

Chapter 12

Community-Related Skills

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Building community has always depended upon mobilizing the capacities and assets of a people and place.

-- John McKnight, quoted in "Rebuilding Communities, A Neighborhood Reinvestment Strategy,"
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Activities:	Page
✓Community Solutions (#26)	505
✓Home Visit Fishbowl (#27)	511
✓Community Involvement (#28)	517
Supporting Information:	
✓Importance of Community Involvement	

SCOPE

This chapter helps prepare members to understand and assess community assets and needs. It also discusses "customer service issues" such as relating well with the community and treating community members with respect. It identifies barriers to community involvement and methods for involving the community in your service projects.

IMPORTANCE

Strengthening communities is one of the four components of the AmeriCorps mission (see the shaded box). AmeriCorps programs bring members into communities to "get things done." AmeriCorps members arrive full of good intentions to carry out wonderful community service projects. Yet they may meet with resistance from the very communities they are trying to help.

This chapter examines some reasons for this resistance, and how careful preparation and planning can help prevent or overcome it. Members must learn to respect, work well with, and involve the people they meet during their community service projects.

**THE MISSION OF AMERICORPS
"STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES"**

AmeriCorps unites individuals from all different backgrounds -
- and organizations of different kinds -- in a common effort to
improve our communities.

Source: Corporation for National Service, *1997-98 Member Handbook*,
Washington, D.C.: September 1997.

TARGETED USERS

Before designing solutions, AmeriCorps programs and their members must first assess the needs and assets of the communities in which they will be working and involve people from the service population and staff of agencies working with this same population.

This chapter is designed for individuals responsible for PST development and training delivery. It can also be used as the basis for in-service training sessions on community-related skills.

**LESSONS LEARNED:
LACK OF COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE**

AmeriCorps program directors have found that many members have little or no prior experience working at the community level and lack skills in community needs assessment, working effectively with local residents, and developing community involvement or "ownership" in project activities.

EXPECTED LEARNING

This chapter is designed to help trainers to teach community-related skills needed to implement effective community projects and successful AmeriCorps programs. Program staff can use the ideas presented in this chapter not only to teach AmeriCorps members community-related skills, but also to incorporate and *model* these ideas in their planning and their dealings with members.

Hint: Members will take their cue from the program staff. If program staff don't ask members' opinions and try to address their needs in the PST, then the members will treat community members the same way.

RELATED CHAPTERS

This chapter is closely related to *Chapter 11: Diversity and Multiculturalism*, page 445, *Chapter 13: Planning and Evaluation*, page 527, and *Chapter 14: Community Projects*, page 575.

SOME CAUSES OF COMMUNITY TENSIONS ABOUT AMERICORPS MEMBERS

- The service population may meet the arrival of AmeriCorps members with apathy. They may think this is yet another program destined to fail or fade away. Members will be there for only one year, two at most.
- The service population may resent members, especially if the members are perceived as having a just-do-what-we-say attitude, or are viewed as strangers suggesting simple solutions to longstanding problems. Or the community may feel that the members' community service project does not speak to their critical needs.

Activity #26: Community Solutions

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Facilitation Coaching Familiarity with community involvement Knowledge of the resources available in host site communities
Time Required:	About 2 hours (more time may be needed if there are more than four groups)
Materials Needed:	Easel pad, markers, and masking tape -- so each small group can have several pieces of newsprint and several colored markers <i>Member Instructions</i> Cooperative Learning Roles Chart posted on newsprint
Learning Objectives:	At the end of this activity, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To identify assets within the community● To view community members as having skills, not simply being "at-risk"
Skills Development:	Community surveys Teambuilding with other members and with site supervisors Group problem solving and reaching consensus
Directions:	<p>Have members work in cooperative learning teams of 3-5 members. For maximum effect, put members in groups with others who will be working in the same community.</p> <p>Go over the <i>Member Instructions</i> with the full group. Give each group three pieces of newsprint and a set of markers. Assign a scenario to each group and have groups spend 35 minutes designing a solution to the problem presented and summarizing it on newsprint.</p> <p>While the groups work, observe their interaction. Listen to the methods they propose for solving the solution. Do they focus on members fixing the problem or do they talk about including community members and resources in a meaningful way?</p> <p>When time is up, ask the members to stop discussion. Present a 10-minute lecturette on the effectiveness of using assets available</p>

within the community to help the community solve its own problems. (See the box on community assets and community involvement.) You must do this after the group work so they do not have this guidance beforehand.

