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Volunteerism in Crisis:
AmeriCorps as Disaster Response

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
The University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies

by
Emily Joy Danielson
B.A., Grinnell College, 2006

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ABSTRACT

AmeriCorps, the federal volunteer program developed in 1993, has won increasing political and cultural support since its development. Hurricane Katrina challenged program administrators to recruit and support volunteers in New Orleans, a uniquely devastated city. This qualitative study based on interviews with former volunteers examines the implications of AmeriCorps program policies for the recovery of post-Katrina New Orleans. Rooted in statements by the United Nations, the Federal Emergency Response Agency and local grassroots organizations, this study concludes that the AmeriCorps program was not effective in facilitating the return of displaced residents, appropriately utilizing city resources or maintaining strong accountability to those most affected by the disaster. Thus, the AmeriCorps program, which is not intended specifically for disaster relief, must be redesigned in order to accountably contribute to recovery in the cases of acute disaster.

Keywords: AmeriCorps, volunteerism, disasters, Hurricane Katrina.

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

The United States has a long history of volunteerism, originating with early religious charity where those with wealth assisted those “less fortunate” (O’Connell 1983, 1-4). There have been significant changes in national volunteerism since its beginning. Today, more people than ever before participate in volunteer activities—27% of the US population (CNCS 2006)—hope to better their communities, try something new and gain experience. The federal government has encouraged these endeavors, beginning with the internationally focused Peace Corps and continuing today with the growing national volunteer program, AmeriCorps. Following national disasters the number of volunteers and the hours they commit increase—as in the case of September 11th, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina. For the sake of this study I will use the definition of volunteerism as work done without financial compensation for an institution or organization. This is distinct from simply work without pay, as it is directly affiliated with an organization other than the home, such as church, school or a non-profit organization.

Hurricane Katrina and the tragic aftermath placed many government programs under intense scrutiny. It is my intention to examine the AmeriCorps program as a component of the federal disaster response in post-Katrina New Orleans through the work of federally supported volunteers. While Hurricane Katrina affected the entire Gulf Coast, my study is bounded by the borders of Orleans Parish, Louisiana, where federal infrastructure failure led to devastating flooding. By interviewing former AmeriCorps volunteers who served in this area in 2006 I explore the implications of federal volunteer policy in the ongoing recovery from this disaster.

New Orleans in January 2006 was still soggy. I traveled with a plane ticket from my future supervisor, and ate the first of many Meals Ready to Eat (MRE's) that evening. The next day I gutted my first of over two hundred houses with the support of a Christian relief organization. I was never an AmeriCorps volunteer, though I was socially connected with many of them. I volunteered with faith-based organizations for a year specializing in house gutting and volunteer coordination. Through this year and after, I struggled to understand the reasons for such an intense need for volunteer services. I discussed government neglect in hundreds of conversations with displaced people about FEMA, then-President Bush's statements, tax collection and other topics; however, I craved an understanding of the seeming paradox of government-sponsored volunteerism.

I chose Orleans Parish as my study site partially out of convenience—I am a resident and attend school in New Orleans—but more significantly, Hurricane Katrina was the largest national disaster of this century and the most widely recognized failure of federal disaster response. The density of population in Orleans Parish and the exceptional failure of levee infrastructure concentrated tragedy in this city. Additionally, the mass evacuation of all residents, including community organizers and activists working against social inequality, created what Klein identifies as a “beautiful” blank slate for opportunity seekers from all over the world (2007). According to a press release from the National Commission for Community Service, by August 2007 post-Katrina New Orleans has hosted over a million relief volunteers (CNCS 2007) often drawn by extensive media coverage of struggling survivors. Thus, New Orleans in 2006 is the ideal place to study volunteerism and the impacts of a federal program on a devastated city. This study is not exclusively on the impacts of federal policy; it also provides a snapshot of the volunteers who worked in

the Crescent City. They found AmeriCorps positions through online and personal connections and worked hard in difficult conditions.

The time frame for this project is the period of disaster recovery, not relief. The volunteers I interviewed were not responding to dehydrated people on rooftops, nor did they have to search for bodies or care for the sick without electricity. Rather, they were tasked with supporting the systems that began to take hold following mass evacuation. Some were new, such as systems of utilizing and handling the mass influx of volunteer labor, and some were old, such as public education. Rachel E. Luft also identifies this time as the period in which the “second generation” of social movement groups, focusing on grassroots organizing for a “just reconstruction,” were developing (2009, 504). As many new groups were emerging federal grants of low-cost AmeriCorps labor supported only specific organizations.

This study explores the implications of AmeriCorps policies for New Orleans in 2006—one year after Hurricane Katrina. I focus on the AmeriCorps program and examine volunteer recruitment methods, the applicable training and experience volunteers received, the benefits they were offered in exchange for their labor, the actual work they did, and their relationship to official AmeriCorps rules and regulations. My analysis places this information in the context of the needs of displaced people, resource availability in the city during this time and the history of social justice organizing in the South. While the AmeriCorps program is not designed as a disaster response program, it consistently increases the number of volunteers sent to a specific location following an acute disaster (CNCS k). A statement issued by the Commission for National and Community Service states “The Corporation’s Board of Directors added a new strategic initiative on disaster

preparedness and response...This action reflects the agency's growing expertise and increased commitment to help individuals and communities expand their capacity to prepare for and respond to natural disasters” (CNCS 2009). Thus, I place the AmeriCorps program in the context of the federal government’s reaction to Hurricane Katrina, in order to contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of the role of government following disasters.

My data analysis is from my perspective as a post-Katrina resident of New Orleans and in the context of local needs. Through my research I determine that AmeriCorps policy provides insufficient support—financial and otherwise—making it an unattractive employment option for displaced residents, and relies heavily on the services of the disaster-struck city to support the needs of volunteers. Due to the low financial stipends, insufficient health care and selective publicizing, New Orleans residents were discouraged from participating in AmeriCorps. Following a disaster, those affected are in increased need of well paying jobs and health care for any injuries, trauma induced conditions, and mental health needs. AmeriCorps job postings were selective and disproportionately drew those who were computer savvy or had personal connections with select organizational leaders. Many volunteers were housed in former homeless shelters and hospitals—areas that could have been used to ease the homelessness and health care crisis of residents. They were provided emergency-only health care despite working in dangerous conditions, forcing some to rely on an already over-burdened local charity medical system. Volunteers faced an extreme amount of stress, which contributed to a significantly low organizational retention rate following service completion—and the highest dropout rate the AmeriCorps program has known. This increased the turnover rate in organizations and required more

energy to be spent on training new volunteers than on increasing organizational capacity. Despite all of this, individual post-Katrina AmeriCorps volunteers worked to the brink of exhaustion, wracked their brains for creative solutions to overwhelming problems and struggled to help the ravaged city of New Orleans.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this thesis I offer an analysis of the AmeriCorps program in the 21st century. My case study, the first AmeriCorps team in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, examines the role of federally sponsored volunteers in disaster recovery¹. The history of the AmeriCorps program began in 1964 with Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA)—the first federally sponsored national volunteer program—which recruited mostly white, college-educated young people to provide social services in southern black communities. Simultaneously, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was recruiting a demographically similar volunteer population to advocate for political change in very similar communities through their Freedom Summer program. As government priorities and political climates shifted, VISTA was incorporated into a full-fledged AmeriCorps program and SNCC folded. Now, looking at recent U.S. history of government response to the devastation following Hurricane Katrina, it is my intention to place AmeriCorps within the context of disaster response and efforts of social justice organizations in the South.

VISTA

In his 1961 introduction to the Peace Corps program, President John F. Kennedy stated: “The wisdom of this idea is that someday we’ll bring it home to America” (Americans for a National Service Act, 2007). Peace Corps volunteers do important work such as teach in schools, provide health care, develop businesses and plant trees; however, some academics are critical of the political and cultural implications of the program.

¹ In this case I use the term “team” to represent the annual group of volunteers in the area. These groups are sometimes referred to in the literature as “generations.”

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman writes that the Peace Corps as a program holds U.S. culture in such high esteem that experience and training perpetuates U.S. imperialism and demonstrates much of the political naiveté of the 1960s: “It threw young volunteers at the third world in the way the United States Army threw draftees at the Vietnam War—with approximately the same effectiveness at times and the same assumptions, namely that American will was enough to make the nation prevail” (1998, 10). Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) was the first federally funded national service program following in the footsteps of the internationally focused Peace Corps. The VISTA program, created by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 as part of the War on Poverty, brought the ideology of the Peace Corps to the national arena.

Five hundred college students applied to the first year of VISTA and one hundred were selected and placed with the North Carolina Fund (NCF). They were “young and idealistic,” came from middle class households and women outnumbered men three to one (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 8 and 13). Fifteen out of the one hundred were African American (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 8). The first VISTA service corps received a \$250 stipend plus room and board for 10 weeks of service (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 185). Beginning in 1965, VISTA workers were compensated \$75 per month and contracted for one year with the option to extend for another. Upon the completion of service, volunteers were awarded an additional \$650 (Wilansky 1969, 993).

The NCF was established in 1963 by Governor Terry Sanford as an anti-poverty volunteer program (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 177). Stanford chartered the new agency as a private, nonprofit corporation whose purpose was to “enable the poor to become productive, self-reliant citizens, and to foster institutional, political, economic, and social

change designed to bring about a functioning, democratic society” (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 182). From 1963 to 1968, the Fund drew the bulk of its financial support from the Ford Foundation and agencies of the federal government² (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 182). According to Korstad and Leloudis, the NCF foreshadowed the development of nonprofit social service providers that “today stand alongside government and business as a vital third sector in the development of social and economic policy” (1999, 183).

The majority of the first VISTA volunteers working with the North Carolina Fund assisted children in educational or recreational programs through tutoring in public schools or assisting the local Parks and Recreation department (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 186 and 197). In the process some VISTA volunteers began organizing communities around playground construction, federal funding for after school tutoring, and the creation of Head Start programs (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 191). As the VISTA program expanded, work assignments and geographical placement became increasingly diverse. By 1966 the VISTA program expanded dramatically, supporting 3600 volunteers scattered across the country (CNCS i). Eileen Wilansky reports VISTA workers in the late 1960s serving in mental hospitals, working with migrant workers, assisting alcoholics in city slums, teaching mothers “hygiene techniques,” setting up community clinics, collecting clothing donations and visiting senior citizens (1969, 991). The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) reports that mid-sixties VISTA volunteers helped to develop the first Head Start programs and Job Corps sites, started agricultural cooperatives, organized community groups and supported small businesses (CNCS i). Many volunteers were building careers and gaining experience with their volunteer service. A VISTA volunteer who aspired to be a

² The Ford Foundation contributed \$7 million and total allocation from public funds totaled \$7,042,753.

nurse recalled that her service year was “the closest I could come to direct nursing experience without actually being licensed” (Wilansky 1969, 993). While many volunteers brought unique skills to their work, there were no educational requirements, tests or examinations, and volunteers were often placed in positions for which they had few qualifications (Wilansky 1969, 993).

The majority of the early VISTA volunteers were northerners and encountered southern poverty and racism for the first time during their service year (Clotfelter 1999, 15). They were offered a six-week pre-service training course that did not address root causes of poverty.

When faced with such suffering, most of the Volunteers turned, at least initially, to explanations that were both familiar and comforting. While they never quite blamed the poor for their plight, they did locate the causes of poverty within a cluster of social and psychological inadequacies. The poor, it seemed, ‘believed in nothing and [had] little faith in their own capacities.’ Such views provided both emotional distance from hardship and assurance that the Volunteers could ‘fix’ the people they encountered. ‘All we had to do was clean up this one generation,’ a former Volunteer recalled many years later, ‘educate these people and lift them up, and it would be over with. We really believed that’ (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 186).

While this mindset was not constant among volunteers, the VISTA program did not offer a more comprehensive analysis of social problems. Individual community members exposed volunteers to the complex systems that keep people in poverty (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 187). In response many VISTAs began organizing concerned citizens to address community concerns. For these efforts volunteers faced institutional backlash.

Some members of the first VISTA team grew weary of “keeping order on ball fields” and began organizing parents to build a playground “in a poor black neighborhood where the city refused to provide recreational services” (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 189-190).

This first group of volunteers was only contracted for ten weeks, which limited the

effectiveness of organizing work, which requires long-term commitments; however, the state political structure that ran the NCF lashed out against their new efforts. As remembered by a former volunteer, the mayor of Durham proclaimed to volunteers “We, the volunteers, must remember that we were employees (in effect) of the City of Durham, and under the city's thumb. We are here to serve as requested, not to change the requests. In short, we are here to be un-creative, and not to fight poverty, but to play the city's conservative ball game” (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 189-190). Ultimately the North Carolina Fund—which hosted the first VISTA group in the summer of 1964— terminated the volunteer program citing “the tension between service and activism” (Clotfelter 1999, 15).

Daniel Blumenthal, a VISTA volunteer in 1969-1970, recalled similar tension. He writes that many of his fellow VISTA volunteers spent their days driving people to the welfare office or distributing used clothing (2002, 26). “Those jobs constitute service, to be sure, and they need to be done, but in the long run they don’t change anything” (Blumenthal 2002, 26). Conflicted between service provision and wanting to change systems that make such services necessary, many volunteers felt a sense of frustration and failed to complete their contracted time with VISTA (Blumenthal 2002, 26).

In New Orleans in the mid-1960s, VISTA volunteers were placed with local organizations such as the Social Welfare Planning Council (SWPC) and Total Community Action (TAC), where much of the initial tension from the first VISTA summer continued. In 1965 twenty white VISTAs were sent to New Orleans. Kent Germany describes them as aggressive activists and organizers (2007, 88). The SWPC brought them on to “play effective roles in community affairs” and to “raise residents’ self esteems” (Germany 2007,

88). VISTA workers immediately began attempting to organize poor black communities for social and political change. The SWPC lashed out in response, explaining, “VISTA meant three social workers at no cost”— emphasizing the expectation that VISTAs would provide social services, not political agitation (Germany 2007, 88). VISTAs were denied numerous requests to move into neighborhoods they were working in, to hold meetings in public places, to post potentially controversial fliers and to organize against agencies of the government (Germany 2007, 88 and 91). Two volunteers, Peter Friedberg and Gary Sledge, attempted to organize the Central City neighborhood against police brutality; as a result they were targeted by the New Orleans Police Department and the FBI, accused of being communist sympathizers and transferred by VISTA away from the city (Germany 2007, 91-92). New Orleans VISTAs were so disgusted with the restrictions placed on them that only four out of the original twenty completed their full term of service (Germany 2007, 88).

Nationally, VISTA volunteers in the 1960s and 70s came into conflict with local political leaders in communities where they worked (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 190). Some recruits openly questioned Jim Crow laws, and some allied with civil rights resistance. In response, President Nixon placed restrictions on all VISTA participants, confining their activities to politically neutral service provision (Clotfelter 1999, 10). As a result of the new regulations, increasing numbers of VISTA volunteers grew so frustrated with the restrictions on their work that they chose not to complete their service year (Blumenthal 2002, 26).

Simultaneous with the first VISTA program, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was recruiting volunteers to fight poverty in a different way. Freedom Summer was designed to expose the nation to the root causes of poverty through the stories

of privileged volunteers. It was intentionally politically radical and expected participants to actively organize black communities. Demographically similar groups of volunteers were drawn to both projects; however, they ultimately had very different experiences and impacts.

SNCC

The Freedom Summer was spearheaded by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and ran from June to August 1964—concurrently with the first VISTA program³. SNCC, originally founded by students involved with lunch counter sit-ins, has won a secure place among the “Big Five” civil rights organizations (Polletta 2002, 88). The goal of the Freedom Summer project was to draw national attention to the violence and segregation in Mississippi, thus forcing federal intervention (McAdam 1988, 39). SNCC recruited students from top colleges and universities in the country to participate in Freedom Summer. “The Volunteers” were 650 young people, mostly Northerners, mostly white, and mostly students or “nonprofessionals” (Sutherland 1965, 4). They were not burdened with families, marriage, debt or career worries, which would have hampered their significant mobility (McAdam 1988, 44). Volunteers were housed with host families or in large collective Freedom Houses and were offered no financial compensation for their work. According to McAdam, the financial requirements meant that the majority of volunteers were upper and middle class (1988, 41). Less than 10% of the volunteers were black despite some money being set aside for fellowships and 41% of applicants were women—surprising considering they were agreeing to potentially dangerous situations

³ The Freedom Summer is also referred to as the Mississippi Summer Project.

which tend to be male dominated (McAdam 1988, 41 and 43). The average SNCC volunteer age was 23.2 (McAdam 1988, 41). Similar to VISTA participants, Freedom Summer volunteers interacted intimately with southern racism and poverty, realities many of them had never previously experienced (McAdam 1988, 41).

Freedom Summer programs included registering black voters and running Freedom Schools in rural Mississippi. SNCC believed that voting was crucial to gaining power and challenging political systems that did not look out for black interests (Polletta 2002, 70). Volunteers canvassed door-to-door trying to convince black citizens to register to vote—despite constant threats of violence (McAdam 1988, 80-81). Ultimately 17,000 Mississippi blacks traveled to the courthouse to attempt to register, and only 1,600 applications were accepted (McAdam 1988, 81)—a clear testimony to the efforts of volunteers and to the prejudice of the state registrar. SNCC also realized that it was more than political restriction oppressing the black population. Freedom Schools, which were designed to “counter the obvious inequities and insidious political messages” inherent in the public educational systems, were a successful component of the Freedom Summer project (McAdam 1988, 83-84). Activities included leadership development and academic learning about black history and other topics (McAdam 1988, 84). SNCC anticipated approximately 1,000 students and over 3,000 showed up despite “the lack of facilities, fears of black parents and considerable violence directed at the school” (McAdam 1988, 84). Despite this success there were many setbacks—both McAdam and Polletta report numerous instances of conflict and violence. Freedom Summer volunteers and SNCC staff were frequently in harm’s way, and faced daily life threatening violence. State institutions, the local police, state sheriffs and the FBI directly perpetuated a large majority of the violence. These

institutions also sanctioned the violence of white vigilantes who independently took it upon themselves to punish participants in the project (McAdam 1988, 96-101). SNCC's vision and insightfulness made both Freedom Schools and voter registration efforts highly successful, based on the positive impacts these programs had on low-income black communities.

White volunteers were consistently under black leadership, which was a cornerstone of the project's anti-racist agenda. Highly educated, white, middle class youth were not accustomed to taking direction from people of color, which agitated already existing tensions (Polletta 2002, 105). SNCC culture and staff interactions were strongly influenced by black church culture, while white activists were shaped by secular, raced, classed and gendered ideas which they brought into the organizing sphere (Polletta 2002, 61). White volunteers sometimes flaunted their class and educational privileges, were ignorant of the complexities of southern race relations and intimidated residents with their formal political skills (Polletta year, 105). Eventually some whites—defined by Polletta as “freedom highs” (2002, 88)—got uncomfortable with their lack of power in the movement, especially during the shift away from participatory democracy to a more intentional top-down leadership structure (Polletta 2002, 90). Whites abandoning expectations of leadership was fundamental to the movement according to Ella Baker, one of SNCC's founders, who stated, “Deferring to residents in decision-making was a way to prove organizers' trustworthiness and to show that they had no desire to press residents into service on behalf of their personal agendas” (Polletta 2002, 69). SNCC staff members were committed and patient enough to address conflict and volunteers' racism successfully—over 80 mostly white volunteers remained in Mississippi after the program was officially

over to continue the work. This massive influx of newly hired staff members caused conflict and organizational weakness at SNCC following the Freedom Summer (Polletta 2002, 88). Conflict centered on the role of whites, decision making practices and SNCC's position in larger social movements (Polletta 2002, 88-89; Meyer, Whittier and Robnett 2002, 274-276).

This principle of accountability by leadership remains a cornerstone in social justice work. According to Paul Kivel, "To make effective decisions about your own work we need to be accountable to those groups [at the bottom of the economic pyramid] and take direction from their actions and issues" (2007, 146). Additionally, Paul Kivel states that examining supervision structures in organizations is fundamental to understanding whose interests are being prioritized. He expands to give examples emphasizing the importance of those with privilege (race, gender or class) being supervised by those experiencing oppression (Kivel 2007, 146).

The Freedom Summer politically radicalized volunteers. Many referred to the Freedom Summer as a "watershed" moment that completely changed the course of their lives (McAdam 1988, 12). McAdam cites one Freedom Summer volunteer reflecting on his service as saying "I went from being a liberal Peace Corps-type Democrat to a raging, maniacal lefty" (1988, 127). Another, discussing his former political ignorance states, "Politics? What the hell was that? I didn't know for nothing about politics...I was going to spend my summer 'helping Negroes'...sort of a domestic Peace Corps member" (McAdam 1988, 47). By the end of August 1964, volunteers' politics had changed—they joined and often led radical organizations upon returning to school or home. McAdam discusses significant influences Freedom Summer volunteers had on the Free Speech Movement, the

Antiwar Movement and Women's Liberation Movement, as well as their continued involvement with the Civil Rights Movement (1988, 161-198). As shown by the above quotes, Freedom Summer volunteers explicitly distinguished themselves from government-supported volunteers. They emphasized that prior to their service they were politically neutral or liberal, similar to those involved with Peace Corps. As a result of participation in Freedom Summer, they were transformed into politically radical activists.

