

# Public Safety and National Service

How Volunteers Can Help Make a Safer America

*Written by*

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# How Volunteers Can Help Make a Safer America

## Volunteering in a New Era

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, there has been an upsurge in interest in volunteerism in the United States. Thousands of Americans are eager to pitch in to protect their communities. Local government agencies and community-based organizations are eager to receive the help. And the federal government is actively encouraging the deployment of volunteers.

President George W. Bush has called upon Americans to perform the equivalent of two years—4,000 hours—of volunteer service over the course of their lifetimes. To facilitate this ambitious goal, the Bush administration has expanded the government's national service programming, enlarging programs like AmeriCorps, Senior Corps and Peace Corps, and creating new initiatives such as the Citizens' Corps and the USA Freedom Corps, a coordinating council designed to oversee national service programming.

Harvard University's Robert Putnam said the expansion of national service programs is coming at the right time. "The administration is right to see that the tragedy of 9/11 is also a quite historic opportunity to try to increase civic engagement and an ethic of service," said Putnam, author of the book *Bowling Alone*, which discusses the decline of community cohesion in America. "It's the kind of opportunity that comes along once or twice a century."<sup>1</sup>

While all forms of volunteerism are encouraged in the wake of 9/11, public safety has been a particular focus. Leslie Lenkowsky, chief executive officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service, made this point when he told the National Press Club in 2002:

To prevent what we can prevent, and to prepare ourselves for what we cannot, will take a concerted effort that involves not just our intelligence and security agencies and our trained "first responders," whose efforts were critical in helping New York deal with the terrorist attacks, but also an unprecedented level of commitment by everyday people—by volunteers—to support those first responders and ensure that homes and families, schools and places of business, houses of worship and other public spaces are prepared to face any crisis.<sup>2</sup>

In pursuit of this goal, the Office of Homeland Security in the summer of 2002 awarded \$10.3 million in competitive grants to 43 non-profit and public organizations to fund the work of 37,000 AmeriCorps and Senior Corps volunteers. These programs are breaking new ground and engaging volunteers in a host of new activities aimed at community safety and defense.

Along the way, they are posing a number of important questions: How can volunteers enhance the work of criminal justice agencies? Anyone who has ever worked with volunteers knows that even the most capable require a tremendous amount of training and supervision before they are ready to make a significant contribution. How can criminal justice agencies—courts, prosecutors, police precincts, probation officials and others—manage volunteers in a way that strengthens rather than saps existing resources? Can volunteers perform meaningful public safety work or will they be forced to occupy make-work jobs? How do you protect the safety of volunteers while asking them to work alongside police and prosecutors in high-crime areas? And, perhaps most important, is it possible for volunteers to achieve tangible, measurable outcomes—reducing local crime, aiding victims and ameliorating conditions of disorder?

This white paper attempts to answer these and other questions about service and safety. It is based in large measure on the experience of three AmeriCorps programs created prior to 9/11 in New York, Connecticut and Florida.<sup>3</sup> The paper highlights important lessons that have been learned about, among other things, successful strategies for addressing public safety issues, managing volunteers to derive the maximum benefit from their work, ways to integrate volunteers into a law-enforcement environment and ways to assess a community's needs and garner new ideas for effective programming. It also tells the story of how AmeriCorps members have made a difference in the lives of communities: Brooklyn, New York, Bridgeport, Connecticut and Pinellas County, Florida. In doing so, this paper is intended as a primer for anyone interested in planning, operating or working with volunteers on issues of public safety.

## What Can Volunteers Do?

What value is there in volunteer service? It may seem obvious why volunteers are useful to traditional charities; after all, soup kitchens, children's hospitals and the like can always use a helping hand. But it may be harder to see the value of a volunteer in an organization like a police department or a prosecutor's office, where the bulk of the work is carried out by trained (and sometimes armed) professionals. While volunteers (for the sake of their own safety) cannot be given weapons or asked to face the dangers inherent in front-line law enforcement, they can nonetheless help criminal justice practitioners pursue their goals in a number of concrete ways:

**Freeing up scarce resources: volunteers can free up police officers, prosecutors and court staff to focus on pressing duties.** Volunteers can provide support to public servants who are often overworked and burdened with time-consuming administrative responsibilities. Volunteers can prepare reports, answer calls and provide basic

assistance to the public, enabling police officers, prosecutors and other front-line workers to spend more time visiting victims, investigating cases and interviewing or monitoring defendants.

One of the simplest ways that volunteers can help a police department, for example, is by performing background work that frees up officers for more hands-on crime fighting. In Brooklyn, New York, AmeriCorps members work in the domestic violence units at three precinct station houses, processing complaints, inputting domestic incidence reports, answering and logging phone calls from victims and providing referrals for other services. With the members' help, domestic violence officers have increased their time visiting victims and investigating cases.

Volunteers can also perform tasks in the community that police officers have done in the past but that don't necessarily require the expertise of an armed professional. In Pinellas County, Florida, for example, AmeriCorps volunteers set up roadside equipment to measure the speeds of passing cars, a task that can take two officers more than three hours to complete. "It may seem like small things that we're doing," said AmeriCorps member Nathan Burnside, "but when you add them up, we're providing so much more time for the officers to go out and do police work."

