



# VOCAL NEWS



Literacy Volunteers of Illinois

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## \$1 Billion to AmeriCorps !

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 - which was signed into law by President Biden on March 11th - is an unprecedented effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 and respond to the public health, education, and economic crisis caused by the pandemic. The package, which weighs in at a cost of \$1.9 trillion is one of the largest economic rescue plans in U.S. history. It mixes efforts to mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic with strategies to fight the virus itself. The ambitious plan includes measures to deliver immediate relief to American families, fund a national vaccination program, provide aid for small businesses, cut child poverty in half, reopen schools, and help parents get back to work.

The American Rescue Plan also contains \$1 billion for AmeriCorps and many of its programs -

- \* \$620M for AmeriCorps State and National
- \* \$80M for AmeriCorps VISTA
- \* \$30M for AmeriCorps Seniors
- \* \$20M for the Volunteer Generation Fund
- \* \$20M for State Service Commissions
- \* \$73M for AmeriCorps Administrative Expenses
- \* \$148M for the National Service Trust
- \* \$9M for the Inspector General

Some of the bill's provisions include increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance to make service more accessible and inclusive, increase the diversity, cultural experiences, and number of AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers serving in communities across the country, and to help stabilize existing national service programs and expand into new communities. The \$1 billion is to be phased in over a three-year period.

While these provisions are broad, there is another piece of legislation that seeks to better define the use of the additional funds – the bipartisan CORPS Act which was reintroduced this past week in the US Senate. Originally filed in the previous Congressional session, the CORPS Act would increase the living allowance to 175% of the poverty level and double the education award through a supplement for the next three years and eliminate the taxes on both permanently. The bill also prioritizes stabilization of existing programs, supports the creation of new programs in underserved communities, and promotes recruitment of diverse populations.



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**From the Executive Director ...**

This week is **National Volunteer Week**, an annual celebration to say “Thank You” to America’s volunteers and encourage those who are not yet volunteers to consider becoming one. Typically celebrated the third week of April this year’s National Volunteer Week is April 18th – 24th.

For those of us in the literacy field, National Volunteer Week is the perfect time to celebrate and say “thank you” to our tutors who, week after week, provide valuable services to our students, as well as thanking the many other volunteers who provide service in so many other ways that helps us keep our programs and organizations strong and vibrant.

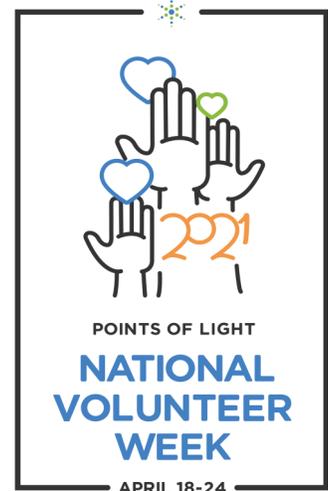
National Volunteer Week has been with us since 1974 when President Richard Nixon signed the first proclamation declaring the third week of April as Volunteer Week. Every president after him followed suit, with President Biden issuing this week’s Presidential Proclamation on Friday, April 16th. The week is also celebrated in Canada with a theme this year of “The Value of One—The Power of Many”.

The official sponsor of the US celebration is the now global Points of Light (POL) organization, which was founded by President Bush in 1990. They have on their web site a variety of materials for use including downloadable logos and sample messages for social media posts.

Many host sites may already have events and/or activities planned for National Volunteer Week. If yours has not, there is still time for you to recognize your volunteers this week, but consider also—beyond this week. The Points of Light offers a daily Point of Light Award—the process is simple and can be done through their web site.

Closer to home, consider nominating your volunteers for a Volunteer of the Week award, which is sponsored by Serve Illinois, the funding body of the VOCAL program. Every Monday, Serve Illinois highlights the selfless work of one of our state’s great volunteers on their web site and social media - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We’ve had three of our Jump Start tutors recognized—most recently on March 8th (see page 3).

The process to nominate a Volunteer of the Week is a simple one and can be done on their web site - [serve.illinois.gov](http://serve.illinois.gov). You can view past winners on the site, and, if you’re not already connected with them on their social media sites, you can do that through their web site as well.



