



TC LISC AmeriCorps at work in local neighborhoods

What does the addition of 13 creative, energetic AmeriCorps workers mean to Twin Cities community developers and the neighborhoods they work in?

The difference between a community garden being created...or not; once-homeless children having access to afterschool learning and recreation...or not; families understanding what it takes to buy a home or prevent a foreclosure...or not.

Since last year, Twin Cities LISC has recruited, selected, and placed 13 AmeriCorps members with Twin Cities community development corporations (CDCs). Part of national LISC's AmeriCorps effort that began in 1994, recruitment for the Twin Cities program started in fall 2009 with 129 applicants. Those selected provide a year of service to local CDCs, helping them implement community development strategies, enhance community engagement, and create stronger, more sustainable communities in the metro area. Each CDC position requires a particular set of skills, which the members are matched to. Whenever possible, Twin Cities LISC tries to hire AmeriCorps participants from neighborhoods where it works.

Each member is paid a stipend of \$18,000 for 1,700 hours of work, attends monthly training sessions, and participates in special service projects. (The Twin Cities group spent the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday rehabbing a vacant and foreclosed house with [Urban Homeworks](#).) The first TC LISC AmeriCorps "class" will complete its year of service in August, 2010. This summer, Twin Cities LISC will begin recruiting a new class of 13 full-time and 5 quarter-time AmeriCorps members.



TC LISC AmeriCorps members, MLK holiday, 2010

Ten of the current participants work in areas where Twin Cities LISC concentrates its resources: the East Side and Central Corridor of St. Paul; the South Side and North Side of Minneapolis; and the suburb of Hopkins. The remaining three support organizations devoted to region-wide foreclosure prevention and recovery, and affordable housing.

Helping improve neighborhood quality of life

To grasp the real-life impact AmeriCorps members have on local neighborhoods—not to mention the passion they have for community work—you have to get to know a few of them.



Meet Becky Meyer, who has adopted 20-square blocks of the St. Paul's East Side as the territory for her agenda of “place-making” projects. Becky has helped the [East Side Neighborhood Development Company](#) form neighborhood resident leadership teams for several small, inexpensive projects like a fall yard clean-up for seniors and disabled residents; two clean-up and bulb planting events along a main commercial corridor; a boulevard clean-up and a rain garden plan for the Whitall Development Site; and most recently, an entirely new community garden for the East Side.

Then there's Tom Watson, who helps [Emerge Community Development](#) coordinate after-school programming on the South Side of Minneapolis for children who were once homeless or who have a family member with a disability. One of his secrets to success is the creative way he's developed partnerships with other non-profits and institutions. For example, Tom organized speakers from the nearby Fremont Community Health Clinic to come in and discuss sexual health issues with teens. He also brought in students from Bethel University to perform skits that focused on academic achievement and cultural awareness, followed by a social hour where kids could ask questions about college life.



And finally, there's Ariele Strachan, who has helped lead the community engagement effort for the “Backyard Initiative” in South Minneapolis. As part of the [Cultural Wellness Center](#), she's conducted person-to-person outreach, recruited attendees for community meetings, organized focus groups and more intimate “Listening Circles” to gather resident perspectives, and helped train South Side residents to conduct research that helps assess the health and health care needs of community members. Over the next few months, these perspectives will shape a neighborhood action plan.

The other Twin Cities LISC AmeriCorps members have been just as effective, each helping meet the unique needs of both the CDC and the neighborhood they work in. Their range of activities is a great illustration of comprehensive community development, which aims at a better quality of life for neighborhood residents. That includes not only homes and jobs, but opportunities to build wealth, get a quality education, and live healthy lifestyles in healthy environments.

CDC supervisors typically heap praise on their AmeriCorps members, using adjectives like exceptional, outstanding, diligent, empathetic, and selfless. Steve Cramer, executive director of Project for Pride in Living (PPL), one of the TC LISC AmeriCorps host organizations, says: “PPL now has 25 staff members drawn from various national service initiatives like AmeriCorps working across the agency. These energetic and committed, mostly young people tutor children to improve their academic standing, connect residents to essential resources, work to improve housing conditions in inner-city neighborhoods, help people learn to use technology to enhance their employment and education, and on and on. PPL's activities are so greatly magnified by these individuals it's hard to imagine what we would do without them!”

Funding for the TC LISC AmeriCorps program comes from the Corporation for National and Community Service (AmeriCorps), Twin Cities LISC, and local CDCs. National LISC just received a \$2.2 million grant to continue this program across the country, including the Twin Cities. (Here's a short [video](#) about this program.) The majority of Twin Cities LISC's funding for this program was from the Knight Foundation. In addition, the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation supports AmeriCorps work in North Minneapolis and the Family Housing Fund supports members working on foreclosure recovery.

Twin Cities LISC AmeriCorps members, 2009-2010

James Bacigalupo, [PRG](#) (region-wide)
Provides foreclosure prevention counseling

Rose Carr, [City of Lakes Community Land Trust](#) (region-wide)
Coordinates the purchase and rehabilitation of land trust homes

Ronald McCain, [Urban Homeworks](#) (North Side, Minneapolis)
Rehabilitating foreclosed and vacant houses

Becky Meyer, [East Side Neighborhood Development Corporation](#) (East Side, St. Paul)
Focuses on "place-making" neighborhood improvement projects in a 20-block area

Ian Plitnick, [Greater Frogtown Community Development Corporation](#) (Central Corridor, St. Paul)
Providing project management assistance for rehabilitation of foreclosed and vacant homes

John Reynolds, [Minnesota Home Ownership Center](#) (region-wide)
Supports consumer and community outreach; develops information tools; and provides training and support to home ownership counseling agencies

Ariele Strachan, [Cultural Wellness Center](#) (South Side, Minneapolis)
Carrying out community engagement and research projects to help plan for the improved health and health care of area residents

Jacqueline Taylor, [Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services](#) (East Side, St. Paul)
Works to implement programs to reduce vacancies and improve housing quality in neighborhoods significantly impacted by the mortgage foreclosure crisis

Eric Thiewes, [Project for Pride in Living](#) (South Side and North Side, Minneapolis)
Providing project management assistance for rehabilitation of foreclosed and vacant homes and providing outreach to increase the number of Section 3 certified businesses

Tom Watson, [Emerge Community Development](#) (South Side and North Side, Minneapolis)
Assists with after-school programming for children from families who were homeless or have members with a disability; coordinates the work of the comprehensive community development group Emerge is co-convening

Tia Williams, [Hope Community](#) (South Side, Minneapolis)
Helping organize resident engagement activities and train new resident leaders.

Devolia Wilson, [Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation](#) (East Side, St. Paul)
Coordinates MCASA homeownership and credit counseling workshops for families with low incomes

Sydney Wolf, [Intercongregation Communities Association](#) (Hopkins)
Recruits volunteers and coordinates special projects and events for the Blake Road Collaborative