

Exploring CEDAM's AmeriCorps Retention

Evaluation conducted by TerraLuna Collaborative and commissioned by CEDAM



The Community Economic Development Association of Michigan (CEDAM) partnered with an external evaluation firm to help us better understand what drives inequitable member experience, especially related to retention.

Our findings are based upon interviews with 21 unique full-time AmeriCorps members who served in our program at some point in the last five years. Our sample roughly represented our corps' typical demographics and included those who finished their service year and those who did not.

MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR SERVICE

- Current recruitment channels attract the attention of applicants interested in particular career fields, organizations, and/or roles more so than those with a general desire to become an AmeriCorps member.
- Many were connected with their host site before becoming a member and hoped to build their professional and career skills through the opportunity.
- Of those with expectations for the service year, levels of understanding varied. For example, some did not understand their role's connection to AmeriCorps (and even CEDAM) until they began their term.
- Interestingly, years after, many members still refer to the service year as a "job" rather than a "volunteer" experience.

PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE EXPERIENCE

- Most former members remembered their service year positively; service was hands-on, their influence was tangible, and the service positioned them for careers. Members recalled receiving numerous benefits through CEDAM's AmeriCorps program, including networking, financial stability, personal growth, and career development.
- However, for some members, the service year did not meet expectations. Misalignment was most often attributed to issues at the host site; site supervisors often caused or did not mitigate these issues.
- Some members reported that the hiring process didn't provide an accurate understanding of what to expect and that training didn't position them to fulfill their host site's expectations. For example, it seemed like they were expected to possess specific technical, technological, and interpersonal skills on day one that were not required per the job description.
- Members emphasized the impact of host site selection on member outcomes. They advised against selecting sites without a clear and meaningful connection to their community or those not structured to support AmeriCorps members.
- Members generally perceived CEDAM was open to "people from all walks of life, all circumstances, all age groups, all abilities," which matches existing program records. Reported issues related to equity primarily occurred at host sites or other locations somewhat outside of CEDAM's control but which CEDAM could still influence.

REFLECTIONS ON SERVICE EXPERIENCE

- A sense of inclusion and support - particularly from supervisors and team members at the host site - was crucial to how members viewed their service year. Members desired to be a part of a team that included their cohort peers, site supervisor, and other staff at their host site.
- Members noted a lack of clear and positive supports at both the CEDAM and host site levels. Members desired clear and consistent communication between CEDAM and the host site, in part to address the support gap.
- Members described an ideal CEDAM AmeriCorps experience as one where both the host site and members (as individuals) make a lasting impact on the community, a deep sense of personal and professional growth, and consistent and effective leadership.