*“As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands — one for helping yourself, the other for helping others.” — Audrey Hepburn*

## AmeriCorps Week: A Virtual Affair

March 7th - 13th was designated as National AmeriCorps Week. Led by the national AmeriCorps agency and here in our state, *Serve Illinois*, the week is a time to salute current and members for their service, thank AmeriCorps community partners for their support and communicate AmeriCorps impact on communities and on the lives within them to the general public. In honor of the Week programs throughout the country held a variety of service, promotional and outreach activities to draw attention to the work of their agencies and the service performed within them by AmeriCorps members.

The pandemic put an end to our 13-year run of kicking off National AmeriCorps Week with an Information and Recruitment Fair at the Thompson Center in downtown Chicago, and so virtual activities were sought to promote the Week this year. Postings on social media and letters to elected officials were the predominant choices. With templates to state and congressional officials being provided, members adapted them and reached out to eight Congressmen/women, both US Senators, and six state legislators to make them aware of services being offered in their communities through AmeriCorps programming, and both thank them and ask for their continued support for national and community services programs. Social media postings were also made by members and host site staff with a feature story on our Kewanee contingency being published on March 11th in that city's Star Courier with a headline of "AmeriCorps Week Ends With a Plea for Volunteers". It was a nice end to the week and it was an exciting start to the week learning that our AmeriCorps member, Kurt Mohr, was named *Serve Illinois*' Volunteer of the Week on Monday, March 8th (see below).



### Kurt Mohr - Volunteer of the Week (March 8th, 2021) - Serve Illinois



Kurt Mohr is the quintessence of a volunteer who gives for all the right reasons. After successfully completing Literacy Volunteers of Illinois' required training in September of 2019, he started volunteering for the Jump Start tutoring program. He works with incarcerated youth at IYC-Warrenville. Kurt started out committing to 2 hours a week, but he enjoyed the experience so much he then signed on to 4 hours weekly. Now Kurt is serving as an AmeriCorps member, tutoring the youth 10 hours a week.

Kurt usually helps the youth with Math and Science. He says, "Math was always particularly difficult for me in school, and I went to college ill prepared for the math requirements of my chemistry major." He took remedial math in college and goes on to say that "because it was so difficult, I can often understand where our students have problems... the same places I did." The 1 to 1 interaction with students is what Kurt finds most rewarding especially when "they suddenly understand something they didn't before." Every day after working with the kids, Kurt says, "I feel a little younger than when I walked in!"

Kurt's humility and humor define him. He is patient and passionate about tutoring the youth and guiding them toward a better future. Kurt is also a CASA volunteer and serves as an ELL tutor mentoring a young man from Venezuela who recently immigrated to the U.S. Kurt's gifts are our treasures. LVI is grateful for all his hard work, and we are fortunate to have Kurt on our team!

*Nominated by—Teresa Urfer, Program Coordinator*



## A Day On ... Not Off !

### Providing Comfort at the Fisher House

For MLK day which is AmeriCorps' Day On and Not Off, five of us (pandemic-related limit) went out to help at the Fisher House in Hines, Illinois. The Fisher House Foundation provides and builds comfort homes where members of the military, veterans, and their families can stay free of charge while their loved one is seeking care at a VA Hospital. The houses provide guests with private bedrooms and bathrooms, along with a common kitchen, dining room, and living room. The Fisher House at the Hines VA Hospital Complex was beautiful with a nice large dining room and a wonderful kitchen. Once settled in, we cooked two large pots of chili for the guests to enjoy when they arrive. One of the pots of chili was meat-based and one was vegetarian, but both were delicious! After cooking and storing the food for later consumption, we proceeded to work hard and make welcome bags for the arriving guests that included toothpaste, a toothbrush, Kleenex, and other toiletries.

I was fortunate enough to be one of the members to participate in the onsite activity and it was a great experience and an honor to serve and learn about the Fisher House and to see how much care they put into helping our members of the military and veterans. I encourage anyone reading this to serve their community on every MLK day and any other day possible.

- George Mendoza, Literacy Volunteers of Illinois.