COMMUNITY ASSETS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Community Assets Model: We often think of low-income communities as having many problems, and forget that they also have many assets, including people who understand the community, have strong survival and problem-solving skills, and are committed to improving the quality of life for their families and neighbors. Failing to involve the community as problem solvers means that these community assets may not be brought to bear in your project. Involving the community with a community assets perspective means that you go to community members with the assumption that they have information, experience, and skills which you lack and which can strengthen the community. It makes community residents your equals and partners, not helpless victims dependent upon you. People from outside the community work to strengthen community organizations and help the community help itself.

These assumptions and approaches are used by many community workers and community assistance organizations, such as the Center for Community Change. The "assets" approach is eloquently described and applied by John Kretzman and John McKnight of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University. The Resources section of this manual references materials from both entities.

Now tell the members to look at their outlines and see if their plans include looking for and using community assets. If some groups indicated they did build in community resources, give them credit now. Then ask the groups to take 15 minutes to write into their plans how they will find and tap community assets. If this was

already included, see if they can strengthen this aspect of their plans.

Then have each group **report**. Ask the reporter to explain their original plan and how they modified it after the lecturette. After each team's presentation, lead the full group in applause for the group's presentation. Make sure to point out the diversity in presentations styles, and how no one method is right. Give all members the chance to ask questions and clarify the material presented.

After all groups have presented, have the group **process** the experience. Ask what they would have done differently if you had presented the lecturette first. Do they think putting the lecture first would have been as effective?

Now ask them to **generalize** what they learned, discussing ways to obtain community input to plans and activities. Now ask members how they plan to **apply** what they have learned while in their service assignments.

Assignment

To plan community projects addressing specific situations and problems.

Directions

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles posted in the training room.

Silently, take 3 minutes to read the scenario your group has been assigned. Then take 30 minutes to discuss the assigned problem within your group and outline your plan for a community service project which will address it.

1. The largely low-income, rural county your AmeriCorps program serves has a high concentration of radon, a gas found in houses which can accumulate to dangerous levels and cause cancer. Radon gases can be dissipated easily with the installation of fans, pipes, or sealants to rid the house of the gas. Despite the proven danger from extended radon exposure, only 10% of the houses in the county have been tested. Your service project's goal is to identify and reduce the number of houses with dangerous levels of radon. Almost 1,000 homes remain untested, and few homeowners have information on radon abatement contractors or materials to take corrective measures.
2. Your AmeriCorps program provides after-school recreational programs for high school students in an urban area. It is spring and the high school principal and several teachers have asked your help to educate students to the dangers of driving under the influence (DUI) of drugs or alcohol. Over the last several years three students have been killed and seven others badly hurt on prom night due to drivers who were DUI.
3. Your AmeriCorps program has several members placed in four inner-city elementary schools as teacher aides. Several children were recently caught bringing guns to school; the children claimed they needed the guns for protection since they are afraid of being beaten up or robbed on their way to and from school. Parents are demanding better security. Teachers are nervous and in some cases very frightened. The principal asks if the AmeriCorps program can help.
4. You are a team of members assigned to a community mental health center to do outreach. The problem you hope to address is suicide among teenagers. In this large city, three teenagers have committed suicide in the past year, and there have been numerous other attempts -- probably many more than have been officially reported. When a teen suicide occurs, the community becomes very concerned and your center does a lot of counseling in the schools. But thus far, there has been no ongoing project to determine the factors

related to teen suicide, identify young people who may be considering suicide, and provide appropriate interventions. The center has been thinking about starting a teen support group which would address a variety of teen tensions and problems including suicide prevention. You have been asked to work with a psychologist at the center to help develop a project.