Following the Freedom Summer, SNCC shifted ideologically away from the interracial beloved community vision to one of "collective identity" and demanded that whites work in their own communities to challenge racism and white supremacy (Meyer, Whitter and Robnett 2002, 269 and 275). SNCC and later, the Black Panther Party's (BPP) statements reflected the widespread demands by black radicals for work by white allies—black leaders would define the terms, strategy and organization of their own liberation and white activists must organize their own communities against racism (Barber 2006, 225). These demands were difficult for many white activists to follow. They were pushed into an unfamiliar leadership structure and were asked to do uncharismatic organizing work with their own families and friends. This caused significant numbers of whites to sever their ties with SNCC. As one former Freedom Summer volunteer explained "The leadership changed and it became much less of an open organization... I didn't like the leadership and its new direction" (Meyer, Whitter and Robnett 2002, 280).

Political Shifts

From Movements to Markets

The political climate that birthed both SNCC and VISTA was significantly different from that of the twenty-first century. The 1960s saw a climate of successful Third World uprisings around the world that encouraged some youth to join up with radical groups (Green and Siegel 2002). Intense political controversy spurred revolutionary thought and action in the United States and abroad. “The civil rights movement, now at high tide, was challenging the nation to fulfill its promise of equality and opportunity. Not since the Civil War and Reconstruction had so many citizens demanded so clearly the full implementation of equal rights before the law” (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 180). According to John H. Strange, “One of the most controversial pieces of domestic legislation of that period was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 which established Community Action Programs, funded by the federal government, yet operated for the most part by private, nonprofit agencies exempt from direct political review or control at the local or state level” (Strange 1972, 655). This was the first snowflake in an impending blizzard of public-private alliances. The government increasingly partnered with for-profit and non-profit agencies to address social problems.

Neo-liberalism rose to prominence in the late 1970s, advocating market-based solutions to social problems (Gotham and Greenberg 2008, 1039). This increasingly popular three-pronged—government, for-profit and non-profit—responsibility for social problems was adapted to an individual level in the 1990s. Petras details a significant political shift during the Clinton administration away from state responsibility for the country’s pervasive social problems, towards an individual do-gooder responsibility. The

era of “big government” shifted to “big citizenship” (1997, 1587). Political encouragement of corporations, non-profits and individual citizens to claim responsibility for pervasive social problems has increased dramatically since the 1960s. This increase in reliance on non-governmental entities has been coupled with decreased spending on welfare and other anti-poverty initiatives from the federal level (Ahn 2007, 63). As the state disinvests from supporting poor families, it places increased responsibility on well-meaning citizens and non-profit entities to pick up the slack. This shifts the financial burden away from federal and state budgets and places the responsibility of comprehensive services for those living in poverty on a multitude of organizations that citizens now have a moral responsibility to support.

Americans have always done work without pay. Families have cared for children, neighbors have helped each other with construction projects, and congregants played the piano in their church. “Americans have worked in their communities since the nation’s founding. Businesses, churches, and schools all actively help organize their members’ efforts” (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 29).⁴ The rate of volunteering in the US has increased steadily since the 1970s, with an increase of 32% since 1989 (CNCS 2006, 2). Teenagers, ages sixteen to nineteen contributed significantly to this change, with their rates of volunteerism more than doubling since 1989. Volunteering with educational or youth organizations and participating in community service has dramatically increased, counteracting the decline in volunteer hours for religious institutions, political causes, civic

⁴ While religious institutions are often most recognized for their charitable or missionary work, many have a history of organizing members to advocate for social change as well as provide services. “From religious pacifists to Quaker abolitionists to Catholic settlement workers, much of America’s activist history has had deep roots in the church” (McAdam 1988, 48). While faith-based activism continues today, a change in political climate and an increase in dependence on foundation funding has affected this component of religious work as well as that of other institutions. The majority of faith-based work in the U.S. represents a Christian responsibility to charity.

organizations, health care needs and art and cultural causes (CNCS 2006, 3). Thus, as more and more people volunteer, their efforts are increasingly focused on education/youth outreach and direct service to communities. There was a dramatic increase in volunteerism in New Orleans following Katrina, specifically in 2006 and 2007. According to CNCS, searches of Serve.gov increased 535% after Katrina (CNCS e). Significant numbers of Americans were turning to this federally sponsored, online resource for recommendations on how to assist victims.

Foundations developed in the early 1900s to establish a bureaucracy to help the wealthy handle voluminous charitable requests (Roelofs 2003, 7). John D. Rockefeller established The Rockefeller Foundation in 1913 with the intent of creating a central financial parent for all other charitable organizations and showing to socialists that capitalism can promote public good (Roelofs 2003, 7). Early foundations also served their founders as tax shelters. When Edsel Ford died in 1947 his family's foundation—The Ford Foundation—was allocated the majority of his wealth (Roelofs 2003, 8). “Some \$300 million in inheritance taxes shrunk to a few million and it was arranged for the foundation to pick up even this modest tab” (Brinton 1958, 41). This allowed the Ford family to retain control of their ancestor's money, while avoiding significant taxes. According to Roelofs, “Tax evasion and public relations have motivated most foundations (along with indeterminable quantities of guilt and benevolence)” (2003, 8). Taxes that otherwise would have been levied on considerable wealth remain within the jurisdiction of private foundations. “Foundations are made partly with dollars which, were it not for charitable deductions allowed by tax laws, would have become public funds to be allocated through

the governmental process under the controlling power of the electorate as a whole” (Ahn 2007, 65).

Certainly many decision makers within foundations have good intentions and truly wish to assist those with less access to wealth. There is, however, a difference between providing necessities for people—as charities such as soup kitchens do—and providing people with the means to procure them on their own. The Walsh Commission in 1915 investigated foundations and took testimony on foundations’ operations. Witnesses were critical of foundation heads stating, “if Rockefeller and Carnegie wanted to improve human welfare, they might pay their workers more” (Roelofs 2003, 9).

Wealthy foundations are responsible for funding a significant amount of the charitable work that is done in this country and abroad (INCITE! 2007, 4). Simultaneously, foundations, particularly Ford, became involved in the civil rights movement, often steering it into more conservative directions (INCITE! 2007, 5; Arnove 1980, 4). This was accomplished by only funding specific projects within radical organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality chapter in Harlem. Significant amounts of money were allocated to a small business and industry development project while none was provided for the organization’s desire to create an all-black school board to control local public schools (Allen 1969, 126). Thus, foundations simultaneously provide tax shelter for wealthy benefactors, fund charities which provide much needed social services but do very little to address underlying inequalities which create the need, and support only specific projects within controversial organizations. Foundation funding sustains the approximately 1.9 million non-profit organizations operating within the United States today (IRS 2008). Many of these organizations have been recipients of AmeriCorps grants

and/or volunteers. By providing extremely low cost labor to select institutions, the federal government not only publicly encourages the organization's work and mission but also provides concrete resources to strengthen it.

President Obama began the call for increased volunteerism in his inaugural address and backed it by signing the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in April 2009 which increased funding for AmeriCorps and other programs supporting domestic volunteers. As a result of this legislation, AmeriCorps participation has increased from 75,000 to 250,000 volunteers annually (The White House 2010). These actions are rooted in a strong historical precedent—the federal government has created increasingly large national volunteer programs since the New Deal (Light 2002, 47). John F. Kennedy developed the Peace Corps soon after his election in 1960, followed closely by Johnson's VISTA in 1964 which continued until Clinton incorporated it into AmeriCorps—today's largest service program in the U.S.—in 1993 (Clotfelter 1999, 6). Except for Gerald Ford, every president since John F. Kennedy has encouraged volunteerism rhetorically and often programmatically (Light 2002, 45). According to Light, Nixon bolstered volunteerism more than any other president in our history by establishing a Cabinet Committee on Voluntary Action, an Office of Voluntary Action within the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and The National Center for Voluntary Action (2002, 47). Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both encouraged volunteerism, though they did little to establish new programs (Light 2002, 46). George H. Bush launched his Points of Light program in 1989 to call all individual Americans and institutions including corporations, schools and places of worship to claim society's problems as their own and to help solve them (Greenya 2006,

580). Individual responsibility is a very old concept in US culture; however, political programs expanded this notion to task citizens with solving prevailing social problems.

The Reagan and Bush administrations and the Republican Congress of the 1990s called for the non-profit sector to take over from government more of the responsibility for dealing with social problems (Coltfelder 1999, 9). Clinton created two significant programs which decreased government responsibility for social problems—his AmeriCorps program provides a stipend to well-meaning volunteers to assist those less fortunate and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 decreased government support for welfare programs. One of the most important pieces of this welfare reform bill was increased expectations for individuals to support themselves by working or by seeking help from places other than the government—which was enforced with a strict five-year time limit for welfare benefits (Hays 2003, 16). While this reform act decreased the welfare rolls dramatically—from 12.2 million recipients in 1996 to 5.3 million in 2001, the number of people living in poverty only decreased by approximately 11%⁵ (Hays 2003, 17 and U.S. Census Bureau 2006). According to Hays, many families who have left welfare are “...turning to locally funded services, food banks, churches, and other charities for aid. Many of those charities are already overburdened. In some locales, homeless shelters and housing assistance programs are closing their doors to new customers, food banks are running out of food, and other charities are being forced to tighten their eligibility requirements” (2003, 227). Thus, as welfare funding decreases, charities and other non-profits have not been able to adequately fill the gap by providing services to families living in poverty. It should also be noted that this research is based on data before the 2008

⁵ The number of people living in poverty in the US in 1996 was 36,529,000 while in 2001 it was 32,907,000.

economic downturn that is causing even greater numbers of families to depend on social services and charitable giving.

Political encouragement of individual volunteerism has increased to place the burden of filling this gap on the shoulders of well-meaning individual citizens. Whether it is through an afternoon of volunteering, a financial donation or a year of AmeriCorps service, there are taxation and benefit incentives for individuals who have the capacity to help in whatever way they deem fit. In his 2002 State of the Union address then-President George W. Bush issued the challenge: “My call tonight is for every American to commit at least two years, 4,000 hours over the rest of your lifetime, to the service of your neighbors and your nation.” George W. Bush’s recent call for individuals to volunteer with organizations follows the tradition established by Nixon, Reagan and his father (Light 2002, 47). In 2003, the second President Bush created USA Freedom Corps and increased funding of Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. The federally maintained USA Freedom Corps Volunteer Network, Serve.gov, is the largest online searchable database for volunteer opportunities. It includes collaboration among government agencies, for-profit companies, non-profit organizations and private foundations (Bridgeland, Goldsmith and Lenkowsky 2002, 21). Organizations listed on this website are not clearly identified as government, for-profit or non-profit. This fits into a neo-liberal framework by eliminating distinctions between these three types of institutions and possibly funneling volunteers to projects that benefit corporations. This network only displays government approved volunteer opportunities, effectively directing potential volunteers who turn to the Internet for information away from projects and organizations that challenge political policies.

Service Provision

Increased political encouragement of volunteerism has been coupled with a cultural shift for 18 to 24 year olds, away from political action and toward service provision (Walker 2000, 648). “Service has been positioned as a morally superior alternative, a belief reinforced through rhetoric and practice by parts of the community service movement” (Walker 2000, 647). As the Black Power movement of the 1960s focused on transformative change, the 21st century service provision emphasis focuses on survival within the system. Acquiring services becomes an end in itself (Petras 2000, 1589). Petras asserts that volunteerism distracts the concerned citizen away from holding the state and government agencies accountable for the conditions low income families face (2000, 1589). Volunteerism holds the privileged individual accountable for social inequality, assuming that individuals are better suited to solve mass social inequality than increased government investment. Similarly, service provision depoliticizes social problems absolving national and state agencies of structural responsibility (Petras 2000, 1587). Walker states, “If students only think of civic engagement as individual, results driven activity, they are not necessarily challenging institutions in power. Feeding the hungry does nothing to disrupt or rethink poverty or injustice. Tutoring inner-city kids does nothing to secure more resources for schools or ensure that teachers are held accountable” (2000, 647). According to Petras, policy change is necessary to reduce the need for services which institutional injustice and disinvestment induces (2000, 1589). Political and cultural encouragement to assist the poor is based on serving individual, short-term needs—a meal, a bed for the night, homework help, a shower, even a counseling session. Well-meaning

individuals are not given incentives to fight for policy changes in the areas of food justice, housing availability, educational inequalities or health care.⁶

There is an assumption that as the government pulls away from direct funding and support of social services, that it effectively fills the gap by providing incentives—often financial—to organizations and individuals who wish to provide services. There are two significant differences between the state directly providing services—say food stamp allocation—and government support of non-profits—for example offering an AmeriCorps volunteer to a soup kitchen. The first is one of decision-making authority. As previously mentioned, federal programs are subject to public scrutiny and at least some degree of voter approval (Ahn 2007, 65). Faith-based and non-profit organizations are accountable to their select leadership—not the national electoral base. The second issue is that volunteerism and charity does not consistently prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable people in their communities. Wofford, Waldman and Bandow identify a drawback to relying on volunteerism to accommodate for decreased federal investment: “One-third of the volunteering done by those 90 million Americans consists of serving on committees, baby-sitting, singing in the church choir, or other activities that are beneficial but hardly a substitute for the welfare state” (1996, 29). Similarly, in discussing volunteer efforts coordinated by faith-based institutions, Waldman indicates “while all this charitable activity is valuable, it should not be confused with help for the poor—or with solving social

⁶ A review of Serve.gov turns up many opportunities that would fall into the former list and almost none that fall in the latter. For example, searching the term “Food Justice” generates opportunity titles such as: “Food Pantry Bagger Needed,” “Assist with Food Distribution” and “Grant Writers Wanted.” There were no search results from the term “racial justice” and “housing” generates options to visit with seniors and build for Habitat for Humanity. I do not mean to imply that these are bad opportunities or should not be pursued. Rather, I am attempting to highlight the emphasis the federal government has placed on service provision as the superior use of volunteers, which is in contradiction to the political emphasis SNCC and other civil rights groups placed on their volunteer programming.

problems. Most religious charity and volunteerism is directed inward—toward the congregation, the building, the Sunday school, the organ—rather than outward toward the community as a whole” (2002, 33). Additionally, there is church and state tension when agendas for social service provision are shifted from government authority to religious decision-making processes.

The second difference, identified by Clotfelter, is that a large percentage of volunteers are amateurs—defined as those who are not trained for the work they are doing or are in employment positions above their qualification level (1999, 2). “Despite the undeniable trend over time toward greater professionalization of so many activities, including those of government and nonprofit organizations, a significant amount of effort that advances social policy in the United States continues to be carried out by persons such as those described above, who either do not receive a paycheck or receive a modest paycheck for doing work for which they were not professionally trained” (Clotfelter 1999, 2). The early VISTA program sponsored amateurs to provide health care, education and other services to very low-income communities. The volunteers who are expected to help fill the gaps in the welfare state often have no background in the work with which they are tasked. Even today, of the three AmeriCorps programs—National Civilian Conservation Corps (NCCC), VISTA and State/National—only one (VISTA) actively recruits participants with higher education or work experience. NCCC and State/National qualification summaries identify citizenship status and age as the only limitations to participant eligibility (CNCS a). According to Walters, “Crime, drug abuse, family breakdown, and other social crises are so complicated that traditional institutions such as churches and voluntary associations cannot possibly address them. Only policy specialists trained in the delivery of

social services—therapeutic-state elites—are up to the task” (1996, 44). Thus, social workers, health care providers, counselors, teachers and others who find themselves unemployed due to government budget cuts may be replaced with individuals who may be aspiring to those positions yet have not been trained or certified. In contrast, social movement scholars insist that community leadership and control is necessary to address the problems affecting a population⁷. It is important to recognize that neither position advocates for unprofessional, non-local volunteers to address social problems.

Training and support is especially valuable when working in disaster areas, where it is important for volunteers to know how to handle traumatic situations. According to Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, a researcher of secondary trauma, it is also necessary that those who are assisting in the recovery have access to support and mental health services. She explains: “We frequently see trauma exposure response manifest in our work in two ways: lack of accountability and unethical behavior” (2009, 25). Secondary trauma affects workers who then “unknowingly abuse their power in their client interactions, or develop policies that are not mindful and consistent with the values of the organization, or competing with other organizations instead of collaborating” (van Dernoot Lipsky 2009, 27).

AmeriCorps

President Clinton created AmeriCorps in 1993, incorporating the continuing VISTA program and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) that had been created in 1992

⁷ Nancy A. Matthews explains that survivors of gendered violence must take leadership positions in ending these acts (Matthews 1994). Bursik and Grasmick document the effectiveness of community control of crime prevention programs (1993). SNCC, similar to other anti-racist organizations, saw black leadership as a cornerstone of their political and social agendas (as discussed on page 4).

as a way to explore usage of post-Cold War military resources in a national context (CNCS i). Today, AmeriCorps programs include VISTA as well as State/National and NCCC. The VISTA branch of AmeriCorps remains rooted in its original mission as a component of the federal war on poverty. VISTA is unique as it is not exclusively focused on service provision but rather on capacity building of anti-poverty organizations through building infrastructure and community partnerships, and by securing resources and trainings (CNCS 2008). NCCC is a highly mobile, full-time, residential volunteer program for men and women age 18–24. Members are assigned to one of five NCCC campuses and travel regionally to complete service work hosted by local organizations lasting no more than eight weeks in one area (CNCS d). The majority of AmeriCorps volunteers are distributed between State and National programs⁸. AmeriCorps State works with the Governor-appointed State Service Commission that allocates volunteers to numerous non-profits and faith-based organizations (CNCS e). AmeriCorps National places volunteers in federally approved organizations. Both State and National AmeriCorps programs, hosting the lion's share of AmeriCorps participants, focus on direct service provision with tasks such as tutoring and mentoring youth, assisting crime victims, building homes, and restoring parks (CNCS g). The first class of 20,000 AmeriCorps members in 1994 served in 1,000 different communities across the country (CNCS i).

In April 2009 President Obama tripled the size of AmeriCorps, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, many of whom have channeled federal funds to bolster AmeriCorps and other volunteer programs. In 2006, \$542.9 million supported 75,000 members working nationally (Eisner 2005). In 2006 VISTA was allocated \$96.4 million,

⁸ Of the 75,000 AmeriCorps volunteers in 2007, 67,350 served with AmeriCorps State or National programs.

State/National \$275 million and NCCC \$25.5 million (CNCS h).⁹ The total cost to the Corporation per AmeriCorps member averages \$18,000 including administrative costs (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 32). The financial incentive of encouraging volunteerism to address social problems for which the state would otherwise be responsible made AmeriCorps increasingly attractive to Republicans who initially opposed the program. Former Michigan Governor George Romney, a strong supporter of AmeriCorps, framed the program in a 1995 statement as having the potential to create an ever growing “army of unpaid volunteers” to address civic problems, which dramatically increased Republican support (Wofford 2002, 17).

In Louisiana, the AmeriCorps 2008-2009 program year hosted 1023 State volunteers, 807 National and 81 VISTA. This is a sharp increase from pre-Katrina years: 2003-2004 (172 members total) and 2004-2005 (370 members total) (CNCS f). Many NCCC teams also worked in the state; however, their base that served Louisiana was in Mississippi. AmeriCorps provides significant benefits, such as the education award and job training, to college-bound volunteers in their 20s—in 1995, 79% of AmeriCorps volunteers were between 18 and 29 years old (Tschirhart 1998, 35). Low-income citizens make up about a quarter of AmeriCorps volunteers (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 34). Simon concludes that volunteers generally have economic privilege which allows them to work for the small stipends and educational awards offered (2002, 671). According to Tschirhart, AmeriCorps also draws younger citizens due to the tuition credits applicable towards higher education, opportunities to explore jobs/career paths, the development of interpersonal skills and professional experience (1998).

⁹ The disparity between the total amount and that allocated to the three listed programs can be attributed to the funding of other service programs not included in this study including Senior Corps and Citizen Corps.

Since the early VISTA program, AmeriCorps has provided participants with a small living stipend. In 1997 benefits to AmeriCorps volunteers were expanded to include the Education Awards Program that provides volunteers with student loan allowance upon the completion of their service with a maximum value of \$4,725 before taxes (CNCS f). “The standard AmeriCorps living allowance is \$7,945—about \$160 a week—of which \$6,700 comes from the federal government. Those members with no health insurance also get a health plan valued at \$1,200. So direct compensation is just more than \$9,000. If they finish a year of service, they get a \$4,725 scholarship” (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 30). AmeriCorps NCCC members receive a living allowance of approximately \$100 every week, housing, meals and limited medical benefits and a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award upon successful completion of the program (CNCS d).

It is recognized that AmeriCorps volunteers benefit more than financially in exchange for service. AmeriCorps’ participant benefits range from growth in self-esteem and character development to the acquisition of job skills and preparation for future careers (Perry, et al. 1999, 236-239). Neumann, et al. identifies “a charitable contribution value due to performing public service” as a tangible benefit to volunteers (1995, 11). The benefits to volunteers have been studied and documented; however, there is no substantial academic literature on the effect of AmeriCorps on host organizations or communities in which volunteers are placed¹⁰.