**Addressing disorder: volunteers can address conditions of disorder that, if left unchecked, create a climate where crime can flourish.** There is a generation of research that documents the importance of painting over graffiti, fixing broken windows and cleaning up vacant lots and dirty parks. Unfortunately, these activities are time-consuming tasks that require constant vigilance. It's not enough to do a single park clean-up—you've got to go back over and over again to ensure that the conditions do not deteriorate. Most public agencies simply do not have the manpower to perform this work on an on-going basis.

Volunteers, however, can sustain such initiatives. In Pinellas County, for instance, volunteers regularly patrol local parks, identifying equipment in need of maintenance, picking up trash and keeping an eye out for gang or other crime-related activity. In Brooklyn, AmeriCorps volunteers work with the public housing agency and tenant associations to patrol the grounds of public housing, inspecting and repairing elevator and hallway lights (often knocked out by drug dealers) and rooftop access doors (broken by addicts searching for remote locations to use drugs).

**Providing manpower for new initiatives: volunteers make it possible to launch new programs or focus on areas that had previously received less attention, like crime prevention or disaster preparedness.** Volunteers allow public-safety officials to focus on areas that are important but, given the crush of everyday business, are a low priority. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, for example, community leaders felt that not enough was being done to prevent young people from getting involved with drugs. "We realized that if we were going to make an impact on the drug problem, we needed to intervene before people started using them," said Joyce Pratt, director of the Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership. AmeriCorps members went into

schools to serve as tutors and mentors to at-risk children, and set up new crime-prevention initiatives—like Safe Home, which installs locks, fire alarms and other safety features in homes in high-crime neighborhoods. “By relying on volunteers, we were carrying the message that public safety is a community function,” said Thomas J. Sweeney, the former chief of police in Bridgeport. “We were also in desperate need of help. And it’s a lot easier to accept the help when you have little to begin with.”

**Responding to emergencies: volunteers can provide critical support during a crisis or disaster.**

The value of volunteers is particularly apparent when disaster strikes. Consider, for example, what happened in Ocala County, Florida in 1998, when a devastating hurricane killed 52 people and destroyed an entire community. Private companies estimated that debris removal would cost about \$8 million and take 90 days, according to Alex Amparo, director of emergency management for Volunteer Florida, the state commission that oversees community service initiatives. But the county had another resource: about 2,000 volunteers who spontaneously rushed to the scene of the disaster. “The county was able to utilize all these people coming in, most of whom were not affiliated with any organization. They were simply individuals who wanted to help,” Amparo said. “The volunteers went on to people’s properties, pulled out tree limbs and helped the community get back on its feet more quickly. . . . In the end, they were able to reduce the cost of the clean-up to \$1.4 million and complete it in 55 days.”

Florida now uses volunteers to build its long-term infrastructure to deal with hurricanes. The state offers training to AmeriCorps volunteers in emergency shelter management, giving participants the skills they need to set up and manage a shelter and to cope with a disaster before the arrival of first responders. “When we evacuated people for Hurricane Floyd, there was a severe shelter deficit. We had enough shelters, but not enough people to run them,” Amparo said. “We recognized that we had a pretty good distribution of AmeriCorps programs in our state, so we decided to offer everyone an optional training. Last year, 450 volunteers received the training. That’s building local capacity because they stay certified as emergency shelter managers long after they leave AmeriCorps.”

Volunteers in New York City also provided needed assistance in the aftermath of 9/11. After the terrorist attacks, AmeriCorps members in three Brooklyn precincts virtually ran the domestic violence units, enabling continuity in services while the police officers responded to emergency duties out in the field. The domestic violence officers met with the members for weekly updates but otherwise left operations to the AmeriCorps members and spent their time on emergency details. Members also helped organize a food drive for emergency workers at Ground Zero and performed outreach to let the community know about free crisis counseling.

**Bridging the gap: volunteers can build working partnerships between criminal justice agencies and neighborhood residents.** Volunteer programs can strengthen the bond between citizens and criminal justice agencies that depend on community

involvement. This is not some abstract achievement, but a goal with meaningful consequences—after all, criminal justice agencies depend on citizens to serve as witnesses, jurors and general allies in the effort to keep neighborhoods safe.

In Brooklyn, AmeriCorps members work alongside prosecutors and police officers—people who, in other settings, have been objects of fear and mistrust. Sharon L. Lloyd, a former AmeriCorps member in Brooklyn, said she gained a better understanding of the pressures police face when she worked with them in a Brooklyn station house. “It was a great experience because I got to see their side,” Lloyd said.

The AmeriCorps program in Brooklyn has also created a number of more informal opportunities for criminal justice players to have positive interactions with local residents—everything from softball games to Martin Luther King Day celebrations to marches against violence. In all of these ways, volunteer programs can serve as a link between the criminal justice system and neighborhoods, putting a human face on justice. According to former Brooklyn assistant district attorney Raul Sanchez, “Working with local residents in these ways isn’t an exercise in feel-good justice. It makes a you a better prosecutor. It gives you better contacts in the community and it helps you figure out what’s really going on.”

**Promoting civic engagement: a volunteer program can promote an ethic of service while giving participants valuable skills and work experience that can lead to gainful employment.** Volunteer programs, by providing participants with job skills, can improve a community’s well-being. This is especially significant when volunteers are drawn from low-income neighborhoods where the rate of unemployment is high.