Activity #27: Home Visit Fishbowl

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Familiarity with managing role plays Facilitation
Time Required:	About 2 1/2 hours
Materials Needed:	<i>Member Instructions</i> Role play character scripts A doll
Objectives:	At the end of this training module, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To describe steps in planning and carrying out a home visit● To list and describe possible pitfalls in home visits
Skills Development:	Listening comprehension Interviewing Negotiation Customer relations
Directions:	<p>Go over the <i>Member Instructions</i> with the full group. Explain that this activity involves members playing roles to simulate a home visit. Explain that you will be using a "fishbowl" technique -- three members will act out the role play, and the rest of the group will watch the interaction and critique it.</p> <p>Divide members into three groups by having them count off 1-2-3. Give one role play sheet to each group -- Group 1 gets the member sheet, Group 2 the mother, Group 3 the daughter (the daughter also gets the mother's sheet, but the mother doesn't get the daughter's, and neither of them gets the member's script). Let the group choose who will play the parts and have the group prepare that person for the role. Allow 20 minutes for small group preparations.</p> <p>After the role players have been identified, have the remaining members in count off 1-2-3-4. Tell them that all number 1's should focus on the body language and other nonverbal cues, number 2's should focus on tone of voice and mood, number 3's should focus on the role of the AmeriCorps member and what happens to</p>

him/her, and number 4's should watch the mother and what happens to her during the role play.

Allow 15-20 minutes for the role play. Instruct the role players to make the experience as realistic as possible. Tell the role players that if you say "cut" -- just like in show biz -- they should all freeze and stop talking. If at any time the role play seems to be getting out of hand, say "cut" and redirect the action, adding new information or refocusing the role play. For example, if the mother and member seem to be arguing and not moving towards a positive solution, give the role play a new twist by telling the AmeriCorps member role player to focus on appealing to the mother's concern for her children.

When you feel the major lessons have been illustrated, stop the role play. **Process** the role play; ask all members to take 5 minutes to think about and make notes on:

- What went right
- What went wrong
- When it started to go wrong
- What the AmeriCorps member role player could have done differently to avoid some of these problems

Ask the role players what they felt about the interaction. Then ask for the number 1's to talk about what they saw in the body language, then the number 2's to talk about what they heard in the tone of voice, then the number 3's about what seemed to be happening with the member, and the number 4's what seemed to be happening with the mother. Then ask everyone to contribute to a discussion around the four questions you raised. Spend about 20 minutes on this discussion.

Ask the members to consider how having two AmeriCorps members present might have changed the dynamics of the situation. Do they think having two members on site visits would make it easier or harder? **Generalize**; see what the members feel they learned. This discussion will probably take another 10 minutes.

Have the members return to their cooperative learning groups to **apply** what they learned. Pass out the role sheets to each group. Have each group do the role play again. Allow the groups 10 minutes to role play and then another 5 minutes to critique each other. Then have them switch roles so several members get a chance to play each. Allow another 15 minutes for this process.

When all groups are done, ask if anyone has any questions or comments.

Warnings:

While role playing is a very effective technique, it has the potential to get out of hand. In giving directions, emphasize the importance of making the simulation as realistic as possible. If the role players begin to take the role play too personally, stop them by saying, "cut" and give them new instructions.

Variations:

Ask one or two carefully chosen representatives from your service population to come in to play the part of the service recipient, brief the group that will play this role, or participate in the post-role-play discussion. Caution: be sure you know the community representatives well and that they understand why you are asking them to play this role.

If your group has 40 or more members, you may want to split them into different rooms and have several role plays simultaneously.

Modify the role play to fit your program and service sites (see box.)

MODIFYING A ROLE PLAY TO FIT YOUR PROGRAM

1. Use a project topic that fits the actual member assignments in your program
2. Pick a situation involving a role or skills that are very important in your project -- home visits, tutoring, meetings with community members, etc.
3. Be sure the situation doesn't involve a very large group -- the more roles, the more complex the role play becomes
4. Clearly define and prepare a background description for each role -- member, one or two customers, community person, etc. -- including both views about the situation and personal background
5. Be clear on what the member is trying to accomplish, so the meeting or interaction being simulated has a clear purpose
6. Avoid situations which require a lot of technical knowledge unless members have already received training in these technical topics

Role Sheet #1 -- AmeriCorps Member

You are an AmeriCorps member assigned to a *promotores* (health educators) health promotion program called Prevention Now! with a local community-based organization called the Hispanic Center. Your program's objective is to increase the immunization rate of children in the Innercity Barrio -- and to have at least 350 families with immunizations completely up-to-date.

Prevention Now! along with several other health-related organizations is holding a free health fair on Thursday night, from 4 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. A variety of services will be offered, free-of-charge. Prevention Now! has recruited several family practice doctors to give vaccinations. Local parents must sign up their children for an immunization appointment, since Prevention Now! must order the vaccines no later than Wednesday morning to have them on hand.