AmeriCorps volunteers are placed with thousands of host organizations across the country, both faith-based and non-profit. Host organizations that receive AmeriCorps

¹⁰ Examples of the hundreds of studies highlighting the positive impact volunteer experiences have on individual lives include: Grese, et al. 2000; Musick, Herzog and House 1999; Piliavin and Siegl 2007; Willigen 2000; and Wilson and Musick 1999.

volunteers are required to match federal funds by raising 15% of each volunteer's living allowance and other support costs (CNCS f). Even with this financial contribution requirement, AmeriCorps labor is significantly below market value. They are notably cheaper than full-time staff (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow. 1996, 33). Organizations do contribute to the volunteer's stipend in a "cost-sharing" system that requires between \$9,500 and \$11,000 for each State/National or VISTA volunteer to be contributed to the Corporation for National and Community Service¹¹ (CNCS j).

The original intentions of the AmeriCorps program claimed to support community empowerment and to legitimize government interaction with non-profit and faith based organizations. The program was supposed to prove that the federal government, through the use of volunteers, could support the work these organizations were doing and encourage partnerships with for-profit companies. The ultimate result, with volunteers being placed in government offices, is that it perpetuated the bureaucracy that negatively affected low-income communities in the first place.

The Clinton administration began with...a keen recognition of the danger to community posed by big government... The president claimed that AmeriCorps would prove that government could act as a partner with citizens, using its resources to leverage additional contributions from the private sector. It quickly became apparent that in the AmeriCorps program, government overshadowed its "partners." More than one-fourth of AmeriCorps volunteers were placed in federal, state or local government agencies—where they would reinforce the bureaucratic state, not rebuild the voluntary sector...The revival of citizenship requires a transfer of power from government to families, voluntary associations, and communities. (Walters 1996).

According to Walters AmeriCorps ultimately provided inexpensive labor to local, state and federal government agencies and was used to gain support for government efforts by attempting to pacify dissent by proving that big government created positive programs

¹¹ Hosting NCCC volunteers does not involve organizational cost sharing.

(1996). The placement of AmeriCorps workers in government agencies also served to save significant amounts of money—volunteers did the work of full-time employees who otherwise would have required full salaries.

Faith-based organizations are recipients of large numbers of AmeriCorps volunteers. The program is able to toe the line between church and state by exclusively supporting the individual volunteer, not the organization as a whole. Religious organizations are able to receive federal support through AmeriCorps volunteers while maintaining their spiritual missions. “Consider the case of Habitat for Humanity, one of the most successful faith-based volunteer groups. The founder, Millard Fuller, was wary of any involvement with AmeriCorps precisely because he feared a government program would distort the religious nature of his effort. But on the urging of his board, Habitat brought in some AmeriCorps members” (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 31). This proved to be successful as AmeriCorps volunteers were used to manage large numbers of short-term volunteers and build 50 houses. “Habitat’s experience is instructive...because it is a faith-based organization that did not have to alter its spiritual mission to make use of AmeriCorps members. This has been the experience of all the religious groups from the nuns of the Notre Dame de Namur mission to the Greater Dallas Community Churches—that have brought on AmeriCorps members” (Wofford, Waldman and Bandow 1996, 33). Indeed, AmeriCorps host organizations in the greater New Orleans area following Hurricane Katrina include faith-based initiatives (Catholic Charities, Habitat for Humanity, Mary Queen of Vietnam, Trinity Christian Community); non-profits (JumpStart, Literacy Alliance, Rebuilding Together, Operation REACH, Green Light New Orleans); government programs (Recovery School District, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Louisiana

Division of Administration, TeachNOLA) and institutions of higher education (CNCS c). Absent from this list are grassroots and social change organizations. The dominant organizations advocating for a just reconstruction following Hurricane Katrina are identified by Rachel E. Luft as: ACORN, Common Ground, People's Hurricane Relief Fund, People's Organizing Committee, New Orleans Women's Health Clinic + Women's Health and Justice Initiative, Safe Streets Strong Communities, and the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice (2009, 504). None of these organizations hosted AmeriCorps volunteers.

According to Walters, federal support, including AmeriCorps volunteers, can be a mixed blessing. "Robust community groups that enjoy genuine grass-roots support do not need to seek federal grants. And the organizations that do seek out government support are generally those with their own in-house bureaucracies, accustomed to receiving federal social-welfare grants and contracts...Public financing of AmeriCorps often led organizations to substitute the 'blessing' of a government grant for the hard work of fanning and sustaining local support" (Walters 1996). Coltfelter identifies AmeriCorps as a public service program that utilizes amateur labor to do increasingly complex jobs, in many cases involving duties formerly done by paid staff. As they take on this work the organizations become increasingly dependent on them (1999, 2). This dependence could place an organization on tenuous footing, as AmeriCorps volunteers are only contracted for one year and positions must be applied for annually. Ultimately, it is up to federal decision makers to allocate volunteers to organizations.

In 1995 President Clinton, under congressional pressure, challenged his advisors to take AmeriCorps off the political battlefield. Wofford, then the CEO for the Corporation for National Service (CNCS), writes that he himself had to de-politicize all his actions and

further make political work off-limits to national service participants (2002, 15). This is partially due to a bipartisan government that would resist supporting a federally funded program that changed the political leanings of voting citizens (Wofford 2002, 17). Since then, the Corporation for National and Community Service—the entity which directs AmeriCorps—has made clear its intention to operate in a nonpartisan, politically neutral manner (Simon, 2002, 670). For example, Wofford, Waldman and Bandow cite an AmeriCorps official explaining that, “We funded a grant to ACORN Housing Corp., which is closely associated with an advocacy agenda. When we found out that ACORN had crossed the line into political advocacy, we pulled the plug” (1996, 35).

To maintain a politically neutral stance, AmeriCorps volunteers are prohibited from engaging in any potentially political activities. In explaining why AmeriCorps members were barred from attending the Stand for Children rally in Washington D.C., the CNCS general counsel wrote: “National service has to be nonpartisan. What’s more, it should be about bringing communities together by getting things done. Strikes, demonstrations and political activities can have the opposite effect. They polarize and divide” (Drogosz 2004, 18). It is important to note that strikes and demonstrations often resist actions by government and corporate institutions. In a commissioned study Simon concluded that participation in the AmeriCorps program has a politically neutral impact on its diverse membership (2002). “The enabling legislation for AmeriCorps draws a sharp distinction between service and activism. For example, AmeriCorps volunteers can work to winterize the homes of the poor, but they would violate the terms of their contract by joining with labor unions or other partisan political organizations to demand the enforcement of

housing codes” (Korstad and Leloudis 1999, 196). The AmeriCorps program regulations follow in the footsteps of the restrictions placed on early VISTA participants.

Disasters

The previous sections have offered a history of the AmeriCorps program as a whole; however, my study is exceptional in that it examines AmeriCorps policy in the context of the biggest national disaster in the U.S. in the twenty-first century. It is important to note that AmeriCorps was not designed as a disaster response program but was used as such, with rapidly increasing numbers of volunteers traveling to the Gulf Coast following the hurricanes of 2005 and direct recruitment to help “storm victims” (CNCS b). This section provides background on disasters, their social impacts and historical government responses.

The differences between technological disasters, a 20th century development, and natural disasters are based on perceptions of control. Natural disasters result from the forces of something perceived to be uncontrollable by all parties. Technological disasters result from the loss of control of something perceived to be controllable (Gill and Picou 1998). While the actual storm, Hurricane Katrina, was natural, the subsequent disaster in New Orleans was technical—the levees, systems designed to control water, gave way. Natural disasters fit into a constant sequence of events and the “ordinary” course of nature. “Most technological disasters involve contamination of the environment that challenges individuals’ fundamental expectations regarding their relationship with nature” (Gill and Picou 1998, 796). Natural disasters have relatively clear and understandable effects allowing for a collective understanding of what happened because of historical and cultural

definitions of nature and relationships. The results of technological disasters are often unknown and not clearly visible which promotes individual definitions of event a single event (Gill and Picou 1998). The result of this is that communities struggle to reach a consensus, which inhibits strong coalition building. The devastation following Hurricane Katrina, while catalyzed by a weather system, was a technological disaster as the damage was caused by infrastructure failure.

This infrastructure failure created a unique disaster area in New Orleans. Nearly everyone was evacuated from the city, either of their own accord or through government channels. Approximately 80% of Orleans Parish flooded, including homes, government buildings, hospitals, places of worship and many other necessary buildings. The decimation of vital pieces of the city's built environment led to scarcity in housing, health care and mental health care. Housing was a significant concern with over two hundred thousand homes and apartments in New Orleans damaged by Katrina (Kromm 2006, 9). Over twenty one thousand FEMA trailers, intended for use as temporary living quarters for residents whose homes flooded, were requested. By February 2006 only three thousand had been delivered (Kromm 2006, 9). Health care was another concern. Prior to the hurricanes in 2005 there were twenty-two working hospitals in Louisiana, while in February 2006 there were only seven (Kromm 2006, 13). Additionally, the majority of care for uninsured patients—66% of all New Orleans uninsured residents—was conducted by Charity Hospital, which was closed days after Katrina and has yet to re-open (Kromm 2006, 13). Mental health care resources decreased along with the decline in working hospitals.

Communities struggling to make sense of events often find themselves creating what Gill and Picou term a “corrosive community”—characterized by fear, anger,

apprehension, confusion, conflict, and stress (1998). Insecurity prolonged by uncertainty leads to chronic, ongoing community stress. Indications of community stress are: disruption in social interaction, normlessness and role disruption. This leads to stress, mistrust, paranoia, loss of self-esteem and alienation (Gill and Picou 1998). The more stressful the event, the more likely the affected individual will experience scary, distressing thoughts and feelings. This in turn results in a high incidence of avoidance behaviors. People whom social scientists have termed “vulnerable” feel these effects disproportionately.¹² Additionally, Hurricane Katrina was an exceptional case as the recovery process was found to increase levels of trauma with time, rather than decrease which is typical of other disaster situations. Ronald Kessler found that “contrary to results in other disaster studies, where post-disaster mental disorder typically decreases with time, prevalence increased significantly in PTSD, serious mental illness, suicidal ideation and suicide plans”¹³ (Kessler et al. 2008). People displaced by Hurricane Katrina often did not receive appropriate mental health care.

According to Susan Cutter, social vulnerability to disasters—individual and community susceptibility to suffering the most losses—is partially a product of social inequalities¹⁴ (Cutter, Boruff and Shirley 2003, 243). There is a general consensus within the social science community on some of the major factors that influence social vulnerability. “These include: lack of access to resources (including information,

¹² I use the term “social vulnerability” for literary consistency; however, it can be misleading and inappropriate as it is used to refer to communities and groups of people who historically have displayed strength, resiliency and self-sufficiency in the face of devastating events.

¹³ Rates of change from the study conducted 5-8 months after Hurricane Katrina to second study 1 year after: PTSD increased from 14.9 to 20.9%, serious mental illness increased from 10.9 to 14.0%, suicidal ideation increased from 2.8 to 6.4% and suicide plans increased from 1.0 to 2.5% (Kessler, et al. 2008).

¹⁴ Other contributing factors include the surrounding natural environment and infrastructure, which often can also be linked to social inequality.

knowledge, and technology); limited access to political power and representation; social capital, including social networks and connections; beliefs and customs; building stock and age; frail and physically limited individuals; and type and density of infrastructure and lifelines” (Cutter, Boruff and Shirley 2003, 244). The authors specifically highlight the characteristics that make individuals and communities especially vulnerable. These include: high-density living (as in urban areas), unstable employment, low levels of education, large numbers of dependents per family, low socio-economic status, and dependence on social services. Additionally, communities with disproportionate numbers of individuals who are female, non-white and/or non-Anglo, youth, elderly, and people with disabilities are considered at risk. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the population of New Orleans disproportionately represented these identities¹⁵. While the proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, the loss of protective wetlands and catastrophic infrastructure failure caused a significant disaster, social inequalities which were present before the storm exacerbated the disaster’s effect on those identified by social scientists as the “most vulnerable”—low-income people, people of color, youth, elderly, women and people with disabilities. As I will discuss further, it is appropriate that the needs of these groups take center stage in the prioritization of relief and recovery efforts, as they suffered the most damages.

In examining the human rights of evacuated New Orleanians, local human rights attorney William Quigley applies the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (2008, 112). An examination of this document finds Part 1 of Principle 28 in this document states:

Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish

¹⁵ The U.S. Census Bureau 2000 data showed Orleans Parish with 69.3% people of color, 20.6% under eighteen years of age, 12.3% over the age of sixty-five, and 22.9% of households below the poverty level.

conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavor to facilitate reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons (UN High Commissioner for Refugees 1998, 14).

In examining my data, I utilize the Guiding Principles to frame my analysis of AmeriCorps policies following Hurricane Katrina.

In the history of disaster recovery in the US and abroad, human rights prioritization has not been successfully carried out. Michael P. Powers writes about the recovery of major, acute disasters—specifically the leadership and accountability structures in relief efforts. Following the Chicago Fire in 1871, the recovery task force, comprised of the city’s commercial elite, focused on the need for cheap labor and emphasized the employment opportunities in the rebuilding process. Ultimately this benefited non-local laborers but “failed to help those affected by the fire, especially members of the middle and working classes” (2006, 14-15). A similar leadership structure was utilized in handling the rebuilding following the San Francisco Earthquake in 1906, where elite businessmen tied the well being of the city’s residents to the status of commercial business. This recovery effort ensured that “those most in need received relatively little aid” (2006, 16-17). In 1927 heavy rainfall caused the swollen waters of the Mississippi river to breach levees in 144 places along its banks. For the first time the federal government contracted the Red Cross to direct relief efforts—a “Colored Advisory Commission” discovered exorbitant amounts of corruption and misuse of relief supplies and funds to the detriment of people of color who survived the floods (Powers 2006, 19). These discoveries were later censored and rewritten by the government to suppress accusations (Barry 1997, 382-383). According to Powers, “the actions taken in the relief effort specifically, and often illegally, reinforced the

subjugation of black laborers” (2006, 19). Powers concludes that if those with “fewer means” are excluded from relief distribution decision making they are significantly more likely “to be wronged in the formation of specific policies or in their execution” (2006, 25). Thus, it is important that those who are accountable to vulnerable communities must be included in the leadership of recovery.

In the vacuum of mass evacuation following some disasters, governments and corporations are able to respond in ways that otherwise would face massive local resistance. As Klein explains, the shock of acute disaster situations renders communities survival-focused and thus less able to organize collective protest against harmful government and corporate actions (2007). Gotham and Greenberg use the term “laboratories” to refer to government and industry views of post-disaster areas and “experiment” to identify their actions (2008). Disasters are framed by capitalists as opportunities, which allow for quick adoption of neoliberal strategies which otherwise would have come up against significant local resistance. “Moments of crisis have presented the best opportunities to experiment with these contradictory and often unpopular forms of governance and to do so with less public scrutiny and challenge” (Klein 2007, 1042). “Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect” (Klein 2007, 20). This makes local leadership that much more important as communities in shock are more likely to face challenges in resisting projects not in their interest.

Social movements have always responded to disasters—the ongoing disasters of poverty, racism, inequality and violence (Luft 2009, 506-507). It is important in discussing post-disaster organizing and relief work to recognize the organizations that have been

mobilized for decades to eliminate the systems that initially caused these inequalities. These organizations and their leaders have experience and expertise in responding to the needs of their communities. The importance of ability to return home in the case of Hurricane Katrina is also supported by statements and actions of grassroots community organizations, led by and accountable to displaced, low-income, New Orleans residents. From evacuation to the present day, these organizations have emphasized the importance of protecting residents' right to return to their hometown. While this is not the case in every disaster, in this situation individual residents and organizations emphasized the right of return and the ability to return home as a pressing need¹⁶.

Conclusion

From 1964 to today, national service programs have evolved into support for sectors distinct from those involved in the civil rights movement. AmeriCorps volunteers have been limited in their work by restrictions on their political efforts and are channeled into specific organizations, which reflect the United State's neo-liberal evolution.

Volunteers, including AmeriCorps, are tasked with accommodating the increasing demand for social services—which often exceeds their levels of training.

¹⁶ Examples of statements and events which emphasize this need include: The People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Commission's statement on November 2005 "We Have the Right to Return to Healthy & Safe Neighborhoods"; in November, 2007 former public housing residents occupied the offices of the Housing Authority of New Orleans demanding their right to return to their apartments; "This is My Home" a documentary by the Advancement Project chronicles displaced public housing residents' struggles to return to New Orleans; The Survivor's Village published a "National Call to Action" in August 2006 to garner grassroots support for displaced people returning to New Orleans; and numerous protests and demonstrations insisting that public housing units be opened to former residents.

The vast majority of literature on volunteerism is on the benefits service provides to volunteers or actions organizations can take to increase volunteer interest.¹⁷ Such research assumes that volunteers both benefit personally, and do almost entirely good work for host organizations and neighborhoods. A significant number of the small minority of authors who take a more critical view of volunteerism as a modern phenomenon have been cited in this document. I assume that volunteerism is neither completely beneficial or harmless. Rather, I place my research on federally supported volunteerism within a historical view of the work done by organizations advocating for social change.

Primary research for this project takes place in New Orleans, Louisiana, a financially struggling, black majority city, geographically positioned next to massive natural resource industry with a long history of social justice organizing that continued through Hurricane Katrina. I consider the large group of AmeriCorps volunteers sent to assist in Katrina recovery to be a component of the federal disaster response. When former President George W. Bush created the USA Freedom Corps Council following September 11, 2001, he linked the missions of AmeriCorps, Peace Corps and the newly created Citizens Corps (created for national emergencies, under FEMA's jurisdiction) (Wofford 2002, 17). This study of the political and cultural evolution of AmeriCorps to its place in the Katrina recovery provides a more complete picture of government incentives for individualistic, politically "neutral" volunteerism. Hurricane Katrina increased the demands on many federal programs. It is my intention to analyze the implications of AmeriCorps policies on the recovery of New Orleans's. I will place volunteer efforts and their benefits and

¹⁷ Of the hundreds of studies on volunteer motivation examples include: Yeung 2004; Liao-Troth and Dunn 1999; Hibbert, Piacentini and Al Dajani 2003; Anderson and Shaw 1999; Schondel, Shields and Orel 1992; and Caan and Goldberg-Glen 1991.

restrictions in the context available resources and accountability to populations identified as “socially vulnerable.”

Chapter 3. METHODS

This section discusses the methods used to answer my research questions. The purpose of this study is to examine methods of recruitment into the AmeriCorps program in New Orleans in 2006, the preparation volunteers received prior to arrival, the benefits they received in compensation for their labor, the work they did, their relationship to official AmeriCorps rules and regulations and ultimately their implications for New Orleans and its residents. To help address these questions I conducted ten in-person and eight phone interviews with former AmeriCorps volunteers. This research was approved by the University of New Orleans IRB Committee and deemed compliant with both University and federal guidelines [Appendix A].

I chose to interview volunteers directly rather than AmeriCorps supervisors or administrators because former volunteers can best inform me about the work that was actually being conducted, their experiences of leadership structures in organizations and the affect AmeriCorps benefits had on their livelihood. In order to be eligible for my study participants had to be full-time volunteers through the AmeriCorps program in Orleans Parish, LA beginning their service in 2006. There were no criteria around completing their contract of service, though only one of my informants discussed early contract termination. I am particularly interested in the relationships volunteers built with organizations and thus filtered my sample to include only volunteers with the AmeriCorps State/National and VISTA programs because these programs place volunteers in one work position for the duration of their service—typically ten to twelve months. For this reason I attempted to exclude participants in the AmeriCorps NCCC program—which is highly mobile and team based with work projects generally lasting 6 weeks. I explained in my recruitment

correspondence that I was only looking for State/National and VISTA volunteers. I received communications from 2 former NCCC members and 1 independent volunteer (non-AmeriCorps affiliated) who expressed surprise that I was not including them in my research, emphasizing the significant amount of volunteer work they did. One wrote in an email to me:

I don't understand why you would exclude NCCC. I served for 11 weeks at the church of F-- and D-- helping establish what was the fledgling [Collaborating Volunteers] as a team leader of short-term volunteers for gutting and removing. The longest period of time for any project away from base is 8 weeks, we were granted permission to extend our project an extra 3 weeks.

Myself, as well as my team also setup, ran, and managed the systems and projects during that time. 2 of my teammates came back and continued to work for the organization. Another went on to become staff at City Year of New York City.

Let me know if you change your mind...

Despite my attempts to limit my sample to State/National and VISTA volunteers, 2 NCCC volunteers slipped past my screening process and I only discovered their sectional affiliation with AmeriCorps once the interview process had begun. In both cases I decided to complete the interview process and focus my questions on their time in New Orleans. Thus, my sample includes twelve AmeriCorps State/National volunteers, four VISTA volunteers and two NCCC. Race and gender were not criteria in determining my sample; respondents included fourteen whites, four people of color, twelve women and six men.

Unfortunately, my numerous requests made to the state and national AmeriCorps offices for information on demographics of AmeriCorps in New Orleans, or even in Louisiana in 2006, were returned with statements insisting that information is not comprehensively available. Therefore, my only way of determining if my sample accurately represents the demographics of AmeriCorps volunteers at that time is through the observational statements of my informants. Three people mentioned that there were

approximately 200 AmeriCorps in New Orleans in 2006 and 1 interviewee stated that there were 800. One black woman explained that she was the only person of color in her VISTA group of thirteen¹⁸. Two informants who attended AmeriCorps pre-service orientation in other states said their orientation was much more racially diverse than the group of AmeriCorps in New Orleans. Four people generalized the group as mostly white and mostly non-local. One informant who came to New Orleans for his AmeriCorps position explained that he did not meet anyone from New Orleans who was doing AmeriCorps despite a wide social circle of AmeriCorps affiliations. Three white women reported New Orleans residents expressing surprise to discover that they were AmeriCorps volunteers *and* from Louisiana, implying that most of the AmeriCorps volunteers they met previously had been from other states.