*MLK Day is a federal holiday observed on the third Monday of January each year. The holiday is held in remembrance of Martin Luther King, Jr.—a civil rights hero who was an instrumental leader during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In his writings, lectures, and sermons, Dr. King encouraged communal aid and nonviolent resistance and activism through the use of boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and strikes; ideas which were inspired by the writings of Mahatma Gandhi. Sadly, Dr. King's life was cut short as he was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis Tennessee. Four days after his death the idea of a holiday in remembrance of MLK was proposed by John Conyers, the Democratic Congressman from Michigan. Unfortunately it did not have enough support to even be put up for debate. Undeterred by the failure of his first bill Conyers would reintroduce the bill every year, gaining co-signers and more support every time. It was not until November 2, 1983 that the bill recognizing Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a federal holiday was signed. It was not celebrated until 1986 with some states not recognizing it as a holiday until the year 2000, when every state observed the holiday. MLK day is the only federal holiday that AmeriCorps designates as a national day of service*

### MLK Arts and Crafts Birthday Celebration

And in Kewanee, the Sunshine Community Services Center held their annual MLK Fair - billed as a birthday celebration - for area youth, but unlike previous years with families streaming into the



library, it was a live-streamed event. Coordinated by the Center's Executive Director, Etta LaFlora, and carried out by the AmeriCorps members the event kicked off at 10:30 a.m. Monday morning at the Kewanee Public Library with families and youth entering a Zoom room where they participated with VOCAL members in a variety of educational activities that included games, puzzles, mazes and reading.



Following the online event, participants were encouraged to pick up activity packets at the Library for later use. The event was promoted in the Kewanee's Star Courier and was cosponsored by the sites hosting members—Abilities Plus, Kewanee Public Library, Salvation Army, the YMCA. and the Henry County Senior Citizens Center.

## Member Spotlight: Nayla Rodriguez



**Nayla Rodriguez** is in her second year of AmeriCorps service at Centro Romero, where she serves as a Family Literacy Coordinator. Originally from Cuba, she went to St. Augustine College majoring in Social Work. She heard about AmeriCorps and the opportunity at Centro Romero from friends while looking for a job after completing her studies. She submitted an application to the VOCAL, and began her service in October 2019.

Among her duties at Centro Romero are giving ESL presentations to mothers, teaching ESL classes, and assisting with childcare. She finds it rewarding to do social work, but it can be a challenge keeping up with the fast pace sometimes. When she isn't on duty, she enjoys spending time with family and getting more experience in social work. After AmeriCorps, she wants to continue her work in social work at a hospital or school.



Centro Romero is a non-profit organization providing options and opportunities for low-income Latino and other immigrants. Services offered include ESL and Spanish Literacy, Family Literacy, Immigration Services, and various programs for youth and women. Through education, Centro Romero emphasizes the development of the whole family unit, the creation of community leadership and self-reliance.

## Member Spotlight: Jackson Smith

I'm originally from Carrboro, North Carolina where I lived until I was about 28. I attended undergrad at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro but had to leave before completing because of a congenital heart defect. I returned to college in Chicago, earning my BA from DePaul University and my MFA from Columbia College.

I joined AmeriCorps directly after college although it took about 6 months for a program year to start and for me to make up my mind which program to join. I joined out of a commitment to the common good and because of the valuable experience it could provide. I serve as the Adult Literacy Volunteer Outreach Coordinator at Centro Romero, where I recruit and manage volunteer tutors. It has been an enjoyable experience for the most part, although not speaking Spanish has proven to be a significant challenge. Google Translate has been invaluable in that respect. Working with students has been the most enjoyable and most challenging part of this position. I have no concrete plans for after my service year. Except, of course, to do another service year. Because of having to leave school before earning a degree when I was younger, my student loan debt is even more significant than the already weighty debt of most people my age, so the 10 year student loan forgiveness is quite an enticing prospect.



In the future, given the time, I would love to earn a Ph.D. and get a job at a college or university teaching English and Creative Writing. I also plan to continue working on my own writing projects and hope to someday publish a novel and a memoir alongside the poetry I have already started (in a small way) to publish. Writing is my main hobby. I like to spend at least an hour a day working on some of the projects I have going, although that's not always possible. I have a poem that is published in Writing for Life, an anthology from Nervous Ghost Press, and one forthcoming in Beyond Words Literary Magazine's June issue. I also like to work out and I am taking singing lessons.

