

Monse Salas: My AmeriCorps VISTA Experience

In August 2020, I joined the AmeriCorps VISTA Program at the City of Santa Rosa's Office of Community Engagement and Sonoma State University (SSU). Frankly, I would have never imagined that a year of national service would lead me to discover my interest in public service and with the local community. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I served under the SMC Community Impact Hubs. During my service term, I have primarily focused on continuing the coordination between the higher education institute, SSU, and non-profit partners, and strengthening and building new collaborations within my sites.

Serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA brought its own set of unique challenges but also a gratifying experience. Learning to deepen the City and Sonoma State's collaborations with their non-profit community partners and to provide resources for capacity-building at each site while empowering the local community through a virtual setting proved to be challenging, but it was one of the best decisions I have made. This year of national service was a year of self-discovery; it is only when you have nothing that you realize you have many things to gain. The more I became involved with the local community and came to meet various individuals where our current programs had made a substantial difference, I understood the importance of community engagement.

Through my year of service, I got the opportunity to work closely with City Transportation Planning staff and aided with community engagement strategies for the Highway 101 Bicycle and Pedestrian Crossover Project. At the Office of Community Engagement, I have assisted with the Multicultural Roots Project; worked closely with residents and community partners through planning events and providing materials and resources for events; and coordinated data collection for evaluation purposes. In addition, I have also assisted with translation services for program materials and live interpretation at meetings and community events. At SSU, I primarily focused on recruiting volunteers to assist with community events, but I have also spoken to many students and helped connect them with opportunities within the campus or outside opportunities.

My team members at SSU and the Office of Community Engagement have all been very welcoming, and from the first time I met them, I realized that we all shared one common goal: to continue to make a difference for the betterment of the community. While the road ahead of us is nowhere near an easy path, we must continue to balance optimism and community resilience. There are many success stories within the community. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I will continue to encourage community members to elevate their voices and encourage students to be dreamers and visionaries and to attain the resources they need. After serving with AmeriCorps, I want to focus on similar work that I do now and continue to work with more community members and students with a primary focus on higher education and closing achievement gaps. Lastly, I would like to mention that my term as a VISTA has helped me improve my leadership capabilities, professional and personal skills. My work has motivated me to step outside of my comfort zone and has opened my eyes to a whole new world of opportunities.