My outreach to potential participants included talking to people with whom I had pre-existing relationships with, in-person recruitment (for example I met one informant at a friend's party when she asked me about my thesis topic), email outreach and snowball sampling. I initially contacted the national and state AmeriCorps offices to send out an email to eligible former volunteers to recruit them for my study. The national office referred me to the state office of Corporation for National and Community Service office in Baton Rouge. The Louisiana State Program Director explained to me over the phone that they did not keep updated contact information for former volunteers. When I suggested that email addresses might have remained the same she explained that there was no comprehensive, annual list of volunteers and she was unwilling to sort through files to identify potential subjects. She suggested that I contact Rebuilding Together because they

¹⁸ There is also a black man in my VISTA group, but he started his service year after she had finished hers.

currently have many AmeriCorps volunteers on staff¹⁹. I attempted to contact the second person in this office and was referred back to the first. I decided to turn to organizations and my own personal contacts to do my outreach. I emailed approximately fifty local organizations that hosted AmeriCorps volunteers in 2008 (CNCS c). I also included some organizations which I knew from experience had AmeriCorps volunteers in 2006. I also sent a recruitment email [Appendix B] to approximately thirty of my personal contacts who had some connection with AmeriCorps. This outreach resulted in significant interest. My subjects contacted me by email and phone calls—the majority of them had heard about my study from their former host organization. One of my subjects is a close personal friend of mine, another I met while discussing my research at a party, and three others were referred to me by their friends. Following every interview I asked the subject if they knew of anyone else who might be interested in participating. The majority of them did and took the initiative to pass on my contact information to their peers. This generated a second significant wave of interest—people referred to me by people whom I already interviewed.

The majority of potential informants contacted me either via phone or email and one replied via text (“I’m down for the interview”). I then ensured they had a copy of the recruitment email and they fit within the criteria of my study. Informants then selected a time and place (if in person) or provided me with a phone number for a phone interview. Most interviews were conducted in the early evening (though start times ranged from 8am to 10pm) and those in person varied in location, typically the informant’s home or a coffee shop. All participants were given a consent form, including contact information for myself and my committee chair prior to beginning the interview. Additionally, they signed (or gave

¹⁹ Upon doing so I discovered that Rebuilding Together was just a zygote of an organization in 2006 and didn’t actually have any AmeriCorps volunteers until 2007.

verbal agreement over the phone to) the consent form [Appendix C] and I read them the participant introduction [Appendix D]. For individuals I knew personally I included a statement that none of the information they shared with me during the interview would be disclosed in social settings. I then requested permission to tape record the interview and explained that the recording would be played back and transcribed by me personally and then the audio copy would be destroyed. I also offered participants copies of their transcription which seven people requested. All participants agreed to be recorded. Prior to my first interview question I allowed participants to ask any questions they might have of me. These were generally simple and revolved around confidentiality, my research questions and my department of study. Interviews lasted approximately one hour though one was forty minutes and another was three and a half hours. Occasionally the recording quality of interviews conducted in coffee shops or over less-than-perfect phone reception were difficult to understand.

Through the interview and data analysis process I found myself identifying with and having emotional responses to some participant responses. In order to better recognize my own biases, I took the time to interview myself and respond truthfully to each question I asked others. Through this process I developed a clear idea of the ways my personal experiences influence my research. By having a detailed statement of my thoughts and experiences I could better distinguish these from my data. This is not to say that I approached this research unbiased, as I do not believe this is possible. We, as researchers, do not make discoveries but rather interpret the world around us through specific lenses or paradigms. "Researchers cannot be 'positive' about our claims of knowledge when studying the behavior and actions of humans" (Crestwell 2009, 7). I support the critique of

positivism in research, challenging the traditional notion of absolute truth of knowledge. The process of interviewing myself allowed me to clarify my own position on political radicalism and anti-racist commitment, as well as to clarify my own relationship to my sample set.

Within two weeks of completing an interview I transcribed the recording and deleted the audio copy from my digital voice recorder. When requested, the transcript was sent via email to the participant. One person replied with simple corrections (the spelling of a friend's name and the author of a book mentioned). I saved the transcripts in a folder on my computer and external hard drive and printed a hard copy, which I filed and hid in my home. I initially transcribed interviews verbatim and then edited out names of people mentioned (for example, Emily would become E---). I then inductively coded all eighteen interviews using the scientific software ATLAS.ti. Unfortunately, upon completing my coding my computer crashed and I lost these coded documents. Four days later my house was robbed and my external hard drive was stolen with all of my back-up copies. While it is highly unlikely, there is a small chance my interviews were discovered and read by hacking my external hard drive. Following this incident I re-coded the interviews by hand on the printouts of transcripts. I retained a list of my inductively developed codes and the second time coding was generally deductive, working off this list. From these codes I developed five themes, which constitute the bulk of my data analysis.

Description of Sample

I interviewed 18 informants who were filtered by their ability to receive notice of my study and desire to participate in the project. All informants were between the ages of

22 and 29 during their service year with the exception of an NCCC participant who turned 19. Most of my informants (twelve out of eighteen) were between the ages of 22 and 24 during their AmeriCorps participation.

Ten interviews were done in person because these participants still lived in New Orleans. Eight were conducted over the phone with people who lived all over the continental United States. Of the ten informants who were interviewed in person, only two of them had not lived in Louisiana before Hurricane Katrina and these two secured local employment directly through their AmeriCorps experience. Everyone who had lived in Louisiana pre-Katrina was interviewed in person. It was difficult for me to definitely define “local” and “non-local” as New Orleans has been a hub for travelers and a host for new residents long before Hurricane Katrina. I interviewed four people who were raised in New Orleans and six people who lived in New Orleans immediately before Hurricane Katrina. The remaining twelve of my group had not resided in New Orleans prior to their work with AmeriCorps.

I interviewed two black women, one black man, one white Latino man, ten non-Hispanic white women and four non-Hispanic white men; in other words, four people of color, fourteen whites, twelve women and six men. The majority came from financially comfortable backgrounds—all of them reported living in homes owned by their parents at some point in their lives, with the exception of one white woman whose parents were both pastors and lived in a home provided in their parsonage. Three people reported ever remembering anticipation for paychecks in their family and only one person, a black woman, reported experiencing homelessness. A surprising number of subjects’ parents had received higher education degrees—only two interviewees came from families where

neither parent had completed a degree above high school. Of the 36 parents of my informants there are three Ph. Ds, two law degrees, two M.Ds, 12 masters degrees, 8 bachelors, and 2 associates, leaving only 7 parents who did not complete a degree above high school.

I interviewed four VISTA participants—all of whom were hosted by a wealthy, white-majority local university and placed in other organizations, twelve AmeriCorps State/National volunteers and two NCCC. They worked for eight different organizations with a wide variety of job responsibilities from pricing artwork to scraping mold off two-by-fours in flooded houses. Their host organizations played huge roles in shaping their experience. In order for my informants to remain anonymous I have changed the names of the organizations they worked for.²⁰ Table 1 lists the organizations represented by my study participants, a short description and the number of interviewees. Had random sampling occurred the number of organizations would be higher as there were many who hosted AmeriCorps volunteers after the storm and there would be fewer informants from each organization. Snowball sampling requests often lead my subjects to recommend their former co-workers, resulting in overlap of some organizations.

²⁰ It was a difficult decision for me not to use the names of specific organizations. I decided to eliminate organizational names based on requests by former volunteers that I ensure their confidentiality. Due to the boundaries of my sample (having worked in New Orleans as an AmeriCorps volunteer in 2006), identifying the names of organizations would make it simple to trace comments back to individual volunteers. Some organizations only had one or two volunteers at that time. The drawback of removing organizational names is that this research does not contribute significantly to the understanding of organizational evolution, which happened rapidly after Katrina. The reader should rest assured that the information I have gathered about specific organizations (their missions, internal and external conflicts, their partnerships) will be presented in a separate document, divorced from identifying characteristics of those who were so gracious enough to trust me with their stories.

Organizational Name	Acronym/ Abbreviation	Mission/ Description	Number of AmeriCorps volunteers interviewed
United Residents	--	A national housing service non-profit	2
Words Not Guns	WNG	A national mediation and peacemaking non-profit	2 (worked with TiES)
Together in Equal Stakes	TiES	A post-Katrina volunteer relief organization	0 (contracted with WGN)*
Expanding Horizons	--	A local, grassroots art gallery	1 (VISTA)
Christian Congregational Giving Alliance	CCGA	A large, international faith based anti-poverty organization	4 (1 VISTA)
Greater New Orleans Rebuilds	GNO Rebuilds	A local network developed post-Katrina	4 (1 VISTA)
Collaborating Volunteers	--	A national volunteer program	2 (2 NCCC)
Saint Vincent Community Outreach Association	SVCOA	A local Christian organization supporting churches	2
Fun to Read New Orleans	FRNO	A non-profit literacy tutoring program working in public schools	1 (VISTA)

Table 1: Organizations represented by interviewees. All participants were State/National AmeriCorps members unless otherwise noted. *Two volunteers were technically contracted with WGN but reported doing the majority of their work with TiES.

While there are many ways to divide a group of 18 volunteers, my division of subjects is based on their work assignments and job responsibilities. This is because my primary research question examines the work AmeriCorps volunteers did in the city and the impact their participation in this federal program had on the recovery of the city as a whole. I grouped volunteers who reported doing similar work together as their responses

were parallel. For example, AmeriCorps volunteers with CCGA and Collaborating Volunteers spent most of their days doing physical labor in residential areas and leading teams of short-term volunteer groups in the effort. The differences in work and housing situations were minimal thus allowing for the combining of organizations within one sample group, which I call “The Gutters.” In one case an entire organization—GNO Rebuilds—is separated due to the unique nature of the work and the relatively large number of project participants (four) from that organization.

The Gutters

My first group of five volunteers focused primarily on physical labor during their service hours. They worked for CCGA and Collaborating Volunteers. They primarily gutted flooded houses as the leaders of rotating short-term volunteer teams that traveled to the city following Hurricane Katrina. Their work also included mold remediation following the gutting, inspecting houses as possible work sites and to a lesser extent leading rebuilding efforts such as painting. These organizations had clear leadership structures and all volunteers reported exhaustion and workdays over ten hours. This group includes my two NCCC subjects. All five volunteers in this group were provided room and board by their organization.

Agenda Setters

This group of four is composed of two volunteers who worked for SVCOA and two who were with United Residents. They reported limited amounts of direction from their supervisors and had a lot of leeway in developing job descriptions for themselves.

Members of this group often struggled to meet their weekly hourly requirements. They self-started most projects and often worked closely with other AmeriCorps volunteers in their organization. Similar to The Gutters, members of this group also managed short-term volunteer groups. The two volunteers with SVCOA lived with two other AmeriCorps in a flooded church. Volunteers with United Residents lived independently²¹.

GNO Rebuilds

This group is comprised of the three State/National volunteers who worked for the above organization. They all reported significant conflict with their supervisor. Their work centered around general information provision. This included public meetings with informational speakers, a website and a monthly newsletter. No one in this group was provided housing by their organization or AmeriCorps.²²

Political Activists

This small group of two is exceptional in that the vast majority of their work was technically forbidden by AmeriCorps rules, yet they faced no repercussions. Both individuals worked through Words Not Guns but ultimately spent the majority of their efforts supporting anti-racist political organizing in the large, volunteer relief organization, Together in Equal Stakes (TiES). AmeriCorps rules explicitly forbid all types of political work during funded hours²³. They had been doing this work for at least 6 months prior to

²¹ It is important to note that volunteers living independently were paying market-rate rent and were allocated no additional stipend.

²² In one theme, Work, there are four members of this group because the VISTA participant assigned to this organization is included.

²³ Interestingly, VISTA and NCCC workers are “on call” or working 24-7 for the entire duration of their contract with AmeriCorps. They cannot have another job, attend school or exercise their political or religious

getting an AmeriCorps stipend and lived temporarily in volunteer housing. They both moved to live independently before the end of their service term.

VISTA

The remaining four individuals were VISTAs and sourced out to four different organizations. They were provided housing by the local university sponsoring their program. One black woman moved to New Orleans for her position with Expanding Horizons. Her work assignments focused on supporting the return and work of evacuated artists. A local white woman was offered an AmeriCorps position with FRNO following a semester of service learning with the organization. She focused on coordinating volunteers, reading with children in public schools and transitioning the organization to a new site. A non-local white woman transferred from a VISTA position in Alabama to direct an English as a Second Language program in New Orleans through CCGA. A local black man joined this university VISTA program at the end of the other VISTAs' service years. He worked with GNO Rebuilds to coordinate meetings and, ultimately, ensure the survival of the organization.

freedom as it is prohibited in the AmeriCorps contract [See Appendix E]. Therefore, these volunteers have no time when political work is allowable, a point I will return to later. In this case these two political activists were State/National—the contract for which is based on number of hours worked.

Chapter 4. DATA—THEMES

Five themes emerged as I coded my data. These themes reflect my research goal to better understand the AmeriCorps program in a post-disaster context. I focused on the implications of the presence of volunteers in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, based on their reflections on their service year. I choose not to examine individual consciousness or opinions, though this would merit further research to better understand the impact disaster relief had on the life trajectory of volunteers. My first theme discusses the people AmeriCorps sponsored to come to New Orleans in 2006 and how they were reached. The second theme examines volunteer experience and training in preparation to work in a city in a state of disaster. In the third theme I examine their living conditions, focusing on housing and health care, and the implications of these arrangements for the city and returning residents. My fourth and largest theme focuses on what work these volunteers did and which organizations “employed” them. I then examine the role the national AmeriCorps program played in shaping this work. In the next chapter, Data Analysis, I frame their efforts in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Theme 1. Getting involved with AmeriCorps: “It just kind of fell into my lap.”

In order to better understand who gets involved with AmeriCorps, this section provides background information on volunteers in each previously identified sample group. While there are a wide variety of AmeriCorps recruitment efforts, there are some common threads. For instance, five people who already knew of the AmeriCorps program explicitly mention finding their specific AmeriCorps position using online resources. Four people were offered jobs through personal connections and a fifth as the result of a

graduate school research project. Nearly everyone, seventeen out of eighteen participants, included Hurricane Katrina as a contributing factor to their decision to come to New Orleans and/or apply for AmeriCorps. The exception was one volunteer who applied to AmeriCorps before August 2005. The majority of job postings and interviewing was conducted by individual organizations that had been granted AmeriCorps positions and had the freedom to choose their volunteers.

Gutters

The three (white, two female, one male) volunteers who did physical work with CCGA were specifically motivated to volunteer by the devastation following Hurricane Katrina—and AmeriCorps seemed like the best opportunity. As two people put it, they “wanted to help in any way possible.” Two of them were not living in New Orleans prior to their AmeriCorps term and primarily used the Internet to search for volunteer opportunities. One person was a Loyola University student and he saw a flier on campus advertising a position with SVCOA, for which he applied and into which he was accepted. He later transferred to CCGA because they provided free housing while SVCOA did not. All had bachelor’s degrees and began their AmeriCorps term directly after graduation.

The two NCCC members of this group worked with Collaborating Volunteers for 12 weeks. Both of them knew people who were AmeriCorps alumni (a friend and a brother) who spoke highly of the program. One woman did not mention Hurricane Katrina in describing her motivations to apply; rather she was searching for employment following college graduation. The other woman was the only person in my sample who applied to AmeriCorps *before* Hurricane Katrina hit. She explained her reaction watching the news

coverage: “Just this realization that this huge catastrophe had just happened and I was excited and I was glad that what I was going to do that year was going to help those who had gone through that.”

Agenda setters

The two women (one black and one white) I interviewed who worked for United Residents lived in New Orleans, in the neighborhood they were hired to work in, before Katrina—one was born and raised in this neighborhood and another in Slidell, LA. They both returned after evacuation and were not happy with their employment because it was not directly related to recovery—one was a waitress and one was working in a computer lab at a local public university. They both had bachelor’s degrees and the black woman had just completed her masters in Urban Planning—she wanted to “get plugged into the recovery process.” She was offered the job following an interview she did for a school assignment with the organization’s director. The white volunteer, who found the position on Idealist.org described AmeriCorps as her only employment option that she deemed “legitimately” paid for her experience and education; however, she had some reservations. “I really didn’t want to take it; I knew I couldn’t live on ten thousand dollars...The people I was working for could not tell me what I was going to be doing when I applied. So I have no idea why I took the job.” They both reported liking the idea of working in their own neighborhood.

Both of my interviewees (white, one male, one female) who worked for SVCOA were raised in Baton Rouge and were looking for employment in New Orleans following their graduation from Louisiana State University. They, along with two other close friends of

theirs, were offered AmeriCorps positions through a personal connection. All four of them (including two I interviewed) had a friend who was a pastor and was granted four AmeriCorps positions to help support the recovery of eight Christian churches. They were drawn to the idea of working together and helping to support New Orleans recovery. They all came from similar faith backgrounds, and were connected with Christian or Catholic churches in Baton Rouge.

GNO Rebuilds

I interviewed four people who worked for this organization, though I include only the three State/National volunteers in this group, and assign the fourth, an AmeriCorps VISTA, to the VISTA group. These three all came from very different backgrounds and accepted the job for a variety of reasons. This group contains one white woman, one white man, and one white-Hispanic man. The white woman was raised in New Orleans but had spent the last year, after graduating college, in her college town helping to investigate racist murders in the sixties. She returned to New Orleans to help in the recovery, specifically in working with her family and other whites around racism and white privilege. She found the AmeriCorps position on Craigslist.org, and explains: “I was so ready to get involved, I met with the boss and it seemed like we shared similar ideas...I thought this would be just perfect.”

The white man came to New Orleans to work with this specific organization. He was a paid employee for two months prior to starting his AmeriCorps position with them. He described his AmeriCorps year as a career move—“paying your dues”—before becoming a salaried employee. He came with a bachelor’s degree in marketing and political science.

The white-Latino man moved to New Orleans with his wife in 2006 directly from a Peace Corps assignment in East Timor. They were evacuated ten months after their initial placement and decided to return to their home state. They are both from Louisiana, though not New Orleans. He had done AmeriCorps before his stint with the Peace Corps and was familiar with the program. He was struggling with a job search and found the position to work with the GNO Rebuilds' newsletter on Craigslist.org and was drawn to it because he had writing experience.

Political Activists

The two interviewees (white, one male, one female) who worked through Words Not Guns were from outside Louisiana and came to New Orleans to work for TiES. They both spent at least six months working with short-term and long-term volunteers in TiES, specifically addressing issues of racism and classism within the organization. One was working at a site that focused on residential rebuilding and the other at the organization's health clinic. The director of WNG personally recruited the two for AmeriCorps positions. They had previously known people who did AmeriCorps with the organization and as one put it: "really felt like the money they were getting was pretty string-free. [Laughter.] They could use that money to support them to do the work they were already doing, that they were really interested in doing." Though there were concerns: "I was a little hesitant I guess... I had this fear of the work being depoliticized and just being seen or promoted as service provision as opposed to community organizing and an anti-racist solidarity framework."

VISTA

The last four informants were all VISTAs. One participant, a non-local black woman was raised in a military family and experienced homelessness as a child. She studied abroad in Kenya, returned and taught at an African centered school while attending college. A dynamic recruiter at a job fair encouraged her application and she applied to the AmeriCorps program in St. Croix, Milwaukee and New Orleans. She settled on New Orleans: “I wanted to learn about community development and they said New Orleans is just like a third world country so if I go to New Orleans that’s gonna give me good experience and get ready for whatever I do after that.” A phone conversation with her future boss at Expanding Horizons sealed the deal.

A white woman, self proclaimed seventh generation New Orleanian, was volunteering with Fun to Read New Orleans during the end of college at a local university. When graduation was approaching they offered her an AmeriCorps position. “It was just like, oh look at this, college is ending. [Laughter.] They’re going to give me some money, you know, not much but it kind of fell into my lap.”

A non-local white woman was a “hobo bum” while waiting on her Peace Corps appointment when Katrina hit. She traveled south to volunteer for the Red Cross and then decided to apply for VISTA, specifically to help with Katrina relief. She was placed with an organization in Alabama, which she did not like, so pushed for a transfer to the VISTA program in New Orleans. She directed an English as a Second Language (ESL) program through CCGA.

The black man who worked for this university VISTA program actually began after the above three—in February 2007²⁴. He was sourced through the university VISTA program to work with GNO Rebuilds. He was raised in New Orleans and returned from evacuation to be close to his girlfriend who had found an AmeriCorps position with a housing construction non-profit. “I wanted to be part of the rebuilding process in some way; I was kind of open into whichever way, for-profit, non-profit, university, higher-education...” He started looking for State/National positions and found GNO Rebuilds first but took a position with the VISTA program because it provided housing.

Theme 2. Experience and Training: “You don’t know the organization, you don’t know the city, you don’t know jack shit.”