## Member Spotlight: Lydia Kelsey

A Chicago native, **Lydia Kelsey** is a full-time, second year member serving at Instituto del Progreso Latino. Lydia attended Goshen College in Indiana which she enjoyed greatly. She liked the smaller size of the school. Before joining AmeriCorps she had the opportunity to spend an extended amount of time in Michoacan, Mexico which she loved; she particularly enjoyed being exposed to the culture and the various delicious foods of Mexico.



At Instituto del Progreso Latino, which is located in the Pilsen neighborhood, Lydia teaches ESL classes an experience which she found difficult at the start since that was her first time teaching. However, she has been able to adapt and has found it a truly rewarding experience and she loves using her fluency in Spanish to help those who can only speak Spanish. After her time with AmeriCorps Lydia is unsure what she will be doing but will definitely wants to continue serving the community. However, in the future she would love to travel all over Mexico as well as Latin America as traveling is one of her hobbies and she had an amazing time in Mexico !



Instituto del Progreso Latino is an educational organization whose mission is to contribute to the fullest development of Latino immigrants and their families through education, training and employment. With offices on the southwest side of Chicago and other service locations, IDPL offers a continuum of adult education services from learning how to read in Spanish to the GED and onto college level classes ABE and pre-GED classes are also offered, as is English literacy for students with less than a 6th grade education in their first language. Also offered are computer literacy programs, internet access and employment-readiness and job placement assistance.

## Member Spotlight: Xochitl Isabella Figueroa

**Xochitl Figueroa**, who also goes by her middle name of Isabella, is a first year part-time AmeriCorps member serving as a Career Pathways Coordinator at Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition (CCLC) She also recently began tutoring in LVI's Jump Start program at the Illinois Youth Center (IYC) in Chicago. She was born and raised in Chicago and lives in the Pilsen neighborhood. She joined AmeriCorps in order to help others and gain valuable experience as she would like to work in community service. At CCLC, she helps provide many people with information that will help them succeed in the workforce such as getting grants for vocational school and where to find training or get other job or career help, which she finds very rewarding. She also finds tutoring at IYC Chicago to be very fulfilling. Like everyone, Xochitl has faced some challenges adjusting to her service activities and she finds the amount of work to sometimes be a little overwhelming but feels she has managed it very well. She also finds the processes at the IYC to be a little bit challenging as they require a lot of patience due to the security measure, but she is understanding of it.

Currently, Xochitl is attending National Louis University where she is majoring in Criminal Justice. She chose this major as her career goal is to help out the troubled youth in Chicago who deserve a second chance and support. At the moment she is unsure of what the future holds for certain but she is sure that she will be working towards her goal of helping out the community especially those who need the help and have more trouble than others. In her free time Xochitl enjoys listening to a lot of music.



The changing worlds of technology, career readiness and healthcare impact all of us, but for the 500,000 adults in Chicago with low basic skills, these shifting landscapes present even more of a challenge. Throughout the country, literacy coalitions serve the important roles of filling in the gaps between programs and building the infrastructure of programs that serve low-skilled adults. CCLC and our members design and implement programs that create opportunities for adults to build their skills and realize their dreams.

## Member Perspective - Three Months in Review

### March Quarterly Member Meeting

On the 5th of March we had our first Member meeting of the year and the first one in a couple of months. It was very nice to catch up and hear about the experiences and challenges faced so far by my fellow volunteers. It seemed that the experience for most if not all of the volunteers has been positive. Everyone was happy to be able to serve the community via their volunteering, and I agree; it has been the most fulfilling job I have ever had.



One of the challenges that I and some members shared were the awkwardness and growing pains that come with starting a new job and routine. Some members had to learn on the job but have grown strong because of it. One of the biggest challenges mentioned was the Coronavirus Pandemic. Due to the pandemic a lot of work has slowed down and left people feeling isolated as most of the members work from home. However, the meeting was a great opportunity to not only break the isolation but to learn from others on how they deal with these challenges. I learned a lot from the other members and have kept their advice in mind, I am grateful for the meeting and hope the members have a great remainder of their service year.