In Brooklyn, many participants in the AmeriCorps program had never before held a steady job, and some had never received a high school diploma. Through the program, participants receive high school equivalency diplomas and acquire job experience. Many go on to find jobs while others go to college. A survey of program participants, in fact, found that 75 percent of respondents were either employed or in school—a significant number given that many members were receiving public assistance before joining AmeriCorps.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, AmeriCorps members in Brooklyn often go on to leadership positions in the community—participating in local organizations, like the PTA, tenants association, civic association and Lions Club. In this way, the AmeriCorps program is helping strengthen the community by providing its residents with new skills and new opportunities. The criminal justice system has also benefited directly: following their terms of service, many AmeriCorps members find jobs with the court system, police department, district attorney’s office and victim services agencies.

**Measuring results: volunteers can help criminal justice agencies assess the impact of new initiatives on the public’s perceptions of safety.** How the public perceives a new criminal justice initiative is difficult to measure—but nonetheless important. It’s especially important if a program’s sponsor is trying to obtain or sustain funding. It’s also important to help answer the question: Is the initiative working?

Volunteers can help measure public opinion by conducting surveys, a task that employees of the criminal justice system simply don't have time to carry out on their own. In St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, the Frogtown Weed and Seed initiative has used community volunteers to assess public views about safety (how safe do you feel alone in the neighborhood during the day? at night?), victimization (have you or a member of your family been the victim of a robbery? break-in? or attack?) and police visibility (over the past month, have you seen a police officer in a car in your neighborhood? walking through the neighborhood? or engaged in a friendly conversation with a neighborhood resident?)<sup>5</sup> In Brooklyn, AmeriCorps volunteers conduct an annual community survey, which found, among other things, that local residents feel 20 percent safer than they did two years ago.<sup>6</sup>

**Making justice visible: volunteers can be a visible presence in the community, communicating that someone who cares—and who can help—is always nearby.**

Volunteers extend the visibility of criminal justice practitioners. By working in the schools, in local parks, in community centers and other places where neighborhood residents gather, volunteers send the message that the criminal justice system cares about the health and safety of the community.

In Brooklyn, for example, AmeriCorps members wear their uniforms—a bright red shirt emblazoned with the name of the program and the AmeriCorps logo—at all times, reminding neighborhood residents that a safe presence is never far away. Hundreds of current and former volunteers live in the community, bringing the message of public safety home with them.

**Volunteers in Action**

The three programs described in the following pages give a sense of how AmeriCorps participants have realized these goals in the field. These programs were launched shortly after the creation of AmeriCorps in 1994 and have had many years to refine their approaches. Collectively, they demonstrate how volunteers can be used in a wide variety of communities and settings—from the inner city to middle-class neighborhoods, from police precincts to juvenile rehabilitation facilities. They also offer insight into the best ways to train and supervise volunteers, as well as work with volunteers from varied backgrounds.

**Brooklyn, New York: Red Hook Public Safety Corps**

Red Hook was once a thriving waterfront community, but by the early 1990s it was one of New York City's most dangerous and notorious neighborhoods. Economic decline, the ravages of crack and the vagaries of history had left Red Hook isolated from the larger Brooklyn community. Its 11,000 residents lived in fear of the drug dealers on the streets and had little hope that things could change.

As is often the case, it took a tragic event to set the wheels of change in motion. In 1992, Patrick Daly, an elementary school principal, was killed when caught in the crossfire of feuding local drug dealers. His death helped focus the attention of local public officials on the neighborhood and inspired a plan to take a new approach to crime and other public safety problems. Red Hook became the focal point of the dis-

tract attorney's "community prosecution" program. It also became the home of the Red Hook Community Justice Center, a community court that handles cases involving low-level crime, housing disputes and family issues in a single courtroom. The idea of the Justice Center was to create a hands-on courthouse, one that would be actively involved in working with the community to address neighborhood problems, including drugs, low-level crime and disorder. Spearheading the project were Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes and the chief judge of the New York State Unified Court System, Judith S. Kaye.

The Justice Center took years to plan and implement, but project organizers didn't wait for the courthouse itself to begin operations. Their first project was, in fact, the Red Hook Public Safety Corps, which used the newly created federal AmeriCorps program to start addressing the many crime and safety problems that had plagued the community for decades.<sup>7</sup> District Attorney Hynes said the Public Safety Corps serves as "a very positive link to the community," showing residents that the D.A.'s and the court system's interest in the community "is not baloney."

The Public Safety Corps has been in existence since 1994 and is supervised jointly by the Justice Center and the District Attorney's Office. Every year it recruits 50 members from Red Hook and surrounding neighborhoods to perform 1,700 hours each of service over the course of one year. The average age of participants is in the mid-30s, and many are looking for a chance to acquire skills and education to improve their lives.

Members are assigned, among other places, to:

- the District Attorney's Office, where they coordinate regular graffiti-removal projects and participate in tenant patrols of the local housing project;
- the court itself, where they staff a childcare drop-off center and escort defendants from the courthouse to drug-treatment programs;
- domestic violence units of several police precincts, where they perform administrative tasks, make follow-up phone calls to complainants and escort victims to court; and
- public schools, where they serve as tutors, teach conflict-resolution skills to students and help implement peer mediation programs.

## Visibility

One of the first tasks the Safety Corps engages in each year is a community-wide survey designed to help gather comprehensive information about the neighborhood—information that is used to identify community needs, plan public safety projects and assess the programs' impacts on the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> "It's incredible how much we get from the survey," said Gerianne Abriano, the assistant district attorney in charge of the D.A.'s Red Hook bureau. "It tells us what people care about, and what they think about the D.A.'s Office, the courthouse, the police. It's like getting a report card that we can use to measure our progress."