This section examines the training and experience AmeriCorps volunteers brought with them or were provided with, relevant to their work assignment. Among the former volunteers a common sentiment was “I didn’t know what I was doing,” expressed by ten of the 18 participants in this project. Informants were critical of their lack of training, recommending that the AmeriCorps program provide some comprehensive preparation especially in the case of disaster relief work. Generally the NCCC and VISTA volunteers reported their training being more helpful (and they all went to training) than State/National volunteers.

²⁴ He was my only informant to start their AmeriCorps service after 2006.

Gutters

Four of the five people who spent their time doing physical labor had bachelor's degrees and one had a master's in public administration. One woman started her AmeriCorps year immediately after high school—she was eighteen. One person went to a training nine months into her service, while another reported two orientations, one “pre-service” and one about five months into it. She mentioned these in order to highlight the level of burnout—over half of the original group had dropped out of the program by the second orientation.

No one in this group had ever gutted a house before or reported any construction experience, but they claimed they learned quickly—through mentorship from more experienced volunteers or “you just figured it out” as two volunteers reported. Eventually they ended up being the trainers, supervising temporary volunteer groups on-site. None of them had experience or training about supervising volunteers but they generally reported this coming naturally or not being exceptionally hard to learn. For some technical and demanding tasks (such as mold removal or scouting flooded homes to determine their suitability as work sites) they detail sufficient training and supervision from their organizations. This group did emphasize their role as mental health caregivers and their inexperience handling traumatic situations. “When I was inspecting homes essentially when I was doing that I would go out and talk with homeowners and I was essentially a counselor for eight to ten hours a day and I would talk to about a dozen homeowners a day and hearing their stories. So it was something I was completely unprepared for as far as how to deal with that and those situations.”

The NCCC team, of which I interviewed two members, spent a week observing the operation of a non-profit in Mississippi and then was tasked to develop a similar volunteer organization in New Orleans. They were dropped in the middle of a flooded, low-income black neighborhood and had twelve weeks to get the organization (Collaborating Volunteers) up and running. They reported one paid staff person from the organization that worked with them. Both of these women reveled in the leadership they were granted. One explained, "While at [Collaborating Volunteers] in New Orleans we might have been cheap labor but we were running an organization and it was really spectacular."

Every member of this group was critical of their lack of relevant training. One mentioned safety and not being sure how to work in contaminated houses, two others emphasized their role as makeshift counselors and how lack of preparation lead to depression or mental health problems, and another explained generally: "I don't feel like I was prepared mentally or in terms of training...That was one of my criticisms of the whole thing was maybe some kind of training beforehand would have been helpful."

Agenda Setters

Everyone in this group had a bachelor's degree and one had a master's degree in urban planning. Of the four people in this group, the two working with United Residents reported not attending any training or orientation and the two with SVCOA, both of whom were primarily responsible for community outreach and neighborhood support, were given an unhelpful training video to watch. "We had a safety training but we couldn't make it to one so it was a PowerPoint on a laptop with us in the room and it was like, wear

goggles and don't step on rafters and it was like, we don't do that...We got our t-shirts and boots and that was it."

One woman who worked with United Residents made the distinction between being inexperienced, and being an inexperienced leader: "There's something maybe wrong with throwing inexperienced people in and then they're sort of looked at as an experienced person. I know I don't know what I'm doing but these volunteers don't know that. So in a way it's not really fair—if it were like me and my neighbors and we were just like hey lets figure this out and do it, you know, I can see that." She then opined that those who knew the neighborhood or who had experience in similar situations, such as post-disaster rebuilding, might have been better suited to leadership roles.

A particularly noteworthy example is of the young white woman who was working for United Residents, which was the recipient of a grant to host a summer camp at a community center. This AmeriCorps volunteer, having previously been only a camp counselor, was informed by her supervisors that she was the director of a two-week summer camp for neighborhood kids. She explained:

Now I obviously have never managed anything, I've been a summer camp counselor and that's about all I've done...and a lot of babysitting. I was in charge of hiring people to do art with kids...and I actually ended up hiring other AmeriCorps members to be our counselors and I had to find kids...These were all big things that I was not trained for, so lack of training was a big challenge and being put in these positions of power without any real reality check. That was really hard, they sort of convinced me saying, 'Oh it's nothing, you can do it, we'll get you through it,' but I didn't really get any feedback until my first day of camp. So I'd done all this planning and marketing and recruiting and hiring, having no idea how to hire people, so it was really rough at first. It was really hard. To not have been vetted...you know trial by fire, they waited until I actually started the camp to tell me what I was doing wrong, instead of beforehand telling me, you need to do this you need to do that. There was not very realistic support and not realistic expectations. Sure, I can do it. I can do a lot of things, but to expect me to figure out how to do it on my own—not realistic in my opinion.

She was in charge of volunteer management for the organization and she explained during our interview that because of her lack of expertise in this area and unclear expectations from her supervisor an unsupervised volunteer fell off a ladder and injured herself.

One volunteer stayed with SVCOA for a second AmeriCorps year. He described a project the AmeriCorps volunteers took on in 2007. They were approached by an organization in the city that addresses homelessness and asked if they wanted to open a shelter in the large church where they were staying. “We had no expertise whatsoever but we’ll go ahead and try it. So we set up a shelter in the building—we had like bunk beds set up, we set up this wonderful place.” It took the volunteers three weeks to complete. When they did not get a response from the organization they bypassed it and did their own outreach to fill the space (an overnight shelter). “We were like, you know what, we don’t know how to do this but there’s an obvious need, so we put ourselves out there, we bypassed [the homelessness organization]—we don’t need their money, we don’t need their interaction, we don’t need anything from them.” The AmeriCorps volunteers did their own intake interviews and after about 5 months realized that safe, overnight shelter “is just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many other things that people, in order to achieve what they’re looking for, there’s a lot else that needs to be done to sustain and facilitate a successful transition from actually being homeless to living independently. There was an enormous amount of work that needed to be done on the part of the resident and any sort of partner they were working with on staff. That was a real learning process.”

GNO Rebuilds

All of the members of this group had bachelor's degrees. One person reported not having attended training (though he had done AmeriCorps a few years prior). He had experience in journalism and free-lance writing and was hired to be the editor of a newspaper about recovery, though he explained that he did not know how to start a newspaper from scratch.

One white man explains rampant inexperience as problematic in his organization: "There wasn't a lot of experience throughout the organization. Everyone was new pretty much—everyone was new to that world [non-profit start up]. That was one of the biggest things, no one had done that type of work before or if they had done that type of work no one had had that type of responsibility."

One white woman explains what she thought was lacking in the training she received, which was exclusively technical: "So we had a Microsoft Office training that I went to because somebody had to go. I don't think that's—for instance, I think an undoing racism training would be really valuable for AmeriCorps volunteers. I think having a better sense of what is the culture of the community that you're working in—just sort of going in completely naive without any sense or feeling of support from somebody who knows, I don't think it's good for the people they're supposed to be helping and I don't think it's good for the volunteers and I don't think it's good for anyone."

Political Activists

Both members of this group, and the previously mentioned woman who suggested an anti-racism workshop, defined training and experience in different terms than other

interviewees. Rather than technical or educational training, they emphasized the need for comprehensive understanding of power dynamics and the role of volunteers. In this politically critical group, the women had bachelors (in American Studies/Ethnic Studies) and the man had not completed college at the time of the interview. Neither reported attending any AmeriCorps trainings and one expressed surprise that she did not get training from WNG. These two emphasized the need for political and racial understanding over concrete skills. One explained why he thought he was unprepared for his AmeriCorps year: “I was not, you know just didn’t have a lot of intentionality and at that point just did not have...I feel like I had some really rudimentary politics around anti-racism and like barely any understanding of accountability in that context and what that means and what that would look like. It’s a really, you know just a very basic and not very well thought out or advanced idea of solidarity and what that means and what that looks like.”

VISTA

All four VISTA participants went to a VISTA pre-service orientation and were provided with education along the way—weekly guest speakers and group discussions about service learning and volunteerism. While the black woman placed with Expanding Horizons reported a steep learning curve, required to learn things like how to price art with which she had no experience, she did bring with her previous expertise. Specifically she was accomplished at grassroots fund-raising—resulting from having to pay her own way to study abroad—which was helpful for an organization in great need of funds.

AmeriCorps initially placed the non-local white woman with a national volunteer organization in Alabama. She spent three months there before transferring to a VISTA

position with a university in New Orleans. At her first appointment she was tasked with finding projects for the organization to do in the lower three counties of Mississippi—the area in the state most affected by Katrina and Rita’s storm surges. She explained her project: “So I ended up running a health clinic for two months—managed and ran a health clinic, recruited doctors, ordered free supplies from drug companies for pills. We saw about 400 patients a day and then that kind of...I realized they needed a professional doing that. So I went back to my organization and fought with them.” She then transferred to New Orleans and was placed in charge of an ESL program that they expected 150 people to register for and got 400 the first day. She emphasized that she didn’t know how to run a program like this, didn’t know anything about teaching English and ultimately didn’t know how rudimentary her Spanish was until she was in this position. Most ESL teachers were volunteer undergraduate service-learning students. She explained the relationship between the university and her host organization:

[The university] had basically come in and said, we will be the great white knight who will save all of this! We have all these students who teach English and they sent 18 and 19 year old kids in to teach these 30 year old adults, half of whom have reading issues in their own language or are functionally illiterate in their own language. Kids who had no clue what they were doing, no training whatsoever, big hearts, strong kids, I really appreciated what they did but I was like, these guys have no clue what they’re doing.

Later she explained that because of a grant from the Department of Education they were required to administer placement tests to incoming students. They did so for months before finding out they were breaking the law by not being federally trained as test administrators.

Theme 3. Living with AmeriCorps: “A pitcher of beer for lunch.”

This section presents the benefits the AmeriCorps program and host organizations provided volunteers, such as stipends, housing, health care and education, as well as the impacts their work had on their need for these benefits. The AmeriCorps stipend in 2006 was \$10,900 annually before taxes, provided on a bi-weekly basis. Following successful contract completion each volunteer received a \$5350 education award. Thirteen out of eighteen interviewees were provided or offered free housing, and five of the thirteen were offered free board. Three of these thirteen volunteers were offered free room and board but choose to live independently despite the increased financial burden. There was no difference in stipend amount for those who had to provide for themselves completely independently and those who had much of their living expenses covered. AmeriCorps in 2006 provided a form of health insurance that covered emergency-only care.

Interviewees emphasized housing provision, financial compensation, and health insurance as critical to their ability to volunteer. They also discussed the significant need for physical and mental health care because of the nature of their work.²⁵ Interviewees often mentioned money as a constraining factor and recommended that the pay be increased. Most volunteers who received housing recognized the negative impact it would have been on their finances if this benefit was not provided. Interviewees were critical of AmeriCorps’s health benefits and those who used them expressed disapproval of the limited coverage. Those who discussed needing health care while working for AmeriCorps

²⁵ The need for mental and physical health care for volunteers who fit within my research boundaries was greater than that of AmeriCorps volunteers in other parts of the country. AmeriCorps volunteers involved in Katrina relief work had the highest dropout rate of any group of federal volunteers, and cited mental health as a significant contributor to this level of burn out. This can be attributed to the environmental conditions resulting from the flooding, the uniquely physically demanding labor, and the secondary trauma non-locals absorbed and the primary trauma local volunteers experienced as a result of Katrina and the levee failure.

emphasized the financial burden—they were rendered unable to live on the stipend without assistance due to medical bills. Two people reported asking their parents for money and one explained, “I just lived on a credit card.” While seven people mentioned physical health problems during their service year, fourteen mentioned mental health concerns. Chapter 5 presents this information in the context of a struggling post-disaster city in the middle of a housing and health-care crisis.

Gutters

Everyone in this group was provided room and board through their host organizations (CCGA or Collaborating Volunteers). Living situations were communal and often less than ideal—informants complained of lack of privacy and limited numbers of showers. One volunteer was originally placed with SVCOA and transferred to CCGA because he was struggling to house himself. He stayed for three months in CCGA volunteer housing and then reported moving out for mental health reasons. After moving out, he slept on couches, stayed with friends and rented a room for a few months. Everyone in this group lived in a building that was a former shelter. CCGA volunteers were in a former shelter for at-risk youth and one worker with Collaborating Volunteers reported meeting a local teenager who was homeless and used to stay in the church before Katrina hit.

All volunteers who were gutting were able to make ends meet on the stipend AmeriCorps provided—most credited free room and board for keeping costs low. One volunteer even reported being able to save money through her AmeriCorps year. While NCCC stipends are a bit lower than State/National and VISTA there were other forms of financial compensation. One NCCC member reported that their first work assignment

was with the Red Cross in Baton Rouge for three weeks. The Red Cross paid them \$900 on top of their stipend for that time. Many volunteers, including her, decided not to accept this money, but some kept it. She explained, “For me \$900 was ridiculous and other people on my team and myself gave a lot of it back when we checked out. There were definitely volunteers who would come back with no money on their debit cards—they got debit cards—but you saw they had new watches and things like that. So you saw that they would go use it on all personal items. My biggest issue is making sure the money is going to the right places.”

Two volunteers in this group reported health concerns. One got sick and couldn’t breathe without an inhaler because of the conditions of the houses she was working in. “Safety is something that really scares me. When I look back on what we were doing...[laughter]. I mean we were working in homes that officially had asbestos in them! I was gutting houses and de-molding in a paper mask! It was absolutely absurd the lack of precautions we took on safety.” She ended up being transferred to an office position due to her health problems. One volunteer, who was employed by her organization after her term of service, linked the health concerns of such physical work with emotional distress. “It was definitely the most physical and emotional job I’ve ever had. I was definitely burnt out, I essentially worked down there for two and a half years and after two and a half years I was so physically and emotionally exhausted that I...I don’t know...it’s a very emotional time looking back on it because I put so much energy and heart into the work that I was doing and definitely felt like I pretty much was beaten [by the work].”

All of the volunteers who were doing physical labor—mostly gutting houses—reported emotional and mental health concerns. Three people mentioned high turnover of

AmeriCorps volunteers in their organization due to the heavy emotional toll. A volunteer with CCGA arrived for her term of service and was surprised to see how “burnt out” some volunteers were after only three months of work. Another volunteer described co-workers deciding overnight that they could not work another day and breaking their contract on the spot. “It was really challenging work and it was really tough to go through peoples’ personal belonging, photographs, wedding dresses, you know...all these remnants of people who had maybe lived in that house since birth and whose parents or grandparents built the house. It was really emotional work, combined with really physical work meant that you would get home at the end of the day and just want to sleep.” Another volunteer explained self-medicating during such a stressful time. “My boss was and is one of my good friends, we would for lunch run out, I would flip my [AmeriCorps] t-shirt inside out²⁶ and we would go to a bar and have a pitcher of beer for lunch because it was such a stressful morning and she was already crying or something dramatic happened.” Two volunteers emphasized the importance of support from supervisors and co-workers. Another explained a mental health intervention: “At one point my supervisor said, ‘You can’t go out and inspect houses anymore’ because I would come back completely emotionally distraught after hearing another sad story.” Another CCGA volunteer explained that after living in volunteer housing for three months he had to move out for mental health reasons. “It was really depressing, it was kind of cut off. I had a lot of friends in the city and I couldn’t see them cause I didn’t have a car and it’s quite a commute from there to here. I had to get away. I also was working seven days a week and to be working all day and then go back there and be kind of cut off from the rest of society, it felt like too much.” While he reported

²⁶ This was due to the restrictions on activities (such as consuming alcohol) while sporting AmeriCorps paraphernalia.

feeling better as a result of his move, the work continued to impact him: “After a while I just stopped taking lunch breaks because I felt kind of...I didn’t really feel like eating or whatever so I just worked through lunch.”

Agenda Setters

Volunteers with SVCOA were staying on the second floor of a flooded church. While this was free for the four of them they reported some difficulties:

There was electricity in three of the rooms and there was no hot water so we would take showers at the pastor’s house... It was just really creepy place to live. There would be people in the church at night. The church was this tremendous building that was just open, like all the buildings, just open to outside. So people who were on the streets were sleeping in the church and stuff. Once there was someone who tried to open my door at night and I was just like this cannot happen again. So we created a secure perimeter in the church for us at night²⁷ so that was creepy because the city was so dark... We had one neighbor. We had one neighbor who lived right behind the church. He was our pal, he was looking out for us but really no one else knew we lived there—it was just an abandoned looking church. It looked no more or less abandoned [than other buildings in the area]...they’d taken the water line off so it didn’t have that bathtub line. So we lived in the church and eventually the power and hot water fell into place.

There were some benefits for volunteers who had free rein in the church: “I built a darkroom in the church. There were a lot of empty rooms in the church so you could sort of do whatever you wanted. So I built a darkroom and would photograph old houses which was fun but painstaking.”

Volunteers working with United Residents had a harder time. One woman reported simply “living off my husband” in response to a question about making ends meet. Her co-worker, however, reported paying for housing as the biggest stressor in her life that year—her rent was \$450/month. This volunteer worked a second job in a kitchen, had to borrow

²⁷ This included a series of locked doors and secured/solid walls.

money from her parents and lived on a credit card. She explained: “I had a lot of stress over money; I couldn’t sleep some nights...” Another explained: “It’s hard to make ends meet if you have a cell phone, if you have a car—if you’re lucky enough to have a car...350 or 375 dollars every two weeks is not very much money.” This volunteer relied on her family to help pay her bills.

Generally, Agenda Setters had fewer health complaints than the Gutters due to the nature of their job, which was generally less physically demanding than gutting. One volunteer with United Residents reported struggling with health care, which was emergency-only.

You don’t have...you can’t have a doctor or anything. That was another big stressor... was the lack of insurance. At the time I had enough health problems that it was an ordeal for me, you know, I had to pay \$100. I had an ear infection, I think, and I had to pay two or three hundred dollars to get after-care service and drops...And then I had a lot of back problems from working in the kitchen at night because I was wearing kitchen clogs and they were bad for my knees and so I had these really bad knee problems. I ended up going to chiropractor and there was no way I could get that reimbursed and that was a hundred dollars each time...

Another volunteer in this group is currently in his third year of AmeriCorps and described how the health benefits have gotten worse. He describes the situation his third service term—in 2009:

It was a complete joke—a farce—it was infuriating. It wasn’t even health insurance; it was a health package, that’s how the lady on the phone described it to me. I was like, am I insured? And she was like, no; you have a health package though. I was like, are you kidding me? The only way, like if I got a nail driven through my foot at eight o’clock at night and I wasn’t on the clock then I wouldn’t be covered at all. So I had to go to the charity system... which is fine, that’s its own system. You were only covered if you were injured on the clock, which is ridiculous, completely ridiculous. The first year was not like that, it was better insurance.

Both volunteers with United Residents reported work-induced stress. The woman with the second job explained: “You don’t have any time to yourself so you don’t really stop and

reflect as much as you should, at least in my situation. It was also chaotic time, post-Katrina, for me.” She, like others, mentioned drinking as a way to relax. There was limited support from supervisors or other networks. A self-described “emotionally exhausted” volunteer with SVCOA also emphasized the need for support and mentioned that there was a woman, who had a degree in social work in the organization offering free counseling. “That was good to have that accessible to the volunteers at the time—I valued that. She wasn’t the best but it was still valuable to know there was some support there that I couldn’t get otherwise.” SVCOA, GNO Rebuilds and the VISTA group were the only volunteers who mentioned having access to affordable mental health care.

GNO Rebuilds

All participants in this group had to find their own housing. A white woman explained she was living with her boyfriend and her sister and her sister’s girlfriend, which helped keep housing costs low. She explained that when things were especially tight her boyfriend would assist her financially. One white man reported simply that he had free rent and was employed by GNO Rebuilds for 2 or 3 months before starting AmeriCorps, which allowed him to save a little money. Another volunteer was married and his wife had student loans and a job to support them. He also took a part time job coaching soccer and did other side jobs such as being an extra in films. Two people in this group were the only ones who mentioned having used their education award to fund school.

There were very few complaints of health concerns in this group, which focused primarily on office work, though one did mention that the health care was “bad.” Three of the four mentioned stress and anxiety as a result of their work, and the white man noted

that his co-workers were struggling but did not address his own situation. One volunteer explained that there was temporarily a free counselor available:

You just basically made an appointment and the reason they had it in place was because you're dealing with post-Katrina stuff—you're seeing a lot of stuff. While I might not have seen things other people saw I guess, more in with the people, I spent a lot of time in the office I guess. When I talked to them about...I utilized this...I didn't talk to them only about AmeriCorps of course it was job related stuff, but it was real good. I'm really glad they had that. That was only a short-term thing; they ended it while I was there.

Political Activists

The two members of this group mentioned AmeriCorps benefits and work concerns the least. They both temporarily stayed in free volunteer housing provided by TiES. Neither had a car and one was on food stamps. After moving out of free housing they were able to find relatively cheap places to live. As one explained simply, "I didn't need any more than I was getting paid." They did not mention any health concerns, though there was some mental anxiety from working closely with storm survivors and facing organizational resistance to their work.

People were walking around with an incredible amount of stress; some people were walking around with a significant amount of trauma. Things were pretty painful a lot of time...you know definite struggle with that and I think that exacerbates personality conflicts as well. So that was always an issue... I certainly found I was definitely not immune to any of that. I was very quick, I was not taking care of myself, and I was abusing alcohol pretty often. I think that that was also like, I think a lot of people weren't sure how to deal with what was going on around them. There was conflict stuff going on all the time—it was a pretty intense environment.

