in with job skills?

Saunders noted that in Rhode Island, many applicant organizations do not win a fully funded program when they first apply — sometimes they first will be offered funding for a pilot. She suggested working in partnership with your state commission, which can be your ally in navigating the system.

#### **IV. AmeriCorps VISTA at Minnesota Children's Museum, Joe Olson**

Joe Olson discussed Minnesota Children's Museum's funded VISTA volunteer position (VISTA is an acronym for Volunteers in Service to America). Prior to launching into their work, the museum staff asked many questions of Cathy Saunders and the Providence Children's Museum team.

MCM has one VISTA volunteer. They are in year one of the program and, Olson admitted, year one of the learning curve. The VISTA program is focused on capacity building and helping people move out of poverty. The museum's VISTA member recruits youth from a few different low-income neighborhoods to work in the museum. The VISTA member also conducts research to make sure that the museum is serving residents of those neighborhoods. The idea is that when visitors from those neighborhoods see someone from their neighborhood working in the museum, then they feel more welcome.

Minnesota Children's Museum staff and their VISTA volunteer are adding components to staff training around youth development. The VISTA volunteer assists with customer service and engaging visitors. To demonstrate that they are preparing youth for higher education, the museum staff have added partnerships. They now have commitments from the Saint Paul school district and the Minnesota summer employment program. They also receive funding through Best Buy's @15 program for having a VISTA volunteer. Olson said that one of the benefits of having a VISTA is added credibility for your youth employment program.

In Saint Paul, organizations apply for AmeriCorps programs (including VISTA) through the city of Saint Paul. The city's goals are to improve educational programs for youth, to prepare youth for higher education and to help at-risk youth. Olson advised tailoring your program to the specific needs of your community, as well as the goals of the VISTA program.

Olson warned that it is a detailed application and approval process, but he said that the city and state were helpful and encouraging, even prior to the application process. Minnesota Children's Museum learned from these offices what would create a successful application. The application involves creating an Action Plan and a detailed list of activities that you are going to undertake to achieve your goals. Grantees must re-apply for the grant program each year (although the application paperwork is reduced after the first year) and submit quarterly reports on milestones. Olson said that you have to move quickly on the hiring process after you win a grant. He added that the Corporation for National and Community Service offers a helpful training seminar for new VISTA supervisors.

Olson mentioned the other things that are necessary for an institution taking on a VISTA volunteer:

- A detailed implementation plan
- A workstation for the VISTA member
- Support for the VISTA as for any other staff
- Total buy-in from your institution, preferably with multiple departments involved in the VISTA's work
- Strong volunteer administration leadership in place

Jay Haapala, Minnesota Children's Museum's Volunteer Services Manager, will be leading a session at InterActivity 2010 with Cathy Saunders on the topic of service. Haapala completed the VISTA application for the museum and continues to manage communication with the city. Minnesota Children's Museum hopes to apply to host another VISTA member or to participate in collaborative efforts.

## **V. Discussion, All Call Participants**

Wright invited call participants to ask questions as well as share their own experiences around volunteers, service and youth development, whether through or independent from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

**Question:** *What kind of background checks are required for AmeriCorps volunteers?*

Saunders said that AmeriCorps requires a BCI background check for each team member. Providence Children's Museum does not do the background check until they have made an offer to the candidate; often the background check is done for each participant on the first day of the program. Saunders noted that Boys and Girls Clubs of America additionally requires drug testing for their youth volunteers.

**Question:** *In our city, one of the libraries already has an AmeriCorps program. Can there be multiple AmeriCorps teams in one city, based at different community-based organizations? Or would this be a conflict of interest?*

Saunders said that in Providence there are about a dozen AmeriCorps teams. She guessed that an application that proposes to offer the same service to the same population in the same way would have less chance of receiving funding than one that offers new services or serves a new community in a way that is complementary to what other AmeriCorps teams already do in that community.

**Question:** *How closely do AmeriCorps team members reflect the community?*

Saunders said that AmeriCorps team members do not exactly reflect the minority populations of the community. Providence Children's Museum tries to recruit Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking volunteers, although they can be hard to find. More often, the museum looks at the interests of team members, such as science or culture.

**Question:** *How old are youth volunteers at Minnesota Children's Museum?*

Olson said that his museum's youth volunteers are ages 14 and up.

**Question:** *What are the topics of the brown bag lunches that Providence Children's Museum's AmeriCorps team members attend? What does the pre-service training entail?*

Saunders explained that the pre-service training provides an introduction to the museum. Team members tour the exhibits, meet staff, attend a session on early childhood learning and receive basic and intensive training. Saunders is happy to share sample materials. For each weekly brown bag meeting, the first half hour is a check-in meeting to talk about what is going on at each site. The second half is a prepared training session. The topics cover workplace readiness, such as preparing resumes and cover letters, conflict resolution, understanding poverty and diversity. They also do a series on informal education, bringing in a speaker from Reggio Emilia, having a storytelling workshop and having a session on classroom management. These weekly trainings meet the program's training requirement, which is to spend at least ten percent, and no more than 20 percent, of the team's hours on training. In Rhode Island, some of the training is offered by the state, bringing together all the state's AmeriCorps teams for training.

**Question:** *At Providence Children's Museum, do AmeriCorps team members participate in the Families Together program, in which court-separated families have facilitated visits together at the museum?*

Saunders said that AmeriCorps are not used for the Families Together program, which is facilitated by trained social workers. In the past, however, some AmeriCorps team members have done a mini-internship with the social workers running the program but do not participate more broadly in the program.

**Question:** *What are the requirements for supervision and training for AmeriCorps?*

Saunders said that the grant application details the requirements for supervision and trainings. Both the museum and the AmeriCorps members sign off on the provisions.

**Question:** *How do you see opportunities for the VISTA program to help your museum strengthen partnerships with organizations that have similar missions?*

Olson clarified that the purpose of the VISTA program is capacity building, not direct service. At Minnesota Children's Museum, their goal is to develop a youth service program aligned with St. Paul's work readiness program. Olson suggested researching other AmeriCorps programs in your area that might complement what the museum already does. For example, Minnesota Children's Museum's literacy focus sparked an idea to host an AmeriCorps literacy program.

**Question:** *How long to does it take to acquire a VISTA volunteer?*

Olson estimated that for Minnesota Children's Museum, it was about a six-month process, from the time they first talked about it through the two to three month application process. Saunders added that in Rhode Island, the state commission first reviewed the museum's application and gave them feedback before sending the application to the state level.

ACM members shared additional ideas for integrating AmeriCorps into museum staffing:

- In Olympia, Washington, school districts have placed their AmeriCorps volunteers at Hands On Children's Museum during school breaks. The volunteers helped with camp program during the school break period. They did have to leave the museum a few times to attend meetings. The relationship started because the school principal contacted the museum to offer the AmeriCorps volunteers during a school break period, and then the museum signed a mini-contract with the school to participate. Nash commented that it was great that the school saw the need for the AmeriCorps members to achieve their hours and took the opportunity to partner with the museum.
- At expERIEnce children's museum (Erie, PA), five AmeriCorps members have contacted the museum to work at the museum as a way to add to their hours.
- At ¡Explora! (Albuquerque, NM), a VISTA volunteer is the museum's volunteer coordinator.

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