The questionnaire, which poses 170 questions about local crime priorities and concerns, has the additional advantage of raising awareness about the Public Safety Corps and the role it plays in the community. Volunteers, who wear bright red shirts emblazoned with the Safety Corps logo, fan out across the neighborhood, serving as a visible reminder that efforts are underway by criminal justice agencies to address local problems.

“Before becoming involved with the Corps myself, I remember seeing Corps members each year walking all over the neighborhood with clipboards,” said Shona Bowers, a life-long resident of Red Hook who now runs the Corps. “I’d think, ‘Look, they’re back for that survey.’ It felt good to see them coming back to ask us what we, as residents, wanted for our community.”<sup>9</sup>

“No one should discount presence,” Hynes, the district attorney, said. When Hynes was New York City’s fire marshal in the 1970s, he launched a program called Red Cap that sent more than 30 deputy fire marshals into a single neighborhood wearing red baseball caps. Hynes found “the biggest van I could. It was white with ‘Arson Strike Force’ in red letters and the phone number.” In addition to reducing the incidence of arson fires, the presence of the deputy fire marshals had the salutary—and unexpected—effect of reducing crime. In other words, Hynes said, the marshals themselves didn’t have to fight crime, they merely had to be visible in the community. The same principle, Hynes said, applies to the Public Safety Corps.

## **Expanding Police Capacity**

In police precincts, AmeriCorps members assist the staff of the domestic violence units. In addition to answering phones and helping fill out complaint forms, the volunteers escort victims to court and make follow-up calls to their homes. “For every report we get, we do a home visit and a follow up phone call,” said Police Officer Carol Fields, who works in the Domestic Violence Unit at Brooklyn’s 76<sup>th</sup> Precinct. “The police officer will do the home visit, while the volunteer makes the call to see if the victim needs additional assistance.”

Precinct commanders report that a single volunteer gives officers about 2 to 4 more hours a week to do their work. This extra time is a valuable resource given that the budgets of all city agencies have been cut to the bone. “The Police Department is very understaffed. Nobody is wearing one hat anymore,” said Police Officer Paul Grudzinski of Brooklyn’s 76<sup>th</sup> Precinct.

Even more importantly, the volunteers serve as a back-up when an emergency takes officers out of the office. On and after September 11, 2001, for example, when officers were pulled from regular duty as a result of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the AmeriCorps volunteers kept the domestic violence units running. “It was really handy having a volunteer in the office after 9/11,” Officer Fields said. “Even now [almost a year after the attacks], it is definitely very useful having a volunteer here all the time because I feel more free to go out on home visits.”

Volunteers also work closely with prosecutors at the Red Hook Community Justice Center. One important way they assist prosecutors is by escorting defendants to drug treatment facilities. By providing a door-to-door escort, volunteers reduce the

likelihood that drug-addicted defendants—ordered by the court to participate in treatment—will abscond. It provides prosecutors and judges with an added measure of security, enhancing their confidence that defendants will comply with court orders.

In addition, Safety Corps members—under the supervision of prosecutors and Justice Center staff—are trained to serve as mediators. Every week, line officers and assistant district attorneys are confronted with complaints that don't lend themselves to criminal prosecution: two neighbors arguing over a parking space, a group of rowdy teenagers disturbing the peace of local homeowners, etcetera. How can criminal justice agencies respond meaningfully to these kinds of disputes? In Red Hook, mediation provides one possible answer, allowing police and prosecutors to refer disputants to neutral third parties who can help resolve conflicts without resorting to the courts.

AmeriCorps members in Red Hook focus a great deal of their effort on the local public housing development. They perform safety inspections with staff from the local housing authority, checking to make sure that doors have locks and that broken lights and windows are replaced. AmeriCorps members also participate in tenant patrols alongside local residents. Their visibility on the grounds of the housing project gives residents a greater sense of security and the knowledge that people care about their quality of life.

## Measuring Impact

Over seven years, Safety Corps members have, among other things, conducted thousands of safety inspections, educated hundreds of residents about domestic violence and have recruited thousands of community residents to participate in park clean-ups and other service projects. Just as significantly, the Public Safety Corps has helped change attitudes about crime, public safety and the criminal justice system. According to the Safety Corps' annual community survey, local residents feel 20 percent safer than they did two years ago.

While these kinds of results—generating local volunteerism and reducing levels of fear—were among the intended outcomes of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps, organizers take special pride in some of the program's unexpected impacts. For example, on their own initiative, several Corps members launched a successful youth baseball league, offering recreational activities for 200 boys and girls every summer. More than simply provide young people with something to do, the league has proven an effective community organizing tool by galvanizing the interest and participation of police, prosecutors, businesses and government agencies. Each of the league's 12 teams is sponsored by a different organization or agency (District Attorney Charles J. Hynes, for instance, sponsors "Hynes' Heroes"), and the young league participants are required to participate in volunteer activities, like park clean-ups and graffiti-removal projects that often take place before or after games.

The baseball league highlights one of the most important results of the Public Safety Corps' work—the building of bridges between law enforcement personnel and the citizens they're sworn to serve. "When I got to work in the precinct it was great because I got to see the police side of things," said Sharon L. Lloyd, a former volun-

teer who now works full-time in a precinct as a case manager for domestic violence. “AmeriCorps members quickly began to feel comfortable with prosecutors and police officers,” said Raul Sanchez, a former assistant district attorney who worked in Red Hook under Hynes. “Over the long run, they began to see us as part of the community, as allies. That kind of attitude change was invaluable, and it meant we could do a more effective job.”