VISTA

All VISTA informants reported receiving free housing in the hospital affiliated with their host university. As one volunteer explained: "They have these little apartments for public health students, people who have families who have patients in the hospital,

whatever, so we were staying there. There were 12 of us and we basically all lived on the same floor right next to each other and we were roommates and everything. All [smushes hands together] like that.” One man explained that he made the decision to work through the VISTA program, rather than with the organization directly, because the former offered free housing—which left him having to cover food and car insurance. He recognized housing as the biggest financial obstacle to those wanting to volunteer and suggested “keeping a small stash of Section 8 vouchers for those kids if you know you have a large program that’s coming in just leaving something like that open.” A local white woman explained that the stipend was enough because she didn’t have any student loans. Even with housing provided, the AmeriCorps position was a financial struggle for one woman: “Also, because of issues with my parents and their financial background, just the way they handle money and everything else I was very deathly afraid of being...I was homeless at one point growing up...so I never got into credit, ever. You could defer your loans so I really didn’t have...I had a cell phone bill and that was it, and I couldn’t even pay that all...just to try and eat.”

Two members of this group brought up health care, though one did say that they had access to the university’s clinic. One member went to the doctor and ended up having to pay large medical bills, which was another reason why she could not live off the stipend. One volunteer mentioned that she did not think it was acceptable to be technically working 24 hours per day, seven days per week, with only ten days off a year, especially in a disaster area.

I think it should be built in that at least 20 to 25 days off a year, which is, I think what Peace Corps volunteers get. I think there should be special consideration given for...I don’t want to say counseling...I don’t know how to put this, but there should be some system in place of debriefing and/or counseling if necessary for volunteers.

That was something that drove me crazy—you have a bunch of people down here, probably the largest disaster in the past few hundred years in the country and you're kind of just letting these kids just burn themselves out, burn themselves out. Then they're getting chewed out for dropping out of the program!

This volunteer was pulled aside by state AmeriCorps directors to help them troubleshoot reasons for the largest drop-out rate the program has ever seen. Another volunteer explained how weekly meetings with check-in time and a social worker to conduct group therapy sessions helped support her through difficult times. Another explained “It also became this great support group, where you could just totally vent and put it all on the table and just imagine this group of thirteen people helping you trouble shoot, people who have prior experience, people who don't but work in a different environment or whatever the case. Or, just imagine that network, it was an already ready-made group of friends and network to resources in the city.”

Theme 4. Work: “The director has an idea and it sort of flows down.”

This section expands on the day-to-day assignments given to AmeriCorps volunteers, their level of supervision and information about their sponsor organizations. Jobs varied widely and descriptions of typical days indicated a variety of experiences, from the incredibly busy to the slow and directionless. Those doing physical labor had the most consistent workdays—mostly leading teams of volunteers and gutting houses. The Agenda Setters and GNO Rebuilds groups described the widest range of activities. The VISTAs' primary responsibilities were to bolster the capacity of their organizations to more effectively host the university's service learning students.

Gutters

I interviewed five volunteers whose main assignment was doing physical labor in flooded neighborhoods, mostly for private homeowners. This included gutting homes and mold remediation. All of them led volunteer teams that traveled to NOLA to work. Before 8am every morning they would meet the volunteer team, collect tools, give a safety talk, drive to the site for the day, demonstrate the work and assign tasks. They usually stayed on site until the volunteer team was ready to leave, sometime between 3 and 6pm. They then drove back, unloaded the tools, and made a plan for the next day. While on the work site AmeriCorps workers were often the authority figures. One volunteer explains: "I didn't really like the fact that some of the decisions that I made...that I could make a mistake and it would end up costing somebody something in the future...like if I was working on a homeowner's house for example and I make a bad decision about whether or not to save the floorboards, I could end up costing them a couple hundred dollars or in some cases a few thousand more dollars." In addition to leading volunteer crews, two interviewees reported, "inspecting homes" to determine their eligibility as potential work sites. This was mostly based on structural soundness. One person emphasized this task of scouting homes because it was the project he had the most amount of guidance and supervision with, working closely with his supervisor²⁸.

The two NCCC volunteers were in New Orleans for twelve weeks and developed a New Orleans site for a national volunteer program. They led crews, assigned work projects and managed volunteers. Both NCCC and VISTA programs are 24 hour per day

²⁸ This volunteer did not mention the level of training his supervisor had in this area.

commitments with very limited time off. One NCCC informant explained that her work with volunteers required workdays that lasted fourteen to twenty hours. During their time at Collaborating Volunteers their daily responsibilities paralleled those who were working under AmeriCorps State/National doing house gutting, mold remediation and other physically demanding work in flooded homes.

GNO Rebuilds

I interviewed four people, one of whom was a VISTA, who worked for this neighborhood support organization.²⁹ They all reported difficult work situations. While the VISTA volunteer did have obligations to the university's service learning program, he described his work as centered largely around organizational maintenance and supporting regular educational meetings hosted by the organization. This involved getting low-cost food, recruiting speakers and publicizing. He was also in charge of handling the application process required for the organization to get 501(c)3 status. He took steps to hinder this process when a local resident expressed contempt for the work of the organization and ultimately its mission. This resident, herself a neighborhood leader, approached GNO Rebuilds to challenge the reality of some of their missions and statements. She insisted that they could be supporting different programming and be more accountable to pre-Katrina residents. One Latino man was the editor in chief of the monthly newspaper and he worked with volunteers to produce articles and do layouts. He was also in charge of the organization's website and spent time helping coordinate weekly citywide meetings.

²⁹ For this theme only, Work, I am including this VISTA volunteer in the GNO Rebuilds group because his answers to questions relating to job responsibilities were strikingly similar to those of his co-workers at this organization.

Most of the comments about the work AmeriCorps volunteers were expected to do for this organization centered around the leadership of the director and the board of directors. The director had conceptualized the organization after the storm and the board of directors was comprised of community leaders. One volunteer described the organizational development process: “A lot of organizations just sort of came up and his was just something that just happened like he didn’t really plan it... He found funding and then he found AmeriCorps just cause he’s a social person and he knows who to talk to.” He described the boss in this way: “He would come in...we called him, behind his back of course, the Tornado. He spent a lot of time out doing whatever he did with people and he’d come into the office and when he left it was like a tornado had hit—he was throwing out ideas, you do this, you do this, you do this. That was why he was crazy I guess. There are different ways to define crazy of course and I’m sure he wasn’t psychological or anything like an insane person. But it seemed to be a lot harder with him around than when he wasn’t around. We were able to really get things done on our own.”

The white man was the least critical of the organization. He did allow that his boss was “really bad at managing” but appreciated the freedom and conflict resolution skills fostered in him by the environment. He still works for the organization. His daily responsibilities usually revolved around coordinating weekly meetings—arranging guest speakers and food. He also managed a database and list serve. He reported working 50-60 hour weeks—more than he did after he was put on salary. He described the work as “very much about self-motivation and results-driven.” The white woman placed with this organization had the most critical things to say about it. She explained her work this way:

So really a lot of the work of getting our 501(c)3 status, working with funders, getting grants, this kind of very basic level formation stuff fell to us as AmeriCorps

volunteers. We spent almost all of our time trying to keep this organization alive, which basically meant that we didn't do anything that was our mission which was another wildly debated...I mean, I don't even think we had a mission statement until my last month there or something that it was agreed upon. It was a constant battle—who are we, what are we doing, having these conversations over and over again. I felt like there weren't very good boundaries between our boss and us in terms of the amount of hours we were putting in and the kind of work that was expected of us that we didn't necessarily feel capable of doing or it was difficult to speak up to him.

She went to a lot of meetings held by schools, the city council, non-profit organizations, neighborhood associations, and others. She also helped coordinate weekly meetings hosted by GNO Rebuilds, and assisted with the organization's newspaper. She was also responsible for recording and summarizing the work of all GNO Rebuilds' AmeriCorps volunteers. She explained took two days a month just to do that.

It felt like there was really no substance to anything that we did. It felt like a big joke to me, honestly. All the meetings that we were going to, I started realizing pretty quickly that it was all the same people who were representatives of other non-profits and somehow having this meeting of all these other people from non-profits could conceive of some citizen participation or whatever it was that they...It just felt like we were all there to pat each other on the back, to network with each other, it was a total vacuum of anything that was actually happening. It just felt like it was creating more and more layers between people who were the rebuilding, recovery work that was happening and these big foundations that were wanting to throw money at organizations like ours.

She further described her impressions of the work and the organization:

What I ultimately found, [GNO Rebuilds] was doing was sort of creating its own agenda for rebuilding stuff rather than listening to others, rather than working as a supporting organization that ostensibly would want to put itself out of business. It seemed that it was trying to just create itself and sustain itself and create its whole set of agenda, create its whole own thing. It felt very much that what I ended up doing in a very dysfunctional way, help create an organization that I ultimately didn't believe in as an effective or useful thing. I felt like there was almost nothing we could point to that we'd done that was something I felt good about at the point when I left.

While her negative opinions of the organization are stronger than those of her co-workers, two of them expressed disbelief that this organization still exists.

Agenda Setters

This group reported the most free time, and uncertainty about what they should be doing. The four volunteers in this group worked for two different organizations—United Residents and SVCOA—and had similar work descriptions. One informant as described the structure of United Residents: “[The director] has an idea and it sort of flows down, rather than the neighborhood has an idea and it goes up.” The most noteworthy sentiment expressed by these four volunteers is that their biggest challenge was figuring out what needed to be done in their neighborhood and that they struggled to find work to fill their full-time commitment to AmeriCorps. One informant expressed: “I was surprised by how much down time there was...I could just, I could do whatever I wanted on the computer many hours a day because there was not a lot expected of me. It’s pretty obvious that they had no work plan for what they were going to do with us.” She and the other volunteer I interviewed who worked for this organization ended up going to city council, neighborhood association and city planning meetings. They also planned neighborhood “visioning sessions,” built a website, distributed fliers for events, and coordinated and managed volunteers to work on a community center. “You make your own work but you kind of feel like, what am I doing here? Why am I here?”

A volunteer at SVCOA expressed this sentiment as well: “I had no idea there would be so little direction. I remember thinking...what are we doing? I kind of felt lost in a way...I remember that we were kind of searching for ways to spend our time. It got a lot better but we weren’t sure what we could count as hours and what we couldn’t count as hours because of our lack of a mission...our lack of a project is what it boiled down to...It might

have been thirty hour weeks or twenty hour weeks at the beginning just because of the lack of organization.” She describes a moment that sticks out to her:

I have this very vivid memory of like us being in our common room at the church eating oatmeal, reading the paper, passing that around, reading stories from it, reading our horoscopes...It was like this suspension in time. I don't know, we had nothing to do. We really didn't. It was depressing, it was very sad. There was so much going on but so few access points to that. So I think that compounds some of those negative feelings about being disillusioned by the federal government, well, this is their disaster response.

This group ended up starting a community garden, a tutoring program at a local elementary school and assisted the neighborhood association in some of their projects by flyer for events. Three of the four AmeriCorps who were working for this organization stayed on for their second AmeriCorps year and ended up opening a homeless shelter³⁰.

Even though this group was State/National, which unlike VISTA and NCCC does not require volunteer to be “on the clock” 24-7, one informant explained that the lines between working and not working blurred because they lived where they worked. He also mentioned that there was never a typical work day: “It’s just a really hard thing to get used to because you like the feeling of being off but we were never really off—we were never really on either.” He explained that this was because volunteer management was 24-7 and they were the authority figures because they lived in the church. Thus, volunteers relied on them for advice and guidance at all hours of the night. He gave the example of a short-term volunteer’s wallet being stolen at two in the morning and the AmeriCorps workers having to get up and deal with it. Interviewees who worked for this organization emphasized the very hands-off supervision they received. Their boss was in charge of rebuilding and supporting eight New Orleans churches—but he gave them one very clear direction: “When

³⁰ Discussed on page 66.

we would be kind of on the edge of really committing ourselves to something big and new, he would say you should not commit yourselves, you should hold back...You should wait until the right moment comes along before you completely commit yourselves. That really perplexed us because in the midst of all this destruction we're holding back, you know?" He explained how this created tension because there was so much to be done but everything required a deep commitment. This group ended up "holding back" for the entire service year and part of their second. It was then that they were approached to open a homeless shelter.

Political Activists

The two in this group technically worked for Words Not Guns but they both reported having limited contact with this organization. Upon receiving AmeriCorps positions they continued doing what they had been doing—they had both been volunteering for TiES. One was organizing volunteers against racism and white privilege, the other was doing a small amount of this work in addition to supporting community control of a medical clinic. Each person's work centered around anti-oppression organizing with volunteer groups and community outreach via door-to-door or active participation in other organizations. One person described his work as visiting on porches, hanging out in community meeting spots and walking around, practices which have been established as excellent outreach activities. One participant reported regular volunteer commitments with organizations that work to support immigrants, challenge the criminal justice system and provide anti-racism trainings. Another used a lot of his hours to protest the demolition of public housing during his second AmeriCorps year. As will be discussed further, they had

little supervision or oversight. As one person stated: “I was free to do political organizing work full time.”

VISTA

All four VISTAs I interviewed were sourced through a historically white, wealthy New Orleans university. They explained that their job was to increase the capacity of their organizations to host service learning students and to provide guidance and programming for these students. These VISTAs all worked for different organizations: Expanding Horizons, Fun to Read New Orleans, an ESL program run through CCGA, and GNO Rebuilds. They worked at their organizations Monday through Thursday, and spent Fridays in staff meetings, and working as a group on volunteer projects. One volunteer was placed with GNO Rebuilds, and for this section only is included in the GNO Rebuilds group. Another VISTA’s responsibility was to bring undergraduate service learning students into public schools as “reading buddies” to “make reading fun.” She spent her time trying to match kids with tutors, convince teachers that the program was worthwhile, develop a more rigorous curriculum and transition the opening of a new site in a new school. The other two were placed in difficult situations and reported pressure from the university to accommodate more service learning students and pressure from organizations to further their specific missions.

One member of this VISTA group was the woman who ran a health clinic in Mississippi and was transferred to the program in New Orleans. Once in the city she was acting director of one of the few ESL programs in the city. She reported struggling to understand the federal grant under which the program operated, spending an entire month

reading it over. She also pored over new reports and population estimated trying to estimate the number of students to expect. She was in charge of training service learning students to be ESL teachers—resulting in what she referred to as “the world’s worst volunteer training,” and supporting them when there were classroom difficulties. She struggled with resources—the program lacked textbooks—and infrastructure. She described the process of biking to the CCGA’s executive offices, sneaking in with badges they forged, and “stealing” thousands of photocopies from their parent organization. She had to strong-arm the university hosting VISTA volunteers into restricting the number of service learning students:

I told this woman that and she fought back at me, you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’ve never been...you’re not from this city, you don’t know how this city works, and we’re going to do...we’re going to put students over there whether you like it or not. I was like, over my dead body. Even though I was working for them, I started a little fight with that organization, between her and my organization and had to keep going back and forth. Man, that was a weird dynamic. At that point we were sandwiched between [the university] who was trying to strong arm us into taking 30 or 40 service learning students a semester—no she wanted us to take 200—and I was like, we don’t even have an office, we don’t even have a phone, we’re not taking 200 volunteers.

Through this whole process she reported developing a curriculum and a solid program:

“We expanded to six sites, we really created a solid, state-wide recognized as a solid ESL program, it’s not perfect but I think we really laid the ground work for building a long term sustainable program that’s still going to be there in ten years.”

The black woman in this VISTA group was placed with a small community arts organization that not only sold art but holistically supported the artists by providing them with housing and other needs. She described her work in this way:

Then some of the artists got sick, we found them, we had to bring them back, so I was doing case management stuff, like finding places for people to live, furniture and helping them. One of my roles was actually helping and training them on how to

put their portfolios together so a lot of me was learning as I went. So okay, what does a successful artist...how can an artist be successful in the business of art? So this organization was supposed to be about the business of art. So I had to learn how do you price art. If we're using this as a community space how do we support ourselves and still keep this open, you know what I mean? It was just all these things as I was learning that neighborhood, this was in Central City, as people were coming back, what was needed. We were doing a lot of event planning to bring some sense of normalcy, like you know something's always going on...that's what's normal.

She was basically an assistant to the organization's director who invested in her understanding of the city and the rebuilding processes: "She really wanted me to get dirty and really know the city."

Theme 5. AmeriCorps Rules and Regulations: "You gotta do what you gotta do."

This section examines the extent to which post-Katrina AmeriCorps volunteers were governed by AmeriCorps rules and regulations [Appendix E]. These rules generally prohibit AmeriCorps volunteers from engaging in any political or religious activities during work hours. For NCCC and VISTA volunteers, who are never technically "off," these rules applied to their entire service term. This includes voter registration drives, influencing union organizing, engaging in petitions or boycotts, "or providing a direct benefit to a for-profit entity, a labor union, a partisan political organization." One may not engage in religious instruction or conduct worship services. This section also provides an understanding of the extent to which rules stated on paper and in contracts were enforced during the 2006 AmeriCorps year in New Orleans.

Gutters

Generally the State/National volunteers in this group were connected to each other but not necessarily to the national program. One participant reported that he didn't feel

connected to the national structure at all. Another volunteer explained that some rules—like interpersonal relationships between leadership and volunteers—were thrown out the window in New Orleans: “I actually think that some of the stuff they [AmeriCorps leaders and supervisors] turned a blind eye to most things...what we’re going to do is what we’re going to do. We’re down here for relief, it’s not a cookie-cutter project...” NCCC had unique oversight as their supervisor was not affiliated with their host organization but was employed by the AmeriCorps program to lead the team. One NCCC volunteer actually reported meeting with then-President Bush who came to visit their site, who was there for a public relations trip and photo shoot.

Agenda Setters

Generally members of this group had very little affiliation with the AmeriCorps program. One volunteer explained: “I guess as far as AmeriCorps goes...I guess I was a little surprised about how it was...being part of AmeriCorps wasn’t really part of the job as I might have anticipated. We didn’t have any contact with AmeriCorps personnel or anything like that. It was us, our supervisor and the other company employees. AmeriCorps was just part of our job title...” Another told this story: “Like I said our relationship with our job as far as how it relates to AmeriCorps was very detached, so much so we were 10 months into the program before we were told, oh wait, you’re supposed to go to this website and pick out apparel. Cause you’re actually supposed to be wearing AmeriCorps apparel as you’re working, and we’re like, really? [Laughter]. We got two more months to comply, all right.” Everyone in this group mentioned time-sheets as their primarily responsibility to the

AmeriCorps program. One volunteer reported keeping her own time sheets without supervision “which totally could have been fudged.”

One volunteer refused to sign the AmeriCorps contract without altering it: “I had a big problem with that contract. There is one part of the contract which I recall really infringes on your religious rights. I had an issue with that. Basically it stipulated what you could or could not do outside of your hours that you’re working for AmeriCorps. I would have to find a copy of it, but I defiantly scratched out and re-wrote part of that saying, I will work under this condition and this condition only.” There were no repercussions or follow up regarding this edit.³¹

GNO Rebuilds

One member of this group had done AmeriCorps before and reported knowing how it worked. He was the only person I interviewed who didn’t complete his contract. This was because he was accepted into a graduate program and school started two months before the end of his AmeriCorps term. He made a clear distinction between his troubles with his organization and the AmeriCorps program. Another volunteer reported not feeling very connected to AmeriCorps, though one of her monthly assignments was to spend two days compiling the AmeriCorps report on their activities. Another volunteer also identified this report as one of his job responsibilities. He claims he had “little to no oversight” from AmeriCorps. He explained: “I actually always felt like I wasn’t really part of ‘the AmeriCorps.’ I never carried myself like I was AmeriCorps, wearing the shirt was bullshit,

³¹ The AmeriCorps contract states: “At no time may the member... engage in religious instruction; conduct worship services; [or] engage in any form of religious proselytization.”

absolute bullshit—that is retarded.” When asked about the AmeriCorps rules and regulations he explained: “I’ll put it this way—I did whatever the fuck I wanted...there was no federal oversight. There was no oversight and there was no federal oversight!”

Political Activists

This small group is particularly interesting because the majority of their activities were explicitly forbidden in the AmeriCorps guidelines. Neither of them faced any repercussions and one actually completed a second service year doing similar work. He explains: “I was surprised because I thought I was getting more oversight. In my particular situation I thought there was going to be more bureaucracy and more oversight and more restrictions or even guidance or boundaries around what I was doing. I was actually...I pretty much was able to define and develop pretty much what I wanted to do.” He links this freedom to the situation in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina:

At least through what I’ve seen and folks that I’ve talked to who have done AmeriCorps outside of New Orleans post-Katrina, it’s much more bureaucratic and it’s much more dot the i’s and cross the t’s at the situation. I can say really ultimately the reason I did AmeriCorps and took this position was because I knew that from talking to other folks, I knew that this particular situation I wasn’t going to have a lot of restrictions on what I was able to do, you know? So, yeah, I went to like protests, I didn’t wear AmeriCorps stuff, so I wasn’t like actively promoting AmeriCorps at these events, but...Yeah, technically as an AmeriCorps member I was not allowed to contribute to the struggle to save public housing in New Orleans. But I did anyway. And my supervisor didn’t care... I think some of that was because just the nature of the program that we were doing and the national [AmeriCorps] program I think were sort of sympathetic to our—to the politics of these groups and also sympathetic to what was going on in New Orleans. So I think that they maybe weren’t as strict with us—like it was a you gotta do what you gotta do sort of thing...I don’t know. I feel like people I’ve talked to elsewhere, it’s much more like you’re in the office from 9-5 and your documenting all your hours and the supervisor is checking your thing every couple days...

