

Marshfield Clinic Health System AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin

COVID-19 Response Service Award

Marshfield Clinic Health Systems AmeriCorps Volunteer Wisconsin aims to strengthen communities by increasing the capacity of nonprofit organizations to serve the public by improving how they recruit, manage, and engage volunteers. Since the program's creation in 2014, their 227 AmeriCorps members have provided 92 nonprofits with the tools they need to grow and strengthen the impact of their volunteers, with the 13,142 new volunteers they recruited giving 147,499 hours of service to their communities.

Effectively coordinating volunteers can dramatically impact the services a nonprofit organization can provide, and it became even more critical for organizations and communities following the spread of COVID-19 throughout the state. The pandemic caused a rapid shift in the service done by most of their AmeriCorps members, as many of their host site organizations paused traditional volunteer projects for an indeterminate time. With the widespread switch to remote operations during the first few months of the pandemic, many members became the tech experts at their service sites, helping them adopt new virtual platforms, and training their staff to be comfortable using the new tech. Members quickly responded by creating newsletters, sending check-in messages, and organizing virtual events so volunteers could still interact and feel connected as the new roles were forged. Building upon the knowledge they gained, they created new, impactful volunteer positions that did not require face-to-face contact but still allowed people to serve their communities. To make this possible, they developed virtual orientations and trainings. These modules were vital for their host sites during the pandemic and are continuing to be incredibly useful in training volunteers following the resumption of in-person activities.

While many Volunteer Wisconsin AmeriCorps members had to help their organizations navigate these pauses in services, others had to make it possible for their host sites to dramatically increase services in response to the pandemic. Those serving with food pantries and community centers had to help develop modified distribution processes so both clients receiving items and the nonprofit staff and volunteers were safe. Additionally, Wisconsin 211 experienced a massive increase in call volume due to an expanded need for accurate information on COVID-19 conditions, testing availability, and referrals to assistance services due to the pandemic. In response, their Volunteer Wisconsin member assumed responsibility for training and managing new cohorts of volunteers to answer calls on a newly created COVID-19 helpline, which enabled the 211 staff to focus on the increased call volume regarding their traditional assistance referrals.

Lastly, many Volunteer Wisconsin members received permission from their supervisors to engage in alternate service activities that directly responded to COVID-19 needs in their communities and throughout the state, providing over 5,000 hours of alternative COVID relief service. Several began answering calls for Wisconsin 211, joining AmeriCorps members from other programs throughout the state to operate its new COVID-19 helpline. Additionally, they held food drives for veterans, provided childcare for medical professionals, fed the homeless when volunteers were scarce, created digital and distanced recognitions for graduating high school seniors without in-person ceremonies, and found ways to help those in need in many other ways.

Despite the myriad of challenges they faced coordinating volunteers during the pandemic, Volunteer Wisconsin had long-lasting impacts for the nonprofits they assisted and the community as a whole. They not only organized volunteers to deliver critical services and assistance to people impacted by the pandemic, but they stepped up themselves to take on additional service activities to help their communities respond to growing needs across the state.