In fact, many volunteers have gone on to obtain jobs with the police, the prosecutor’s office and the Justice Center. “Because we have over 200 former members spread out throughout the community, our degree of separation to everyone in this community is one,” said James Brodick, director of operations at the Red Hook Community Justice Center.

**Bridgeport,  
Connecticut: Safe  
Neighborhoods  
AmeriCorps  
Partnership**

Like Red Hook, Bridgeport in the early 1990s was a place that had seen better days. Once a major manufacturing town, the city had suffered a major economic decline. Unemployment was high. The housing stock, which included hundreds of abandoned properties, was crumbling. And crime was exploding. “From about 1988 to 1991, we had a 200 percent increase in auto theft, and a tripling of homicides and robberies. Bridgeport was dubbed the murder capital of New England,” said Thomas J. Sweeney, who signed on as chief of police in 1990. “When I got there, I couldn’t believe what I saw on the street. There were lots filled with garbage, roaming packs of kids. The only people on the streets at night were the police in their patrol cars and all the guys on the corner with their hoodies, sitting around selling drugs.”

Sweeney realized that the police department would not be able to solve these problems on its own. “We’re not going to turn around a city of 140,000 people without the public helping us,” Sweeney said. With only 338 officers on the force—down from a mid-1980s high of more than 400—Sweeney was open to all potential collaborations. “Anybody who was willing to join us was a partner,” he said. When the Corporation for National and Community Service began soliciting applications for AmeriCorps grants, Sweeney and other Bridgeport officials jumped at the opportunity.

Sweeney worked with the Regional Youth/Adult Substance Abuse Project, known locally by its acronym RYASAP, a partnership of community organizations formed in 1985 to address issues relating to substance abuse. The RYASAP board consists of representatives of community organizations, elected officials, police officials, school leaders, members of the faith community and local residents. In 1994, RYASAP launched the Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership with 22 members working on a four-month summer assignment. Over the years, RYASAP has embraced longer assignments, finding that four months isn’t enough time to make a meaningful contribution. “It was hard in just four months to train members, instill in them the ethics of AmeriCorps and get them really committed to the work,” said Joyce Pratt, director of the Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership. “For most of them, it was just a summer job.” Today, RYASAP supervises 17 volunteers who serve 12 months, 34 volunteers who serve six months, and four volunteers who serve four months.

## Safe Home Initiative

Some of the work performed by the Safe Neighborhoods volunteers has its roots in Sweeney's interest in tackling quality-of-life crime. "While the newspaper was talking about violence, most people were being affected by the other things, like car theft, trash in empty lots," Sweeney said. "The Police Department took a large role in cleaning up lots and boarding up empty houses. We also advocated for safety measures."

As a natural extension of this work, the Police Department deployed AmeriCorps members in a door-to-door effort to educate homeowners about crime prevention, assess homeowners' safety needs and install equipment, like new locks, peep holes and fire alarms. The project, which came to be known as Safe Home, today sends 10 members into about 500 homes a year to do free security assessments and equipment installations in high-risk neighborhoods.

Early on, Bridgeport officials recognized that making homes safer was only part of what needed to be done to deal with rampant crime. "We realized we could put all the deadbolt locks in that we wanted to, but if we didn't work with the people committing the crimes, we were simply throwing away our money," Pratt said. In an effort to bolster crime prevention efforts, RYASAP selected community organizations as host sites where volunteers serve as mentors and tutors to children, teaching them about public safety, positive decision-making and conflict resolution.

Volunteers have also helped neighborhood organizations develop "asset maps," which are guides to the resources—institutions, organizations and individuals—in their communities. "If you're going to work from people's strengths, you have to find out what those strengths are first," said Robert Francis, executive director of RYASAP. AmeriCorps volunteers combed three Bridgeport neighborhoods, identifying resources that could be used to address neighborhood problems. In just one example of how useful an asset map can be, Francis related the story of a local school that had lost its art program: "Community members did an asset map of the art-related resources in their area by going door-to-door and finding out who in the community was an artist. They found 110 artists in the neighborhood and found many willing volunteers who helped them reinvigorate the arts program, which is now one of the best art programs in the city."

The Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership has also used asset maps to assist in clean-up initiatives. In the Bridgeport neighborhood known as the Hollow, AmeriCorps volunteers organized community residents—including electricians, carpenters and painters, who donated their time—to help deal with abandoned and burnt-out houses as well as garbage-strewn empty lots. But it's not just the information gathered in the mapping process that's important, Francis said. "It's also about the relationships that are formed between people and their community. It's a much more dynamic process than most community research," he said.

## Satisfied Customers

The city of Bridgeport waged a successful battle against crime in the 1990s. From 1991 to 1998, there was a 50 percent reduction in offenses.<sup>10</sup> The question naturally arises: How much did the Safe Neighborhoods Partnership have to do with these changes? As is often the case in the world of criminal justice research, establishing a

direct correlation between a drop in crime and a particular program is nearly impossible—in large part because so many potential factors come into play.

