



AmeriCorps Programs in Tennessee Showcase Economic Opportunity

The [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) (CNCS) recently released its 2016 [Public Engagement, Outreach, and Education Plan](#). As part of this plan, they have designated monthly themes throughout the year, centered on CNCS focus areas.

January's theme focuses on Economic Opportunity. CNCS and [Volunteer Tennessee](#) are dedicated to creating economic opportunity through national service to improve the financial well-being and security of economically disadvantaged individuals. You can join the conversation on social media by using #Opportunity.

How are AmeriCorps programs in Tennessee using resources in their areas to improve the lives of these individuals and empower them in their communities?

- The [Appalachia CARES](#) (Community, Action, Responsibility, Education, and Service) AmeriCorps program at **Clinch-Powell Resource Conservation & Development Council** works with individuals in East Tennessee to secure affordable and safe housing in the region. AmeriCorps members engage economically disadvantaged individuals in service-learning trainings and programs, empowering these individuals to create positive change in their communities. Throughout this program year, Appalachia CARES seeks to provide housing services and training to more than 2,000 people in Tennessee.

AmeriCorps members lead projects on teaching basic financial management skills and household budgeting, while other members focus their efforts around home repairs. These members incorporate energy efficiency into home repairs, performing weatherization projects and teaching weatherization and basic home repair courses to the community.

One challenge that the AmeriCorps members address is the limited housing and rental market in rural areas of Tennessee. A large percentage of the homes in areas served by Appalachia CARES were built over 50 years ago, meaning most of the available housing requires safety and energy efficiency upgrades. Despite this, the training provided by AmeriCorps members empowers those who receive assistance. They now have the power to make a difference, not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of their fellow neighbors and community members.

- AmeriCorps members at [Impact America - Tennessee](#) are gearing up for a busy tax season in Memphis with their SaveFirst initiative. To combat the unethical practices and price gouging of predatory tax preparers, Impact America – Tennessee is partnering with four well-established community partners in low-income communities to provide free, high quality Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) services. Members assist families that are eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, a federal program that will supplement the incomes of more than 180,000 families in Memphis alone.

Jacqueline Cotter, a current AmeriCorps member with Impact America – Tennessee, gave one person's account in preparing their taxes: after having a poor experience with a tax preparer, a man was charged more than \$300 for a simple return. The following year, he benefitted from Impact America's tax preparation services, where he left in less than an hour having paid nothing to have his taxes filed.

AmeriCorps members become certified at the advanced IRS level, training to become site coordinators at



the four tax sites in Memphis. Throughout the fall, they have recruited more than 90 college students from Rhodes College, Christian Brothers University, and the University of Memphis to be trained and supervised as tax preparers. The sites, which opened in January, anticipate completing and filing 1,200 tax returns this season, with the potential to service up to 60 families in one day.

- AJ Stephens asked himself the same question many high school graduates do: “What’s my next step in life?” After attending an AmeriCorps presentation at his high school, he was accepted to be a member of the [CAC AmeriCorps](#) program with the **Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee**. AJ joined the CAC’s Conservation Crew, a program designed to give applicants without a degree or professional experience an opportunity to engage in a national service program.

During his year with the group, AJ was able to remove thousands of pounds of litter from dump sites, provide historic cabin restoration, maintain trails, and natural pond restoration. While the Conservation Crew has since dissolved, the legacy created by these young AmeriCorps members has resulted in a lasting impact, resulting in full-time AmeriCorps members continuing to serve at these sites today. The final members of this group have since gone on to a second year of service, went on to college, or gained employment.

AJ’s efforts impressed the staff at the Ijams Nature Center so much that they requested he serve a second AmeriCorps term at the organization. He serves in their park management department, maintaining the trails and leading construction projects in order for visitors to have a safe, hands-on experience. He cites that the biggest challenge – having to learn how to do tasks that he’s never done before – is also his biggest success. Through his two terms with AmeriCorps, AJ has gained invaluable skills that he will be able to carry with him after he completes his service.

What’s AJ’s next step? He has started working with CAC AmeriCorps staff to determine how to best use the two Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards he has earned during his service. AJ hopes to attend college with a focus on the environment.

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[Volunteer Tennessee](#) is a 25 member bipartisan board appointed by the Governor to encourage volunteerism and community service. Volunteer Tennessee pursues its mission through administration of AmeriCorps grants, training and collaborations and coalitions with public and private organizations interested in volunteerism and service. Connect with us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).