

APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

Legal Applicant: The Providence Plan, Ready to Learn Providence	Application ID: 11AC124300
Below are the comments from each External Peer Reviewer that read and evaluated the application. While Reviewers did engage in discussion about their evaluations, consensus was not required as part of their review. Therefore, there may be differing views in their feedback on the quality of the proposal.	
<p>COMMENTS: (+) The applicant presents a persuasive argument for redressing discrepancies in health and early education amongst third grade students in Providence, Rhode Island as evidenced by citing critical needs assessments of the pivotal point in a child's ability to comprehend ("learning to read" versus "reading to learn"), child poverty statistics, percentage of children under the age 5 affected by lead poisoning and childhood obesity rates. (+) The applicant builds a strong, concrete connection the multi-tiered assessment of school readiness - the focal point of its proposed interventions --- with a child's physical and mental well-being through citations of credible journal articles and state assessments from the Rhode Island Department of Health. (+) The applicant cites pre-service orientation to both overall member service requirements as well as individual site placements. (+) The applicant identifies a direct line of supervision as well as a concrete schedule for routinely engaging members on a weekly basis for the first four months of the service period and on a bi-weekly basis in the months to follow. (+) The applicant introduces both demographic and background preferences of prospective members as evidenced by its identification of single-parent households, immigrant professionals, recent college graduates and/or older adults as potential candidates well as individuals who are bilingual in Spanish, have post-secondary experience and/or persons with disabilities, respectively. (+) The applicant quantifies impact of member roles by outcomes-oriented mechanisms from the perspectives of the individual NOFO priorities such as the amount of children who complete an AmeriCorps childhood education program (from the early education perspective), the amount of children participating in health education programs (from the health education perspective) and the amount of "economically disadvantaged and unemployed members" who will gain employment following their service period and the amount of members without a college degree will complete a college course within a year of finishing their service term, respectively. (-) The applicant has not refined a recruitment strategy for volunteers that would match not only preferred language proficiency in both Spanish and English to specific programming sponsored but other potential valuable volunteer attributes such as previous volunteer and/or work experience with elementary school children. (-) The applicant neglected to explore how volunteers would have a credible impact on the populations targeted through programmatic interventions. (-) Although persons with "disabilities" are amongst those to be recruited, the applicant neglects to provide information on any placement site-specific accommodations for persons with physical, emotional or mental challenges or any adjustments to the orientation curricula cited that would explore these issues in detail.</p>	

COMMENTS: The applicant identifies clear data that shows the challenging socio-economic conditions of the target areas. They also indicate that 36% of the children living in poverty and are born to mothers who failed to complete high school. All corps members will participate in a 4-week pre-service orientation. The training curriculum includes an overview of AmeriCorps goals in the areas of public service, the local early education system, and the rigorous coursework that members must complete. The applicant clearly addresses the compelling needs that support the argument concerning third grade achievement versus its correlating literacy concerns. Healthy futures outcomes will be determined by data that members self-report. The number of children demonstrating age-appropriate literacy skills will also be determined. The applicant provides a convincing argument about the several educational conditions that tend to plague the targeted area. The key area in which to concentrate efforts is that of early literacy. Members will work to support service site staff to promote that capacity of families to enhance their children's literary center.

COMMENTS: +The applicant demonstrates the relationship between poverty and school readiness through the provision of relevant data and statistics from a variety of recent and reliable sources. The applicant further demonstrates the relationship between school readiness and a child's future success. The applicant presents a strong plan for recruitment that will ensure a diverse pool of AmeriCorps members. The applicant has a well-developed orientation and training plan which will provide the development, knowledge and skill enhancement necessary for the Members to achieve success. The outcomes of the program are likely to significantly address the community needs identified, resulting in children possessing the skills necessary for school readiness.-The exact number of Member slots and corresponding roles is unclear as conflicting numbers are provided.

COMMENTS: The applicant cites a number of studies and analyses to provide compelling evidence of the existence of the identified problems of children entering school with poor reading skills and not ready to learn (which affects their potential for academic success). In addition to substantial poverty, the applicant cites children not achieving health milestones as a contributing factor in children arriving at school not ready to learn (prevalence of tooth decay, obesity among kindergartners, and lead poisoning). The applicant includes data and reports from the Child Defense Fund, Providence School District, Rhode Island Department of Health, CDC, an evaluation of its program as well as research articles. For each of its program areas, the applicant specifies the characteristics it considers to be important in AmeriCorps members for contributing to impact in the community and effectiveness; this is a critical step in mounting successful recruitment and hiring efforts. The applicant describes a number of strategies for recruiting AmeriCorps members that have been and are likely to continue to be effective in ensuring that it will be able to find and hire qualified, diverse, and motivated AmeriCorps members. Given the use of AmeriCorps members in literacy programs, it important to note that the applicant emphasizes priority for members with post-secondary experience (with 18% of membership in the past being college graduates) and, for the Healthy Futures corps, recent graduates in the community health field. The applicant describes a four-week pre-service orientation, program-specific training, and in-service training that are highly likely to ensure that AmeriCorps members will have impact in the community. Proposed process and content of supervision is such that it will ensure impact in the community as indicated by using supervisory capability of host site as a criterion for site selection,