Nonetheless, evaluators credit the Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership with having a genuine impact on efforts to improve public safety. The Safe Home project has been the subject of two independent evaluations, both of which have identified positive outcomes. Most significantly, a 1998 evaluation found that over the course of two years, only one residence in the Safe Home program had been the subject of a crime—an attempted burglary. The evaluation concluded that there was “a clear link between the intervention . . . and the outcomes, i.e., reduction in crime for the targeted neighborhoods.”<sup>11</sup>

Both evaluations have also recorded high rates of satisfaction among Safe Home clients—as high as 96 percent, according to one of the surveys.<sup>12</sup> Evaluators also found that the investment in the Safe Neighborhoods AmeriCorps Partnership was cost effective, concluding that the dollar savings from reduced crime and a measurable decline in the high school drop-out rate far exceeded the cost of the Safe Neighborhoods initiative.<sup>13</sup>

**Pinellas County,  
Florida: AmeriCorps  
Pinellas**

AmeriCorps Pinellas grew out of a collaboration between St. Petersburg College and police officials from Pinellas County, Clearwater and St. Petersburg. All three police agencies saw in AmeriCorps a chance to “engage community residents in their own safety,” said Lawrence Moose, director of AmeriCorps Pinellas. At the same time, the college saw in the program an opportunity to give their criminal justice students a chance to get real-life experience.

“AmeriCorps was just perfect for us when we started to think about programs to improve neighborhoods, crime prevention and safety for kids,” said Rick Stelljes, who oversees volunteer programming for the St. Petersburg Police Department. “The volunteers have allowed us to continue to look at other innovative ways to do our work and freed up time for our officers to do other things.”

The 23 participants are divided into three teams, one team assigned to each of the police agencies. Collectively, the members pursue clearly stated objectives. This year, those objectives include: identifying at least 300 code violations—such as illegal signs on the right-of-way (where they impede drivers’ views) and violations of watering restrictions—in targeted neighborhoods; providing crime prevention workshops to at least 400 residents; tutoring and mentoring 170 at-risk children; and teaching life-skills (such as a workshop on budgeting and money management) to adult inmates of the Pinellas County Jail.<sup>14</sup>

Additional objectives focus on member development such as giving members the chance to receive hands-on mentoring from police officers. This last objective is especially important to participants since most of them are studying criminal justice in college and many plan to pursue careers as police officers themselves. “Most of our members just can’t spend enough time with police officers,” Moose said. And the police officers reciprocate the interest, according to Moose. In fact, police officers are so enthusiastic about working with volunteers that program organizers don’t have

to search for mentors; officers offer their services as mentors voluntarily. “Any member who desires a mentor has no trouble finding one,” Moose said. “It helps that some of the police officers are former AmeriCorps members themselves.”

Volunteers are actually so enthusiastic about their work in AmeriCorps Pinellas that it can sometimes lead to problems. Some members, for instance, are chomping at the bit to take on responsibilities reserved only for officers. “We have to remind them that they’re not law enforcement officers... Some are so anxious to be officers, that we continually have to make clear that there are lines they can’t cross,” Moose said.

Because members are working so closely with police officers, the various police agencies require rigorous background checks. Each agency applies its own methods to the volunteers assigned to it. The St. Petersburg Police Department’s screening is probably the most rigorous, requiring all volunteers to take a polygraph test. “I would say that without the greater background screening, we would have an easier time filling member positions, but you need the screenings if you’re going to work in law enforcement,” Moose said. “Perhaps some of the members we don’t take could have been in other AmeriCorps programs. But the good part is that we know the members we do take are trustworthy.”

### **Doing More with Less**

The members have allowed the police agencies to enhance their connection with the community. For instance, through the use of volunteers—who work with students as mentors and tutors and set up crime-control teams to patrol school grounds—the police now have a daily presence in local schools.

Members have also allowed law enforcement agencies to do more with less. In Clearwater, for example, the availability of the volunteer workforce allowed the police department to institute patrols of parks and other public spaces. AmeriCorps members drive in police department vehicles (not official patrol cars) in teams of two, checking for safety hazards or suspicious activity and locking park gates at closing time. If there’s a problem, they contact the department via a police radio. Members are also on call for special assignments, like assisting officers at DUI checkpoints, conducting bicycle-safety workshops for children and surveying driver compliance with seatbelt laws.

The Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office uses AmeriCorps members to target recidivism by having participants tutor juvenile and adult offenders. In boot camp, AmeriCorps members tutor offenders aged 14 to 18 who have been sentenced to the 30-bed facility for terms of 120 days or more. They also tutor adult inmates in the county jail. Captain Richard Jalazo, who supervises the boot camp and AmeriCorps volunteers, noted that only certain volunteers are suited to this kind of work. “It’s a confining type of situation. If they don’t like doors or gates slamming behind them, it won’t work,” Jalazo said.

The Sheriff’s Office has also responded to President Bush’s call to tighten homeland security by deploying volunteers in the St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport, where they help sheriff’s deputies use new face-recognition technology to identify travelers

with outstanding warrants. AmeriCorps members assist with positioning passengers correctly so the computer can scan their faces. They also assist with general patrols of the airport facility under the direction of deputies.

For volunteer Burnside, who wants to become a police officer, the best thing about being an AmeriCorps member is the “on the job training.” He said the police officers “provide so much help to you. It’s almost like they’re bending over backwards to help you.” He also said the experience has made him more community-minded. “I wasn’t very community oriented when I first started the program. Now, I’ve actually gone out and started a couple of cleanups on my own, working with the Rotary Club in my neighborhood,” Burnside said.