Your assignment is to convince parents to sign up their children for the immunizations they need. You are doing home visits, primarily targeting parents who are enrolled at the local community health center and have children under two who are not fully immunized. You have also been asked to check for any children aged 4-12 that have not received their second MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella), and for anyone in the household from 14 and up that has not had a tetanus booster in the last ten years.

It is Monday morning and you are about knock on the first door. You are excited about this assignment. You are offering parents an opportunity to protect their children against disease, *for free*. You think they will be thrilled at the chance. It should be a fairly simple assignment too; your state, starting three years ago, provides all new mothers with an Immunization Record Booklet at the hospital so they can keep track of their child's immunizations. The local community health center uses these booklets consistently, so parents know the immunization status of their children.

Role Sheet #2 -- Low-Income Single Mother

It is Monday morning and you are exhausted. You work from 6 p.m. to midnight, Sunday through Thursday. You are waitressing in a diner, but it's not a bad job and it pays the rent. You missed two days last week because you had a bad cold, and your boss has warned you that you have been missing too much time lately. After you got home last night your one-year-old baby was sick and cried on and off most of the night. Your 14 year-old is just getting over the flu and is home from school today.

You have heard of the Hispanic Center, but not of the Prevention Now! program. Your pet peeve is people who have never had children giving you advice on how to raise yours.

You don't have medical insurance and your children aren't eligible for Medicaid since you work. You don't know much about immunizations and haven't taken your baby in for any shots since she developed a fever after the last one at six months. A friend of yours told you that her friend's aunt's baby had a bad reaction from a shot and ended up in the hospital. You know that your 14-year-old had a bunch of shots before entering school, but that was several years ago, and in moving various times, you've lost any records you may have had.

You are not expecting visitors, and you know nothing about the health fair.

Role Sheet #3 -- 14-Year-Old

You are a normal 14-year-old but are feeling lousy because you have the flu. You are also bored, because you are recovering. You have a habit of constantly interrupting the conversation when your mother has a visitor. You definitely don't want to have a shot.
(Read the mother's role sheet to understand the family situation.)

Role Sheet #4 -- One-Year-Old Baby

Provide a doll for this role.

Activity #28: Community Involvement

Trainer's Notes

Trainer Skills Needed:	Familiarity with case studies Facilitation
Time Required:	2 1/2 hours
Materials Needed:	Easel pad, markers, and masking tape -- so each small group can have several pieces of newsprint and several colored markers <i>Member Instructions</i>
Objectives:	At the end of this activity, members should be able: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● To identify ways to effectively involve the service community in your program● To identify the barriers to community involvement
Skills Development:	Problem solving Customer relations
Directions:	<p>Go over the <i>Member Instructions</i> with the full group. Then divide members into cooperative learning groups of 3-5 members each. Give each group three pieces of newsprint and a set of colored markers.</p> <p>Assign a scenario to each group and give them a total of 30 minutes, 5 to read and think silently and 25 to discuss what the members in the case study did wrong and what they could do to improve the process. Tell them to be prepared to report on their discussions to the full group.</p> <p>When the time is up, signal all teams to stop their discussions. Ask each group to report on its scenario. Listen carefully to each group's presentation. After each presentation ask if any other members have anything else to add or if they have any questions. Then process and generalize -- ask what members learned from the scenarios and group discussion. Ask members to tell you how the scenarios apply to their service assignments.</p>

Assignment:

To examine how community involvement or the lack of it affects AmeriCorps programs and community service projects

Directions:

Once in cooperative learning groups, decide on the roles for group members, choosing from the cooperative learning roles list posted in the training room.

Take 5 minutes to read the case study your group has been assigned and think about why the members in the case study are having a hard time getting the community involved.

For the next 25 minutes, discuss what went wrong in the case study. Is it too late to save this project? Consider the following:

1. Why is there little or no community involvement here?
2. What could be done to improve community involvement now?
3. What could have been done during earlier stages of the process to build in community involvement?

Be prepared to report on your discussion to the full group.