specification of a reasonable schedule for monitoring the work of the members, and training on being effective in supporting and coaching AmeriCorps members. Among the evidence that the applicant provides to substantiate that AmeriCorps members' service experience will lead to continued engagement in civic participation is delivery of training to provide better understanding of social-economic disparities in the city and development of "actionable" strategies that members can apply beyond their service experience. The applicant further describes the efforts it makes to match member skills and experience with the roles and responsibilities critical to its four program areas to help members have greater satisfaction in their placements and use of college credits, recognition and, events to build camaraderie so that members will feel good about their experiences. Being able to engage AmeriCorps increases the ability of the applicant to provide support to more children and families and improve the quality of early childhood education in different settings. The applicant describes in detail the specific activities in that AmeriCorps members will engage in for each component and the anticipated impact as well as the impact that has been achieved in previous years (90% achievement of outputs and intermediate outcomes). For example, the use of members in preschool classrooms to design and lead 3- to 4-year-old children in classroom activities and to extend literacy activities to home will be instrumental in helping the children gain literacy skills and families to appreciate the importance of early childhood literacy. Members assigned to the Healthy Futures corps to assist families to focus on health issues will help parents better understand developmental screening protocols and connect to community health resources. Members will also provide health workshops to WIC clients in partnership with Head Start and make home-visits. Both areas are directly related to the outcome of increasing the number of children arriving in school healthy and ready to learn. The applicant has drawn clear and strong linkages among the major elements of the application and among the different aspects of its proposed program from problem identification through to anticipated outcomes. The identified problems of children not arriving at kindergarten/school ready to learn or being healthier so that they will be ready to learn have specific strategies that engage AmeriCorps members and community volunteers in activities and roles highly likely to be effective in solving or greatly reducing the identified problems and achieving anticipated outcomes, including the numbers of children who complete the different programs (or health education programs in the case of Healthy Futures) or who make gains in literacy skills. These are the specific areas in which AmeriCorps members will be involved and have significant roles.

COMMENTS: (+) The applicant presents a rationale for the focus on early learning and school readiness that is a research-based, preventive approach to early learning failure. Information is also cited that makes it clear that community stakeholders have recognized local needs and made it a priority to address them through a collaborative effort. In addition to focusing on children's social, emotional and intellectual development, the applicant's utilization of AmeriCorps members supports the enhancement of learning environments in early childhood programs, libraries, home day care providers, and families. This broad community-centered approach to learning enhancement is more far-reaching than a single organization would generally attempt to accomplish within its own sphere of programming. (-) No documentation is provided for the other areas to be served by the project (Pawtucket and Central Falls. (+) The applicant will build on prior years' experience recruiting members and makes it a priority to enroll members who are reflective of the community to be served. (-) Although the applicants cites a volume of member applicants well in excess of its available slots, there is no screening or selection process described.(+) The applicant recognizes that member support and recognition are important and articulates program components to provide these elements. The awarding of up to nine college credits at no charge to members is a significant and noteworthy benefit. Success is evidenced by a strong retention rate and nearly 50% of members reapplying for a second year of service. The applicant

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has made it a priority to enhance member training in ways that provide a deeper understanding of socio-economic inequalities, policy issues, and actionable strategies that members can apply during their term of service and beyond. (+) The applicant considers the quality of a potential host site supervisor to be a critical element in the site selection process. Orientation and on-going support are offered to supervisors and frequent communication between staff and site supervisors facilitates the discussion of issues throughout the year. (+) The fact that the applicant is employing a preventive approach to lessen the subsequent need for intensive remediation of learning problems is commendable. The applicant cites evidence of success: children involved in R2LP programming are 50% likelier to arrive in kindergarten with age-appropriate literacy skills than their non-R2LP affiliated peers. Involvement of AmeriCorps member has extended this success as more children have been served and more individualized support has been provided. (+) The applicant states that to date R2LP has reached 90% of the outputs and intermediate outcomes it has committed to achieving. Findings from a program evaluation reportedly provide evidence that the R2LP AmeriCorps program has had a positive impact on the partner sites where members are placed, on the school readiness of children, and on the members themselves. The applicant has been purposeful in designing the program to increase its partners' capacity to sustain change through training, materials, and system improvements that have the potential to continue to impact the community beyond the grant period.(+) Based on past experience, the applicant describes a practical approach to focusing volunteer utilization in one or two areas to increase the likelihood of productive and successful volunteer generation in support of the program's goals.