### **Eight Lessons for a Successful Program**

Criminal justice agencies interested in using volunteers to address public safety issues do not have to start from scratch. As the initiatives described in this paper demonstrate, much has already been learned. Of course, this is not to say that creating a successful volunteer program is easy. Managing participants, working with a range of partner agencies, partnering with the larger community—all these activities require time, energy and creativity. “There’s a lot to juggle. You need to determine the best role for the volunteers. You have to build partnerships with the police and prosecutors. You have to train the volunteers. It’s hard work, but there are plenty of rewards,” said James Brodick of the Red Hook Community Justice Center.

What follows is a summary of some key lessons:

#### **Recruit a large number of applicants to obtain a small number of good volunteers.**

To find the best volunteers, it helps to have a large applicant pool from which to draw. In Red Hook, for instance, the Public Safety Corps tries to get 250 to 300 applicants a year for its 50 slots. The fact is that service programs like AmeriCorps aren’t for everyone, and recruiters need to find applicants who can fulfill a program’s often demanding requirements. “If you don’t have a lot of people to choose from, you’re setting yourself up for failure,” Brodick said.

**Develop member-screening criteria appropriate to your program.** Public safety programs need to pay special attention to criteria for membership. Some programs, like those in Red Hook and Bridgeport, which try to achieve public safety goals by providing members with new life skills, are willing to accept volunteers with limited work or educational experience. In Florida, by contrast, AmeriCorps Pinellas accepts only those with high school degrees and performs rigorous background checks, including polygraph tests for those working in the St. Petersburg Police Department. “The first question [an officer will ask about a volunteer] will be ‘Can I trust these folks?’” said Rick Stelljes, of the St. Petersburg Police Department, explaining why his agency requires a polygraph test. “We screen them carefully so the officers can say, ‘At least the administration is making sure we don’t have bad folks coming into our agency.’”

**When recruiting volunteers with little work experience, member development must be a top priority.** Programs have found that they need to invest significant time and resources in up-front member training in order to have positive outcomes. In Pinellas County, much of the training and preparation takes place elsewhere, since most of the participants are studying criminal justice in college and many are enrolled in the evening police academy. In Red Hook and Bridgeport, however, the training takes place during the first two weeks, and then at regular “refresher” seminars throughout the term of service. Training in Red Hook, for instance, consists of concrete skills, like cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and mediation, and also lessons related to job-readiness, addressing topics like the importance of being on time.

**Match volunteers to their assignments.** Volunteers have to have the skills and the maturity level for their assigned responsibilities. For instance, a job that requires a volunteer to respect confidentiality might be more appropriate for someone older, rather than a 20-year-old who might not fully grasp the seriousness of the situation. Someone who has done well in school would obviously be better suited as a tutor than someone who is struggling to obtain a GED. And someone working closely with law enforcement officers needs to be ready to witness potentially upsetting situations. “A precinct is not a nice place,” said Jacklyn Romanoff, a former domestic violence case manager in New York City. “It’s not like a maternity ward where great things are happening. It’s a place full of tragedy. A lot of times people come in full of blood and broken bones, so the volunteers have to be prepared for that.”

**Give volunteers meaningful work.** Volunteers, especially those working full-time over an extended period, can lose interest in their work if they don’t feel that their function is important. “I can’t stress enough how important it is for police agencies to make certain the work given to volunteers is meaningful,” said Chief William Hogan of the Newark (Delaware) Police Department, which relies on members of Senior Corps to perform a range of duties, including entering data from crime reports and analyzing false alarms and ensuring corrective actions are taken to limit their frequency. “Many of the volunteers who come into our department are well educated, competent individuals who are looking for a challenge and want to know that they are truly contributing to the police operation.”<sup>15</sup>

**Obtain full cooperation from project partners, especially top officials.** The success of volunteer programs that focus on public safety depends largely on the cooperation of law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies. In Red Hook, the Public Safety Corps depends heavily on the District Attorney’s Office. In Pinellas County, police support is crucial, since members work so closely with officers. “There needs to be support from the top down,” said Rick Stelljes, of the St. Petersburg Police Department. In Bridgeport, the Safe Home project depends on referrals from the Police Department. Volunteers also work closely with police to develop block watches and create safety seminars for landlords. RYASAP, which oversees the Safe

Neighborhoods Partnership, made a point of involving the police chief and other law enforcement officials from the start. “Unless you have the chief’s commitment, a program like ours will not go very far,” Robert Francis, director of RYASAP, said.

**Be prepared to say ‘no.’** There may be lots of agencies interested in deploying volunteers, but not every idea is a good one. Program supervisors need to be willing to say no if the proposed project doesn’t meet program goals. This is especially important in low-income neighborhoods where there is often a long list of issues that need to be addressed. The challenge for the program coordinator is to stay focused on the initiative’s mission—enhancing public safety. “When a potential partner comes to us with a request for volunteers, the first question we ask is: How will it impact public safety?” said James Brodick of the Red Hook Community Justice Center.

**Set goals that are clear and measurable.** “Does it work?” It’s a fair question to ask of any initiative, and the fact that a program is comprised largely of volunteers does not exempt it from scrutiny.

For programs that seek to address public safety, there will always be a temptation to measure success by tracking local crime rates. Programs should proceed carefully here. Crime reductions are notoriously hard to measure. And ascertaining the reasons that crime has gone down is even more difficult.

Whether a program chooses reduced crime as a goal or some other measure of success (e.g., improved public confidence in criminal justice agencies, tangible improvements in an ill-kept local park, etc.) the first step is to articulate a theory of change: not just what impact a program is supposed to have but why. The next step is to figure out how to measure the intended impact.