### February Training: The Business of Non-Profits

Our training for the month of February was once again provided to us by the excellent Keighty Ward. In the training they taught us about the Non-Profit industrial complex and encouraged us to examine ourselves and our organization. I found it very fascinating to learn about how charity can become commodified via the large tax exemptions and credits given to charities and other non-profit organizations as well as to their donors. I learned that the owners of large businesses actually benefit and make money by donating to charity since they are given tax cuts for doing so. Learning that made me want to learn more and I spent a few hours researching non-profits after the training was over. I enjoyed being encouraged to question my own organization and myself as I believe that self reflection can lead to a lot of growth.

Thankfully my experience at LVI and AmeriCorps has been amazing and it definitely feels like an organization that has the best interests of the community at heart. It has been a joy to tutor at IYC Chicago and to see the creativity, cleverness, and growth in the students. I am proud to work for my organization in service of my community. Again, thank you very much for another wonderful lesson Keighty!

### January Training - Adopting a Social Change Model in Adult Literacy

For January Keighty Ward provided the members with another great and thought provoking training session. It was thought provoking because it had us question the effect and methods of not only our organizations but ourselves as well. The training centered around if our organizations helped the symptom or the cause of an issue and how to identify the symptom or the root cause of an issue. Let's use Adult Literacy for example, as we know unfortunately we do not have a 100% literacy rate in the United States.

Now a root cause would potentially be something like the underfunding of schools. A root cause is what causes the issue so in this case the underfunding of schools would cause the symptom of illiteracy. A root cause can create a plethora of symptoms with the underfunding of schools. There is also a decrease of people pursuing post secondary education and less people equipped to go to a post secondary education let alone finish secondary education. The distinction between symptom and cause is very important as you do not only want to be treating the symptoms of an underlying issue but you should also try and treat the root cause of an issue in order to fully eliminate the issue. It is very similar to the proverb "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" in that you can help a community out by giving aid, tutoring, providing resources etc. but you can help a lot more and lower the frequency of an issue by trying to get to the root cause. And I found the training very helpful for this reason as it made me think about how I would tackle problems and their root causes not only in my service for Americorps but also in any future community help plans that I have.

- George Mendoza, Literacy Volunteers of Illinois

## Upcoming Dates

**May**

*Life After AmeriCorps*  
TBA

**Monday, May 31st**

*Memorial Day National Holiday*

**Friday, June 4th**

*Member Quarterly Meeting*  
9:00 a.m.- 1:00 p.m.

### LVI SOCIAL MEDIA



[www.Twitter.com/LVillinois](https://www.Twitter.com/LVillinois)



Visit [www.Facebook.com/lvillinois](https://www.Facebook.com/lvillinois) and click the “like” button.



Follow us on Instagram  
[@literacyvolunteersofillinois](https://www.instagram.com/literacyvolunteersofillinois)

## Night of 1,000 Stars Returns !

The Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition on behalf of the three regional literacy coalitions—Northside, South/Westside and Hispanic Council recently announced plans for a return of the popular annual event that celebrates the successes of adult learners—but it will be a virtual affair, and they are seeking form adult literacy programs —

Sort videos

Tell why your teacher or student is a star. Videos should be 30 seconds to one minute. Make sure there is good lighting and sound!

Share your talent

Showcase the musical or artistic talent of your learners and their culture in a video of no more than three to four minutes. Anything from dance to poems to dramatic readings to cultural displays. Get creative !

Write something special

Write 2-3 sentences about a favorite subject to study, why education is important or a favorite teacher. Email the writing along with a meaningful photo.

**SUBMISSION DEADLINE: APRIL 30, 2021**

Videos can be made on Zoom or any platform it can be saved as an .mp4.

Email [renuka@chicagocitywideliteracy.org](mailto:renuka@chicagocitywideliteracy.org) with any questions!



**February**

Hope Wetlesen  
2/26

**March**

Madilyn Atkins  
3/28

**April**

Alvin Cole  
4/13

Veronica Del Toro  
4/25

Gabriela Napolitano  
4/26

**May**

Valerie Painter  
5/14

Frank Leong  
5/14

**Belated Wishes to those whose Birthdays we missed !**