The second volunteer in this group also expressed surprise as how little oversight she received:

In all honesty, I expected them to care a little bit more about what I was doing with their money. I had to do timesheets but they were really vague and it was hard for me because the work that I was doing was very different...I was doing organizing and this grant was like for community mediation. So sometimes I had to figure out how to fit my work into the categories of what they wanted me to be doing. I think I defiantly...I'm saying all this with a lot of candor, but at the time—even now, it feels...weird. It feels like I'm kind of getting away with something. It felt like I was getting away with something. I could get them...I almost bragged about it...getting George Bush to give me money to do anti-racist organizing in post-Katrina New Orleans. It was because there was so little surveillance and so little accountability for me in terms of what I was actually doing. A time sheet is really easy to fill out in whatever way to make it look like I'm doing what they want me to do.

VISTA

Besides NCCC, VISTA volunteers were the most connected with AmeriCorps as a state and national program. They spent every Friday meeting with their VISTA leader as a group—in staff meetings and working on communal projects. The VISTA leader provided guest speakers and reported to the higher AmeriCorps structure.

A non-local white woman initially worked in Alabama, where she was in close contact with her state director because the work was going so badly. She reported being the first one to tell an AmeriCorps representative that she was running a medical clinic. She insisted that her leadership role was inappropriate given her training and experience and her state AmeriCorps supervisor agreed with her. She went to regional trainings with people from five states but had a hard time communicating to AmeriCorps staff “how our experiences did not fit within the federal guidelines of what we were supposed to be doing.” She went on to explain: “Like you're only supposed to have this many days off, you're supposed to be working 24-7.”

Unlike some of the other informants, one woman reported a complex reporting system and a simple time sheet. “The tools and structures of reporting [to AmeriCorps] felt very intrusive at times...So I felt like the bureaucracy of it sometimes when we had to do these random requests that came from high up or having legislators of whoever come down to do the charade of their showing us off and it was really weird and awkward and uncomfortable.” When asked about her relationship to the AmeriCorps rules and regulations she explained:

I remember talking about why we weren't allowed to protest or whatever. So I remember it was, all kind of things, like we weren't allowed to do it as VISTAs, but I didn't make the connection as AmeriCorps overall understanding the history outside of being told by the AmeriCorps people... Nobody ever said do you know what AmeriCorps did? So I never even thought to look at the history outside of what they told us. So I was like yeah, I never thought, when we would protest when we were gutting houses and we were doing all those things, it was like we were not allowed to do that but it was like okay, we're just kind of...I don't know breaking the rules. You think it was maybe liability but not that fundamental right... I was like goddamn, they got me. [Laughter.] Because I was doing it anyway, not because of that, but if I had known, if I had thought about that I think we could have done it anyway and really like attacked that too, you know what I mean?

Chapter 5. DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This section examines the above data in the social and political context of New Orleans and the city's recovery following Hurricane Katrina. My analysis is based on three criteria for effective disaster response in the specific case of Hurricane Katrina, which I have developed. In this case I use effective disaster response to mean a program that centers the needs of affected citizens that social scientists label "socially vulnerable." These criteria are based on social scientific literature regarding effective disaster response, as well as on racial justice movement politics, as discussed in Chapter 2. I have emphasized these sources because of my own ethical and political beliefs regarding the role of government relief. These criteria were neither developed by nor presented to the AmeriCorps program. AmeriCorps has made no claims that it was attempting to fulfill these criteria; however, I believe this does not absolve them from scrutiny on these grounds.

The first criterion is rooted in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which states that authorities should ensure that evacuated residents have the ability to return to their home city.³² I examine the implications of AmeriCorps policies for the return of New Orleans residents following Hurricane Katrina. The second criterion is based on an examination of the resources available in the New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina³³. I frame the benefits and resources provided to AmeriCorps volunteers in the context of the local housing and health care situations. This second criterion is framed by FEMA's statement that "Volunteers should plan to be as self-sufficient as possible so that they are of little, if any, burden on the disaster-affected community" (FEMA

³² See pages 38 to 39 for sections from this document.

³³ See page 36 for details on storm damage to infrastructure and public services.

2007). This analysis is framed by my discussion of changes in the neoliberal state. The last of the three criteria is based on the principle of accountability. This principle is rooted in accountability literature and the importance of personal experience and understanding as discussed in Chapter 2³⁴. There are many groups and communities affected by Hurricane Katrina; however, this research centers the needs and self-determination of those deemed “socially vulnerable” by social scientists.

The AmeriCorps program was not designed or run specifically as disaster response but does recruit and send volunteers to do this work. The AmeriCorps program did not promise to fulfill the criteria I use to evaluate their disaster response. These criteria are based on the publications of the United Nations, FEMA, social justice activists and scholars and racial justice movement principles of accountability. In my analysis I center the needs and autonomy of New Orleanians affected by Hurricane Katrina. In the rest of this chapter I assess the implications of AmeriCorps in New Orleans in 2006 according to these three criteria.

AmeriCorps’ role in supporting the return of displaced residents

The AmeriCorps program did not directly or indirectly support the return of New Orleans residents displaced by Katrina. All local residents who were hired by the program had already all returned of their own accord, prior to receiving an AmeriCorps position. Only one interviewee out of eighteen reported locating displaced residents and supporting their return home as part of her job responsibilities. The AmeriCorps program could have

³⁴ See page 14 for a discussion of accountability in SNCC’s Freedom Summer program and page 15 for Paul Kivel’s statement relating it to modern work. Also, see pages 24 to 27 for a discussion of the role political activism in holding government anti-poverty programs accountable to low-income citizens.

ensured compliance with a section of the United Nations statement on the rights of Internally Displaced People (IDP) to return home in two ways. First, by hiring them directly to rebuild their own communities, or second, by ensuring that supporting the return of displaced people was a top priority for volunteers. I discuss each alternative in turn.

My first criterion regards the process of recruiting and hiring AmeriCorps volunteers. There was organizational capacity to provide housing for volunteers, the lack of which was a barrier to people returning home. The small stipend and limited health care, while not sufficient to live on, could have provided a base-line income. The health benefits excluded a significant population as it was limited to emergency-only—dire situations were covered to an extent but preventative and primary care was not. This eliminates a large section of the population who might want to work with AmeriCorps but had some sort of medical problem or needed regular check-ups (such as diabetics). Also, there were very few senior participants who came to New Orleans following Katrina, unlike the volunteer population at regional trainings, which, according to two interviewees, spanned multiple generations. One volunteer mentioned having a physical disability but did not discuss requiring any related medical care.

Generalizing across the hiring process of national volunteers is difficult because of the initiative taken by host organizations. Only four interviewees, none of whom lived in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina, applied to AmeriCorps independent of an organizational placement. Two were NCCC members, who are assigned to an AmeriCorps campus and traveled to multiple states to work with numerous organizations. One was the VISTA that applied specifically to do Katrina relief work in September 2005 and was placed in Alabama (she later transferred to New Orleans). The fourth was also a VISTA who

applied for AmeriCorps in three states following a presentation by a recruiter at her college—a historically black university. Everyone else was recruited directly by their organization.

Four interviewees mentioned finding their specific AmeriCorps position online. While many people displaced as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita turned, sometimes for the first time, to the internet for information, those most adept at searching had the advantage in finding employment through this avenue—generally not low-income people who don't have access to personal computers. Additionally, the websites used by AmeriCorps volunteers to find their positions, Craigslist.org, Idealist.org and AmeriCorps.gov, may not be familiar to novice internet users. They are distinct from other websites frequents by displaced residents such as Nola.com, a newspaper-affiliated site with comprehensive information on New Orleans, or FEMA.gov (a necessity for everyone who requested disaster assistance). Those who had personal computers or regular free or low-cost internet access also had the advantage in terms of being the first to see and apply for AmeriCorps positions. One volunteer mentioned finding his position on a flier posted on a private, white-majority, residential college campus upon returning to New Orleans in January 2006. While I have no information about the extent of flyering at institutions of higher education, this process recruits a very different applicant pool than, for example, flyering FEMA offices in Baton Rouge, or Red Cross centers in Atlanta or Baptist churches in New Orleans. It is important to note that aside from maintaining AmeriCorps.gov, all other publicizing of job opportunities was handled by the organizations, not the national AmeriCorps structure. These tactics specifically recruit those with some amount of privilege indicated by Internet savviness or attendance at an elite college.

Organizational leaders granted AmeriCorps positions recruited seven respondents personally. This process varied widely based on who did the hiring, but it effectively eliminated competition for positions. A process like this one can support the hiring of qualified people who otherwise might not have heard of the positions or who may not have the educational credentials to compete in an open application process. My sample included an organization that directly recruited local citizens: United Residents hired two of their AmeriCorps volunteers partially based on their history of residence in the neighborhood where they would be working. Thus, the organization directly ensured employment and leadership roles for two residents who had returned from evacuation. This is an excellent model, employing pre-disaster residents to take leadership in the recovery of their own neighborhood. However, in this case both of these women had been able to return following evacuation on their own, and were employed full time in jobs they left for AmeriCorps. Thus their AmeriCorps positions did not facilitate their return home, and in this case their organization did not provide them with housing, unlike significant numbers of non-local volunteers.

The Political Activists were both recruited by the local director of WNG. One political activist explained that there was “no accountability” in this hiring process. According to him the director of WGN gave these positions to young, non-local whites who were doing what she determined to be “good work.” This could be problematic due to the lack of transparency and open access to job position announcements.

Alternatively, the AmeriCorps program could have indirectly supported the return of IDPs by ensuring that the primary focus of its volunteers was to support the return of displaced residents, which was mentioned by only one study participant. This could have

occurred by placing volunteers with organizations who identified this effort as their primary mission. The AmeriCorps program could have also placed volunteers with various organizations and included supporting displaced residents in their job description. This structure would parallel that imposed by the university that hosted VISTAs—they were all with different organizations but their work was focused on supporting service-learning students. AmeriCorps neither directly nor indirectly supported the return of displaced residents to their hometown.

Only one volunteer, a VISTA who worked for Expanding Horizons, reported finding displaced residents and supporting their return home in her job description. No one else mentioned this as a work assignment. Instead they supported residents who were already returned (typically those with the greatest access to resources,³⁵ members of neighborhood organizations, and homeowners) or non-locals (such as undergraduate service learning students or short-term volunteers). The AmeriCorps program could have made great strides in ensuring the return of residents using the support of organizations and volunteers with connections to displaced residents. Rather it perpetuated the powerful Katrina response attitude that following the federal mass-evacuation: individuals were responsible for finding their own way home.

Relationship to Local Resources

This section examines the systematic use of the city's resources to support AmeriCorps volunteers. I draw on FEMA's statement that disaster relief volunteers must be "self-sufficient" so as not to burden disaster affected areas (FEMA 2007). This section

³⁵ Resources in this case include un-flooded homes.

places the housing benefits received by thirteen of my eighteen subject participants in the context of New Orleans' post-Katrina housing shortage. I also examine the impact of limited physical and mental health benefits for AmeriCorps volunteers. These limited benefits increased volunteers' reliance on the city's already taxed public health services. Due to the low living stipend and insufficient health care, the AmeriCorps program relied on the crippled housing and medical infrastructure of post-Katrina New Orleans to care for their volunteers. They occupied un-flooded housing units and had to rely on their families or the charity medical system for medical care. With the exception of the VISTA group they suffered from un-treated mental health needs.

Housing

Thirteen of the eighteen people I interviewed were offered housing as a benefit of their work with AmeriCorps and their host organization. Except for the case of NCCC, housing and food, when provided, were supplied by the organizations themselves, not by the AmeriCorps program. Affordable housing was a significant barrier to evacuated New Orleans residents returning home. With homes flooded and rents skyrocketing, people struggled to find places to stay. Returning residents packed into FEMA trailers, slept in their cars, stayed with friends and often commuted hundreds of miles to see their families. Volunteers who were housed by CCGA and Collaborating Volunteers were housed in former homeless shelters that did not flood. The VISTA volunteers were housed in apartments attached to the university-affiliated hospital that formerly housed public health students and families with loved ones in the hospital. SVCOA volunteers lived in a church that was so

large (and they had so much freedom) that a volunteer built an entire darkroom in the church for his personal use.

By choosing to use these spaces as volunteer housing rather than living spaces for returning residents, these organizations prioritized the volunteers over the needs of displaced residents returning after Katrina. Recall the non-local volunteer who met a homeless teenager who had grown up in the church where the volunteer was staying. She offered him her couch, an individual act of kindness not bolstered by systematic attempts to house people sleeping on the street. The city was in dire need of medical professionals who could have utilized the apartments VISTA volunteers were living in. There were systematic processes that converted much needed housing for vulnerable members of the New Orleans community to free housing for volunteers, and these processes were perpetuated and encouraged by the AmeriCorps program. If there was ever a time to open the doors of all possible shelters to returning residents who were trying to rebuild, New Orleans in 2006 was it. Instead, these vital spaces were opened to volunteers.

Health Care

AmeriCorps volunteers were provided emergency-only health care and many volunteers were living and working in hazardous environments with very limited safety precautions and equipment. Members of The Gutters group especially reported many safety and health concerns. One interviewee reported serious respiratory damage after only three months of gutting houses. The federal government suspended Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations after Katrina (Gorman 2010, 5) and there was limited safety equipment and training for volunteers. This caused Katrina relief

volunteers to be more reliant on health care than those working in non-disaster situations. Low-level insurance forced volunteers to pay large health care bills—four people mentioned these costs as contributing factors to their inability to live on the stipend alone. Two mentioned borrowing money from their parents, one had to “live on a credit card,” and the fourth who was raised with the least amount of class privilege claimed that her finances were so tight she “just had to try and eat.” This level of insurance did not contribute to volunteers’ well being and added another layer of stress to an already difficult livelihood. Another volunteer mentioned having to rely on the charity medical system, which placed an undue burden on the crippled medical system in post-Katrina New Orleans. With Charity Hospital closed, and the majority of medical facilities still recovering from severe flooding, the care available for returning residents was sub par³⁶. The influx of under-insured AmeriCorps volunteers may not have had a significant effect on the health care system in New Orleans, but the implication that the federal government expected the city of New Orleans and local hospitals to pick up the slack and care for federal volunteers is irresponsible disaster relief practice³⁷. Assuming that volunteers to come from privilege and rely on family members or the ability to get a credit card further discourages disaster survivors, who are financially struggling having suffered storm and flood damages, from becoming involved with the AmeriCorps program.

³⁶ See page 36 in Chapter 2 for more detail about the availability of medical facilities.

³⁷ This process of the federal AmeriCorps program expecting individual volunteers or health care facilities to compensate for insufficient health care parallels the neo-liberal evolution of the welfare state as discussed on pages 22 to 23 in Chapter 2.

Stress and mental health

In examining volunteer stress levels, it is important to reiterate that my case study is an exceptional snapshot of the AmeriCorps program, which generally is not disaster focused. The 2006 New Orleans AmeriCorps team saw the highest dropout rate in the program's history, according to one interviewee, who was approached by state supervisors about this phenomenon. The AmeriCorps program recognized this level of stress and provided a temporary, free counselor which three interviewees mentioned, two of whom used this service. This was short term, ending early 2007, and was not widely publicized as three volunteers recommended that AmeriCorps provide some sort of mental health care, implying that there was none available during their service year. All VISTA volunteers were involved in what one described as "a kind of group therapy" with the help of a social worker provided by the university that hosted them. These services are rarely available to AmeriCorps volunteers in non-disaster situations and AmeriCorps was correct in recognizing the unique nature of this work environment³⁸.

Generally, all AmeriCorps volunteers interviewed experienced an amount of stress ranging from "extreme" to "manageable" with the majority falling on the "extreme" side of the spectrum. This stress contributed to the uniquely high dropout rate, and low numbers of people who continued the work they were doing after their service completion. This caused fast turnover in organizations, which can inhibit organizational capacity as the most experienced workers leave and take their knowledge with them³⁹. Thus, the experience that is gained by volunteers is often lost to other states or countries as mobile volunteers

³⁸ See page 27 in Chapter 2 for a discussion of mental health, specifically secondary trauma and its impact on volunteers.

³⁹ See page 33 in Chapter 2 for an expanded discussion of organizational dependence on short-term volunteers.

escape from high stress situations. Indeed, of those I interviewed over the phone, over half of them reported stress and trauma as primary factors in their decision to move away from New Orleans. Even those who did not drop out of the program brought their increasing levels of trauma and stress into their work, thereby inhibiting their effectiveness.

While those in The Gutters group reported learning the process of gutting a house relatively quickly, volunteers were completely unprepared for the emotional part. Three people reported an emotional toll due to their role as “counselors.” This included “listening to peoples’ stories,” doing intake interviews, and some form of case management. Of those who reported these activities, no one had any background in social work or counseling, nor were they trained in how to handle such situations. The emotional needs of New Orleans residents were very high, with skyrocketing rates of trauma (Galea, et al. 2007; Coker, et al. 2009; Kesser, et al. 2006) and increasing rates of suicide (Kesser, et al. 2008). Caring for people in these situations is something that interviewees reported not being able to learn—unlike gutting which become easier with experience. Rather, this emotional work became harder and harder as volunteers experienced more and more secondary trauma. This aspect of their job was devastating for AmeriCorps volunteers and it also affected residents who, in their very vulnerable state, had only untrained, young volunteers to turn to for emotional support. This is a situation where AmeriCorps volunteers, trying their best, inappropriately filled a gap left by the federal disaster response. The mental health needs of displaced people were not met and AmeriCorps volunteers were placed in situations they did not have the capacity to handle. Residents had no choice but to turn to already traumatized, young, untrained volunteers. None of the volunteers in The Gutters

group reported any mental health care provided for themselves or for the residents they were serving.

AmeriCorps' accountability to "socially vulnerable" citizens

This section examines the third criterion: accountability structures of the AmeriCorps program as they were enacted in post-Katrina New Orleans. For the purpose of this analysis, I define accountability as the prioritization of the interests of a specific group or community. The specific groups I focus on are New Orleans residents who are labeled "socially vulnerable:" low-income residents, people of color, women, youth, elderly and people with disabilities; and the second group, non-local volunteers who were only marginally affected by Hurricane Katrina⁴⁰. My examination of accountability develops in two parts. First I analyze the leadership structures governing AmeriCorps volunteers. As discussed in Chapter 2, group leadership and direction are clues about whose interests are being served⁴¹. Second, I look at the work projects AmeriCorps volunteers focused on to better gauge the priorities of the AmeriCorps program and of individual organizations. This criterion I developed in light of the wide variety of work represented by project participants.

⁴⁰ See page 37 to 38 in Chapter 2 for a complete definition of social vulnerability.

⁴¹ See pages 14 to 15 for and explanation of the importance of examining leadership structure in organizations. See pages 39 to 40 for historical examples of ineffective disaster recovery leadership.

Leadership structures

As discussed in Chapter 2, leadership and work supervision is a strong measure of accountability⁴². Thus, I examine the leadership structures in AmeriCorps host organizations as reported by project participants. AmeriCorps volunteers worked to the best of their ability despite being placed in extremely difficult situations. Their jobs often included large amounts of leadership and control. Every person I interviewed reported their own or fellow volunteers' lack of preparation for the positions they were placed in. Formal education and training can be very useful, even vital, but life experience can also make someone exceptionally qualified for a job. Generally, AmeriCorps participants were inexperienced, which would have rendered them unqualified for the positions they found themselves in if they had been employees rather than stipended volunteers⁴³.

AmeriCorps generally hired non-local volunteers, which in and of itself is not unaccountable to local residents, but these volunteers were placed in strong leadership positions with very little guidance regarding the work residents had requested. Their lack of experience and training in the fields in which they worked did not ensure quality services for disaster-affected New Orleanians.

The two local volunteers, who worked with United Residents, worked in their own neighborhoods where they had lived prior to Hurricane Katrina. This represents strong accountability—supporting local residents to help their own communities. The biggest issue is the preparation and direction provided to them, as both reported training and supervision to be lacking. It is important to note here that even if one hires neighborhood residents, unless they come in with strong backgrounds related to their work assignments,

⁴² See footnote on page 27 in Chapter 2 for scholarship highlighting the importance of experienced leadership.

⁴³ See pages 26 and 27 in Chapter 2 for a discussion of amateur volunteers.

it is poor practice to simply throw them into the fire without appropriate training and clear job descriptions. United Residents would have increased their local accountability by hiring local people who had experience in community work, or provided these volunteers with strong skills.

Directing a summer camp for the first time ever with no preparation or experience not only threw one volunteer into a confusing and stressful situation, it ultimately impacted low-income youth, all of whom experienced increased vulnerability resulting from disaster-induced trauma. AmeriCorps volunteers tried to do their best but were not provided with the proper training to support some of our nation's most vulnerable children. I am not saying that this particular summer camp went badly or was not a great experience for those involved, I am saying that the AmeriCorps structure did not ensure that it would be.