Community Involvement Case Studies

1. The Youth Center's AmeriCorps members are working as teacher's aides in a small-town elementary school. Most parents are working-class or low-income although typically both parents work; salaries are very low. As part of their AmeriCorps program the members must design and implement a community service project. One day during a brainstorming session, a member has a great idea. He suggests that they put together a "toy bank" so the local children can borrow toys for a week and then bring them back. The toy bank would be available after school each day from 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. It would even fit within their strict budget limitations -- a local toy store has already offered to donate toys, and the members can provide staffing. Since the Youth Center staff have been complaining about parents sending their kids to the Center but never coming in to see what the children are doing, the members decide to require the parents to sign out the toys. They spend three weeks putting together a toy tracking system, and then put out flyers about the toy bank in the elementary school. To their surprise, during the first week after the toy bank opens no parents come to sign out toys. Some older children come to ask what toys are available -- one is overheard saying, "I bet they got those toys for free -- no one would pay money for those baby toys."
2. AmeriCorps members at Green Inc. get permission to take a vacant lot that the city owns and transform it from an eyesore to something the community can use. The lot is near, but not in, a community where they provide service. Members meet to decide what to do with the lot. Their brainstorming generates many ideas, including a soccer field, a basketball court, a playground, a tree planting project, or a community garden. Several members have read about how successful community gardens can be at getting a community to work together. Several other members think a playground is more suitable for the site, but they know the budget doesn't have enough money for playground equipment. They begin planning for the garden. A week later the members go over to check out the lot and start to clean it up. Several women and their young children are out walking across the street. One comes over to ask what organization the members are from and what they are doing with the lot. When a members explains that they are starting a community garden, the woman replies, "Oh, okay" and walks away. Members put up a number of flyers for the garden preparing and planting day and are disappointed when only an elderly couple show up.
3. Your AmeriCorps program is designed to increase adult literacy and self-sufficiency in a low-income community. Your AmeriCorps team holds a weekly literacy class that uses the latest innovative and cooperative methods. Your focus on practical learning and teambuilding among the participants in the class has resulted in good attendance. Through this class you and your fellow members have formed a strong bond with your participants. You go with participants to the bank, to the post office, and to doctors offices to help them read forms and make sure they understand what is happening. One morning, you receive a call at 3:00 a.m.; it's a participant you have been working with for three months who has made great progress. She tells you that her toddler climbed out of

his crib and fell on a toy. She says he has a big cut on his forehead and will probably need stitches, and she wants you to meet them at the emergency room. You are very tired and you know she now has the literacy skills to fill out any forms needed, so you tell her that you are sure she can handle it herself, and that you will check back with her tomorrow. She insists that you must come to the emergency room, saying, "I don't know how to do it alone. You always tell me what to say."

4. Your AmeriCorps program addresses environmental issues in a rural area. You and the other members set up a recycling program for bottles, glass, and newspaper. Your program operates as a volunteer generator model; members were team leaders and each recruited community members, mostly teens, to help collect and sort "recycleables" in their designated area. Team leaders set schedules, called volunteers, and coordinated all activities. On the second Saturday of each month, teams in neighborhoods all across town collected and sorted recycleables, and then AmeriCorps members picked up the loads at each collection point and took them to the recycling plants. The program was very successful. You had hoped it would continue after the end of your service year, but it is two months after you left, and the recycling effort has all but died.

Supporting Information

Importance of Community Involvement in Project Planning and Implementation

BENEFITS OF USING COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:

- **Project Appropriateness:** Community input enables you to be sure that what you are doing is something the community needs and wants.
- **Knowledge:** The community knows more than you do -- an outsider can offer a fresh view and some degree of objectivity, but community input is essential to help you avoid "fatal flaws" and unworkable activities.
- **Support:** The community will take ownership of the project if they help develop it, which will mean:
 - ◆ More person-power to carry out project activities
 - ◆ A high probability of project continuation after members leave
- **Capacity Building:** Community involvement builds community capacity for problem solving and program services.
- **Empowerment:** Involving the community makes people feel that they can solve problems and improve their community.

WAYS TO SEEK COMMUNITY INPUT:

- Ask community activists and leaders to help you identify contacts.
- Go to community organizations and associations.
- Seek help from the parents of children you serve or other family members of customers or community members served.
- Ask religious entities for help.
- Hold a well-publicized community meeting in an accessible location to discuss community needs and project ideas.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN COMMUNITY SUPPORT SEEMS LACKING:

- Did the members ask the opinion of community members about the need for the program?
- Did the members include the community in the planning process so they felt ownership in the process?
- Do community members understand how this project will benefit them?
- Are other needs seen as more critical and deserving of community support and involvement?
- Are the community members familiar with and do they trust the sponsoring organization?