Many use before-and-after surveys. For instance, in Bridgeport, AmeriCorps members call residents who have participated in the Safe Home initiatives six months and 12 months after receiving new locks and other safety equipment. When it comes to measuring the progress of children receiving services, some programs survey teachers and other school officials. In Pinellas County, for example, they ask teachers if they’ve seen positive changes in students who receive tutoring and mentoring from AmeriCorps volunteers. Breaking down the volunteers’ activities into quantifiable tasks also makes evaluation easier. Pinellas AmeriCorps pursues 12 goals, all of which have been assigned numeric targets that can be easily measured. For example, one objective is described in this way:

AmeriCorps members will increase 400 residents’ personal safety, and home and neighborhood crime prevention knowledge . . . by providing at least 14 crime prevention/safety workshops on various appropriate topics, with 80 percent of the 400 workshop participants reporting an increase in their knowledge as evidenced by pre/post workshop evaluations. . . . At least 7 of the 14 workshops will be

directed at youth, and at least 200 of the total participants will be youth.

Whatever the goals are, they need to be realistic. It's important that expectations—especially in a program's first year when kinks are still being worked out—are not so high that failure is virtually guaranteed.

## **Conclusion**

The events of 9/11 have added a new and urgent dimension to the nature of volunteering in America. Not only have they led to an upsurge in interest in volunteering (on-line applications to AmeriCorps have risen 90 percent since President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address),<sup>16</sup> but they have contributed to the belief that volunteers have an important role to play in improving public safety and strengthening homeland security. As Gov. Tom Ridge, White House director of Homeland Security, put it: "Citizens can and must play an active role in protecting their communities."<sup>17</sup>

As this white paper has demonstrated, AmeriCorps volunteers can be active players in promoting public safety. Programs, like those in Brooklyn, Bridgeport and Pinellas County, have found numerous ways that volunteers can support and expand the work of police, prosecutors, courts and correction officials. Volunteers can free up scarce resources within the criminal justice system and provide tangible benefits to the neighborhoods they serve: safer streets, cleaner parks, engaged citizenry—these are just some of the positive outcomes for which AmeriCorps members can take credit.

## Notes

1. Dana Milbank, "A Time to Be 'Citizens, not Spectators;' Administration Hopes Sept. 11 Will Be Catalyst for Innovative Service Initiative," *The Washington Post*, (March 17, 2002), p. A6.
2. Leslie Lenkowsky, "Protecting the Homeland: What Volunteers Can Do," speech to the National Press Club, Washington D.C. (Aug. 27, 2002), downloaded on September 5, 2002, at [www.nationalservice.org/news/11082702.html](http://www.nationalservice.org/news/11082702.html).
3. AmeriCorps is made up of three programs: AmeriCorps\*State and National, AmeriCorps\*VISTA, and AmeriCorps\*National Civilian Community Corps. The three programs described in this paper are part of AmeriCorps\*State and National, which, with 44,000 members annually, is the largest unit of AmeriCorps. VISTA has about 6,000 members and the National Civilian Community Corps has about 1,000. Throughout this paper we refer to AmeriCorps participants generically as "volunteers" while acknowledging that AmeriCorps members receive a stipend (up to \$9,300 a year for full-time volunteers) plus an education grant of up to \$4,725.
4. Survey results on file with James Brodick, project director of the Red Hook Community Justice Center.
5. Information on the Frogtown Weed and Seed was obtained from Arnoldo Curio, site director, in a phone interview on Oct. 15, 2002.
6. "Operation Data, 2001" on file with James Brodick, director, Red Hook Community Justice Center (2001). See also Leslie Paik, "Surveying Communities: A Guide for Community Justice Planners," Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice (2002).
7. For more information on the start-up of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps, see Greg Berman, "Service and Safety: The Story of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps," Center for Court Innovation and the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, (1999).
8. For more information about the survey, see Leslie Paik, "Surveying Communities: A Guide for Community Justice Planners."
9. Ibid. p. 7.
10. "Final Evaluation Report of Connecticut AmeriCorps\*State, 1997-1998," submitted by Marta Elisa Moret, Urban Policy Strategies (December 1998).
11. Ibid.
12. "Evaluation of Ambassadors AmeriCorps for Corporation for National Service and Connecticut Commission on National and Community Service," submitted by Marvin M. Smith (1996).
13. "Final Evaluation Report of Connecticut AmeriCorps\*State, 1997-1998," Ibid.
14. Other objectives include carrying out safety patrols in parks and other public spaces in Clearwater at least six times a week, increasing resident and student participation in crime watch programs, recruiting neighborhood volunteers to participate in AmeriCorps initiated community service projects and organizing eight neighborhood beautification projects.
15. Chief William Hogan, "Enhancing Police Services with Senior Volunteers," *Community Policing Exchange*, Phase III, No. 2 Issue 5 (Nov./Dec. 1995).

16. "Senior Corps and AmeriCorps Launch New Recruitment Campaign: 'Americans Give Back' PSAs Encourage Everyone to Answer President's Call to Service," Corporation for National and Community Service, press release (Aug. 27, 2002).

17. "White House and Corporation for National and Community Service Announce New Grants to Involve Volunteers in Homeland Security," press release, Corporation for National and Community Service (July 18, 2002).

## Notes

### **Center for Court Innovation**

The winner of an Innovations in American Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how courts and criminal justice agencies—including prosecutors' offices—can aid victims, change the behavior of offenders and strengthen communities.

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