While the director of the summer camp was perhaps more qualified to do so having finished doing it once, she gained this experience through trial-and-error with post-Katrina New Orleans youth, who should not be used as a training ground. This experience may improve the quality of the next summer camp she runs; however, the nature of AmeriCorps is that there is no mechanism designed to keep volunteers in their positions. The one-year or ten-month contracts allow volunteers to take this newly minted experience and use it to their advantage wherever they wish to travel, whether across the country or across the world. Thus, the community that supported this training and leadership development for the individual volunteer does not necessarily see the benefit of it through increased competence or understanding used to put on the next summer's camp. To be clear, in this case this particular volunteer did stay on to direct three more summer camps in the same neighborhood, in spite of the fact that there was no AmeriCorps structure designed to keep

her there. Rather, she was offered a job through United Residents following her term of service.

The NCCC team was sent to New Orleans to develop, from the ground up, a branch of a national non-profit, Collaborating Volunteers. They, ages 18 to 24, were sent to one of the non-profit's sites in Biloxi for a week to "see how it works." They then traveled to New Orleans where they, in addition to one staff person, were tasked with developing a non-profit volunteer program in Central City. While both NCCC volunteers reported liking "the challenge" and the leadership they were awarded, the level of control they had over how the organization was going to interact with the city and returning New Orleanians is problematic. This team was only supposed to be on this project for 8 weeks, though it was extended to 12 before they traveled to their next site. Their level of accountability was limited because they did not see the long-term impacts of their work, and they were not held accountable for structures they put in place. Not only is a week in Biloxi not long enough to "understand how a non-profit works" to the capacity to be able to build one from the ground up, but it is irresponsible for a group with limited understanding of Katrina and New Orleans to be in charge of developing a full-fledged.

According to Paul Kivel, effective work in a community requires connections that "break down isolation" (2007, 146). One interviewee in my study reported that the organization's relationship to the neighborhood was "distant"—exactly the opposite type of relationship one should have with people one is trying to help⁴⁴. Strong relationships with those in the neighborhood and those affected by the storm will breed innovative and accountable relief practices. Thus, the short-term, in-and-out type process embodied by

⁴⁴ For example, SNCC's leaders were working in Mississippi for years prior to the start of Freedom Summer.

NCCC's engagement with local communities can only brush the surface—acceptable if they are taking leadership from those who are from the area and have strong relationships already built, but in this case they were the leaders and guiding short term volunteers⁴⁵. It is important to recognize that the extremely temporary nature of the NCCC program and the high level of leadership this group was awarded seriously restricts the level of accountability they had to residents affected by Hurricane Katrina.

This is similar to the situation of the SVCOA volunteers in their second service year. In the midst of a severe housing crisis they were tasked with building a homeless shelter in the church where they were staying and working. Despite lack of training and expertise, they jumped at the chance to do something about this social problem. In three weeks they built bunk beds in the church, and started doing intake interviews. They had no guidance or training regarding shelter management. This situation deserves highlighting as an exceptional show of inexperienced leadership being tasked with serving disaster affected residents in very vulnerable positions. Their host organization and AmeriCorps allowed them to operate at a level beyond their qualifications⁴⁶. It is not accountable to a very vulnerable population—post-Katrina homeless residents—to provide them with young, inexperienced volunteers who have never experienced homelessness to be in charge of something as necessary as a shelter. Indeed, one informant explained that after five months they spent a summer “regrouping and processing” and realized that a safe, overnight space was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the needs expressed by people experiencing

⁴⁵ While the NCCC volunteers were in New Orleans for a short amount of time, “short term volunteers” referred to in this sentence were groups of volunteers who came from other areas to volunteer for a week or two.

⁴⁶ Again, qualifications in this study are not limited to formal education and training but also personal experience that increases a person's understanding of the task at hand. In this case, experiencing homelessness or having worked in shelters previously is considered valuable.

homelessness. Presumably both people who have experienced homelessness and those who have worked in this capacity before would know this coming into the situation. Again, the experience these volunteers gained could be very helpful as they continue this work, provided they had stayed in New Orleans working with a shelter. The system is set-up, however, so that there is a very high turnover in organizations. As individuals struggle with the financial reality of the AmeriCorps stipend, they cannot remain in their positions for extended amounts of time. Additionally, AmeriCorps explicitly discourages people from doing more than two or three terms of service. Thus, incoming lack of experience and training coupled with a high turnover rate can lead to ineffective, sub-par and sometimes dangerous situations for residents who have just experienced disasters.

Work priorities

The actual day-to-day work that AmeriCorps volunteers did is important to analyze as it exemplified the mission of the AmeriCorps program and the host organizations. The Gutters generally gutted private residences, benefiting homeowners. They also reported doing a lot of work that directly benefited short-term volunteers, such as packing coolers with cold drinks for the work crews, building showers in volunteer housing, and cooking meals for volunteer teams. The Agenda Setters also reported a lot of work centered on short-term volunteer teams. SVCOA volunteers started a tutoring program at a local public school that potentially benefited students and teachers. They also worked with the Mid-City Neighborhood Association, comprised almost exclusively of homeowners, specifically those who had been able to return to the city. They started a homeless shelter to help house some of the many homeless residents. The AmeriCorps volunteers with GNO

Rebuilds reported a large variety of activities, the majority of which focused on organizational maintenance like submitting a 501(c) 3 application, grant writing, and website and newsletter publishing. The VISTAs' main priority as determined by the university was to increase the capacity of their host organizations to host service learning students. They all assisted the organizations in various ways, but ultimately they were there to build the service-learning program that provided volunteer opportunities for mostly non-local, mostly white, college students. The Political Activists tailored their work around the leadership of local activists and community organizers. They often worked with short-term, non-local volunteers, and challenged them in anti-racist, anti-classist workshops under the guidance of local organizations and leaders with experience and understanding of this work.

What is interesting is that no one in my sample reported being accountable or working for the direct benefit of people still evacuated, especially low-income people and renters. Homeowners, even those evacuated, benefited from the hard work of The Gutters. There was no structure in place to use this labor on rental properties or public housing, both of which were sorely needed for the return of low-income residents. Homeowners also benefited from the alliance between AmeriCorps volunteers and neighborhood associations. It is not that homeowners do not “deserve” this benefit—indeed, in New Orleans especially, there are many low-income homeowners who could use this support. The majority of their equity was in their homes that the flood destroyed, and AmeriCorps and other volunteer labor helped to restore this property. Renters and public housing residents did not receive this assistance.

SVCOA volunteers did start a homeless shelter in 2007, which was important considering the housing crisis plaguing the city at that time. The issue with this project is not the intentions but the execution. AmeriCorps volunteers with no experience in shelter programming, design or management were in charge. While it is important to prioritize services for homeless returning residents, the volunteers in this case were under qualified. Leadership of local community members and organizers would have been a more accountable practice.

The priorities in place for those in the VISTA group and GNO Rebuilds were some of the least accountable to displaced residents. This is not to say that individual volunteers were unaccountable; in fact, a few of them mentioned resisting the structures set up to try and meet the needs of people most affected by the disaster⁴⁷. An example of this is a VISTA volunteer “getting in a fight” with the university, which was trying to make her take two hundred service-learning students while she knew it would be harmful to her organization. Another VISTA spent some of her time assisting local artists in their return to the city, which was not a priority for the university. New organizational maintenance and supporting service-learning students is not in alliance with the priorities of residents who experienced the most serious devastation following Hurricane Katrina. This is a case where the use of the AmeriCorps program as a disaster response program is exceptionally inappropriate—these efforts to support service learning students or the survival of a new organization might be more understandable in a city that was not recovering from a devastating disaster, but in post-Katrina New Orleans they were an inappropriate emphasis for a federal program to focus on, according to the criteria I have identified.

⁴⁷ This resistance is not historically unique as significant numbers of early VISTA volunteers defied organizational and program regulations. See pages 9 to 11 in Chapter 2.

In discussing this work I want to emphasize that post-Katrina AmeriCorps volunteers put in strong effort considering the conditions they were working under. My point is that there were no structures in place to ensure that the work of AmeriCorps volunteers directly benefited those who were disproportionately affected by the disaster. In fact, the two Political Activists who were most accountable to local leadership and the needs of low-income people of color did so by breaking AmeriCorps rules that prohibit political action. The Political Activists and one member of GNO Rebuilds emphasized cultural understanding over technical training. They explained that the most important thing that a volunteer can come in with is anti-racism training, “a clear sense of solidarity” and an understanding of the culture they are working in. The political activists began their AmeriCorps service with some experience because they had been working with TiES for months before they received AmeriCorps stipends; still they both claimed they had a great deal to learn from local grassroots organizations. In the case of AmeriCorps in New Orleans in 2006 there was no structure in place to ensure that volunteers worked in responsible and accountable ways; rather it was left up to the organization and, to a large extent, the individual.

Chapter 6. CONCLUSION

This study is not a snapshot of a typical AmeriCorps program, but rather a study of the AmeriCorps program's response to an exceptionally devastating disaster. While some of my findings can be generalized to the program as a whole, my focus is on AmeriCorps as a component of the federal disaster response to Hurricane Katrina. Thus, I have examined the role of AmeriCorps volunteers following Katrina and in the specific context of the mass evacuation of New Orleans. The volunteers represented in this research did a large amount of work and rose to the task of assisting recovery in whatever way possible. They were sometimes placed in nearly impossible situations and worked to the best of their ability to create useful, sustainable programs. Ultimately I want to lift up the AmeriCorps volunteers who gave of their blood, sweat and tears with the best of intentions and full efforts. They were placed, as one put it, "in the middle of a firestorm" with little preparation, training or guidance. In a city with a massive housing crisis they opened homeless shelters. In areas with little to no available health care they supervised and assisted clinics. They flyered neighborhoods, taught classes, organized fundraisers, worked against societal oppression and gutted thousands of flooded homes. These efforts and the people who sustained them are to be commended. My ultimate criticism lies with the structural components of the AmeriCorps program in New Orleans, which served to support volunteers and inhibit the return of displaced residents.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the AmeriCorps program should not be considered an effective disaster program. As shown by my research, it did not support the return of displaced residents, nor did it ensure that volunteers worked in ways that were accountable to those most affected by the disaster. AmeriCorps generally placed

inexperienced, under-qualified volunteers in leadership positions in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Their work, be it good or bad, affects our most vulnerable people—those who directly experienced the disaster, often people of color, people with low incomes, youth, the elderly, homeless people—and there is no systemic assurance that it will be good. Even in the cases of seemingly exclusively physical labor as a work assignment, informants reported being make-shift counselors for people suffering from trauma, which could have devastating effects on both the volunteer and resident.

Additionally, the AmeriCorps program's benefits placed a significant burden on post-Katrina New Orleans to support volunteers. Additionally, the housing requirements, limited stipends and poor health insurance burdened the wounded city's services even more. Many volunteers were housed in former shelters, making it increasingly difficult for people in need of social services to return. Should injury or illness occur, which it did often due to the hazardous working conditions, AmeriCorps volunteers disproportionately had to rely on the charity health care system, which was struggling to provide reasonable care for the returning population.

AmeriCorps does give young people a chance to gain real-life experience by working in capacities which challenge them to think and problem solve. This experience is built over the course of a ten to twelve month term on a steep learning curve. Following this term there is no programmatic encouragement for volunteers to continue the same work in the same area. Organizations that host AmeriCorps volunteers often do so because of the low-cost of such labor. Thus, they often do not have the budget to hire volunteers once their service is up, but rather end up taking on another, new AmeriCorps worker to start the learning process all over again. The experience that the organization, city and the people a

volunteer was working with imparted on them moves with the volunteer and is not returned or built upon as it would be with a long-term commitment. After an acute disaster this impact on the city and those utilizing the services of these organizations is that much more significant because of the increased level of trauma and need for services among the general population.

I have determined that AmeriCorps is not an appropriate disaster response program, according to the specific criteria I have established for a just and effective disaster response program and my case-study examination of volunteers in New Orleans in 2006. AmeriCorps did not directly or indirectly support the return of evacuated residents, a priority that the United Nations and local grassroots organizations emphasize. The program in New Orleans did not appropriately interact with post-disaster resources such as housing and health care—it expected local organizations to house volunteers and hospitals to pick up the tab for caring for minimally insured volunteers. AmeriCorps structures did not encourage accountability to “socially vulnerable” people affected by Hurricane Katrina. Inexperienced volunteers were placed in leadership positions above their qualification levels and their work priorities often focused on the needs of non-local volunteers or New Orleans residents with greater access to resources.

Policy Recommendations

Following Hurricane Katrina, the AmeriCorps program exemplified irresponsible and un-accountable federal disaster response. In its current state I do not encourage the AmeriCorps program to be used as disaster response; however, I realistically believe it will continue to be used in such capacity. Thus, I have three main policy recommendations that

would increase the effectiveness of the AmeriCorps program as a just component of government disaster response. These recommendations parallel Chapter 5, focusing on the return of IDPs, appropriate interaction with local post-disaster resources and ensuring accountability in volunteer work.

The first policy recommendation addresses the needs of New Orleans evacuees, or IDPs. In the case of disasters that require mass evacuation, displaced residents should be given priority in the AmeriCorps hiring process and they should be specifically recruited. IDPs should be encouraged to use an AmeriCorps position to help them return home. The AmeriCorps program should also ensure that supporting the return of residents is one of the highest priorities for volunteers and place them with organizations that are doing this work.

The second policy recommendation involves appropriate support of incoming volunteers. Following an acute disaster, the AmeriCorps program should gather information about the local situation and available resources and commit to placing a small to nonexistent burden on the disaster zone to support incoming volunteers. In the case of post-Katrina New Orleans, this would have included a housing stipend which would allow volunteers to pay market-rate rent, full health coverage and counseling for all volunteers. This would have eliminated the need to use former shelter space and decreased the burden on local hospitals and clinics.

The third policy recommendation encourages the AmeriCorps program to adopt systems that ensure volunteer accountability to “socially vulnerable” residents. As discussed in Chapter 2, “social vulnerability” is a product of social inequality, and renders some populations more susceptible to disasters. The AmeriCorps program should ensure

organizational leadership comes from local people who have experience working to reduce social inequality in their communities. AmeriCorps volunteers should be placed in positions that match their qualification levels. In no case should a twenty-two year old language major be running a health clinic or an untrained person be conducting intake interviews at a homeless shelter due to the harm that can come to them and the people utilizing these services. The AmeriCorps program should train volunteers to better understand the importance of supporting local leadership. This includes some of the recommendations interviewees made for orientation and training workshops such as anti-racism, community organizing, and accountability. When supportive roles are placed in the context of larger social change they become more palatable to volunteers with class and educational privilege who might expect a stronger leadership role.

Further Research

One component that is missing from my study is data from organizations and supervisors, both those that hosted AmeriCorps volunteers and those that did not. An organizational study of the decisions leaders made around hosting volunteers would lend insight into the process of matching volunteers with organizations and the process of federal site selection. Though I attempted statistical searches, they ultimately dead-ended. A compilation of statistics about post-disaster volunteers, both those who were government sponsored and those who were not, would assist researchers in placing sample sets in a comprehensive context.

The boundaries of my research isolate a very unique AmeriCorps locale and volunteer responsibilities. I can make an effort to identify the uniqueness of the post-

Katrina situation compared to the general AmeriCorps volunteer situation, but it will not be comprehensive without further studies of other AmeriCorps locations, or even an updated study of AmeriCorps in New Orleans five years after Katrina. In order to compile a complete understanding of the role of the AmeriCorps program and volunteers in general, more independent studies need to be done on the impact of volunteers on low-income areas across the country.

I intentionally focused on the organizational and systemic components of volunteerism in this study despite a wealth of data about the individual feelings and concerns of volunteers. It could be interesting and useful to analyze how volunteers talked about the city and their experiences—as a sort of alternative source of information about the situation for their geographically diverse friends and family. Researchers who are interested in volunteer retention rates might want to focus further research on stress levels and financial resources—two of the most cited reasons for not completing a second year. Ultimately I urge all researchers to approach volunteerism with a critical lens, with the understanding that it is a privilege to be able to volunteer for a year. Volunteers are channeled into systems: organizations and institutions that are all influenced by political and economic motives and must be placed in a historical context.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval

★ UNO Institutional Review Board to me, Rachel

[show details](#) 11/24/09

[Reply](#)

University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Rachel Luft

Co-Investigator: Emily Danielson

Date: November 24, 2009

Protocol Title: "Volunteers as disaster response: A case study of AmeriCorps volunteers following Hurricane Katrina?"

IRB#: 11Dec09

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under 45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7)).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

APPENDIX B

Email to recruit potential study participants

Hello, AmeriCorps volunteers! I am a graduate student working under the direction of Dr. Rachel Luft in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study that explores the role of AmeriCorps volunteers in Katrina relief. For this study, I am looking to enlist the help of individuals who volunteered through AmeriCorps State/National or AmeriCorps VISTA in the Greater New Orleans area between 2006 and 2007. As part of the study, each of the participants will be asked to participate in one interview that will last approximately one hour. This study is completely voluntary, and participants can opt out of answering any questions or withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality of your identity and that of any organizations will be maintained at all time. We hope to create a greater understanding of volunteerism as a social phenomenon and investigate federal support of non-profit and faith based organizations.

We are looking for a wide range of participants, representing a spectrum of opinions about the AmeriCorps program, and diverse organizational placements. We are placing the AmeriCorps program in post-Katrina New Orleans within the context of national disaster relief and are documenting the ways federal influences affect local recovery and social justice organizing.

Would you be willing to be interviewed? If so, please contact me, Emily Danielson at 504-259-9116 or emily.danielson@gmail.com.

APPENDIX D

Participant Introduction to the study

Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in this project. I am conducting research on the role of AmeriCorps volunteers in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, with the purpose of framing AmeriCorps within federal disaster response. We hope to gain a better understanding of the role of volunteers as well as federal support of specific organizations.

I have a few questions I would like to ask you. Feel free to pass on any of them, or to stop the interview process at any time. Your participation is completely voluntary, and there will be no negative repercussions if you decide not to participate or wish to stop.

We will maintain confidentiality of your identity and that of any organizations you mention through code names. My adviser and I will be the only ones who know identities and will not disclose it for any reason. If you consent to tape recording, I will transcribe the interview, save it in a password-protected folder, and destroy the audio copy. You may have a copy of this transcript if you like, and have the opportunity to review it. May I tape record this interview?

Do you have any questions for me now, before we begin?

Here is a form for you with contact information for my adviser and me. Please feel free to contact us with any questions or concerns that may come up in the future.

APPENDIX E

Section of the AmeriCorps Contract Agreement

The complete document of AmeriCorps rules and regulations can be accessed through links at http://www.americorps.gov/about/ac/rulemaking_faq.asp. For the sake of clarity I am including here the full text of an email sent by an AmeriCorps supervisor to current AmeriCorps volunteers in the New Orleans area. This was sent two weeks prior to the 2010 mayoral elections.

§ 2520.65 What activities are prohibited in AmeriCorps subtitle C programs?

(a) While charging time to the AmeriCorps program, accumulating service or training hours, or otherwise performing activities supported by the AmeriCorps program or the Corporation, staff and members may not engage in the following activities:

- (1) Attempting to influence legislation;
- (2) Organizing or engaging in protests, petitions, boycotts, or strikes;
- (3) Assisting, promoting, or deterring union organizing;
- (4) Impairing existing contracts for services or collective bargaining agreements;
- (5) Engaging in partisan political activities, or other activities designed to influence the outcome of an election to any public office;
- (6) Participating in, or endorsing, events or activities that are likely to include advocacy for or against political parties, political platforms, political candidates, proposed legislation, or elected officials;
- (7) Engaging in religious instruction, conducting worship services, providing instruction as part of a program that includes mandatory religious instruction or worship, constructing or operating facilities devoted to religious instruction or worship, maintaining facilities primarily or inherently devoted to religious instruction or worship, or engaging in any form of religious proselytization;
- (8) Providing a direct benefit to—
 - (i) A business organized for profit;
 - (ii) A labor union;
 - (iii) A partisan political organization;

(iv) A nonprofit organization that fails to comply with the restrictions contained in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 except that nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent participants from engaging in advocacy activities undertaken at their own initiative; and

(v) An organization engaged in the religious activities described in paragraph (g) of this section, unless Corporation assistance is not used to support those religious activities;

(9) Conducting a voter registration drive or using Corporation funds to conduct a voter registration drive;

(10) Providing abortion services or referrals for receipt of such services; and

(11) Such other activities as the Corporation may prohibit.

(b) Individuals may exercise their rights as private citizens and may participate in the activities listed above on their initiative, on non-AmeriCorps time, and using non-Corporation funds. Individuals should not wear the AmeriCorps logo while doing so.

[67 FR 45359, July 9, 2002. Redesignated at 70 FR 39597, July 8, 2005. Amended at 73 FR 53752, Sept. 17, 2008]

Vita

Emily Joy Danielson attended Niskayuna High School, Niskayuna, New York as well as Hagenmuellergasse GRG3 in Vienna, Austria. In 2002 she entered Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa. During the fall semester of 2004 she lived and conducted research in Dar es Salaam and Endulen, Tanzania. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Grinnell College in May, 2006. During the following years she worked full time doing Katrina relief in New Orleans. In September 2008, she entered the Graduate School at The University of New Orleans.

Permanent Address: New Orleans, Louisiana.

This manuscript was typed by the author.