

Volunteers Making a Difference

Sam P. is a 60-year-old retired former Con Edison worker who meets every week in Brooklyn to mentor an 8-year-old boy named Nicholas. Nicholas' mother is incarcerated and he is living with a caretaker. He is struggling in school and with peer relationships. For over a year, Sam and Nicholas have been doing school work together and creating a youth portfolio. As a result, last June, Nicholas scored 100% on his 4th grade regional science test. In October, Sam and Nicholas hiked to the top of Beacon Mountain, the first time Nicholas traveled outside New York City, and the first time this 8-year-old boy climbed to the top of anything.

Sam is one of over 60 older adult volunteers matched with youth who have an incarcerated parent. The volunteers are part of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of the Community Service Society (CSS) who serve in the Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (MentorCHIP). Volunteers meet weekly one-to-one to provide educational and social support. For children like Nicholas, RSVP mentors are often the only positive adult relationship in their life.

There is a great need for a program like MentorCHIP. In New York State, prison inmates reported that they are parents to over 85,000 children, with approximately 12,000 children having a mother who is incarcerated. A survey of children of offenders found that the likelihood of children of incarcerated parents ending up in prison is between two and six times the average of their peers. MentorCHIP is the only intergenerational site-based program serving children of incarcerated parents in New York City.

CSS has a long history of innovation that has led to improving the quality of life of low-income New Yorkers. Foremost among CSS's services are its RSVP volunteer programs.

RSVP was created by CSS as a pilot program in 1966. Over the past 42 years, the program has been replicated nationally and internationally. Its mission is two-fold: providing meaningful, invigorating opportunities for adults age 55 and older and helping nonprofit organizations in New York City reach more clients and provide more services. RSVP's 7,000 trained volunteers serve at 500 nonprofits throughout the five boroughs.

Here are several of CSS's senior volunteer groups, all helping New York City most vulnerable populations.

ACES Volunteers

The Advocacy, Counseling and Entitlement Services (ACES) Project helps low-income New Yorkers receive needed public benefits and services. Volunteers receive training in Medicaid, Food Stamps, SSI, Public Assistance, housing, and many other government benefit programs. ACES volunteers work in hospitals and community-based agencies throughout New York City, where they provide information and referrals, screen for eligibility for public benefits, advocate for clients when they run into problems, and help people fill out applications. Last year, over 7,000 individuals received information and advocacy on 9,000 public benefit related issues.

CSS works in partnership with the Internal Revenue Service to train volunteers through its Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA). VITA supports those with low-incomes to ensure that they have the opportunity for free tax preparation and access to tax credits if eligible.

Financial Coaching

In 2008, RSVP launched a new initiative, the Financial Coaching Corps, which is designed to build the financial capabilities of low-wage individuals, families, and young adults throughout New York City. Recent subprime loan scandals targeting poor communities are testimony to the need for education programs that help low-income residents understand money management.

CSS trained financial coaches work one-on-one with individuals, guiding them in areas of financial literacy, such as creating a budget; organizing and prioritizing bills; obtaining and reviewing credit reports; and screening for public benefits and tax credits. The findings of CSS's most recent Unheard Third survey indicate that 43 percent of low-income respondents use non-banking financial services such as check-cashing stores and payday loans at least once a month. Volunteers work with low-income New Yorkers to open bank accounts and avoid fringe banking services that often charge exorbitant fees.

Experience Corps

Part of CSS's Voluntary Initiatives, the Experience Corps Literacy Program has changed the lives of thousands of New York City public school children. Launched in 1995, Experience Corps brings together a cadre of ethnically and racially diverse older adult volunteers, a network of public school sites, and a meticulous, research-based approach to help children at risk for academic failure.

Working in teams of 10-15, Experience Corps volunteers serve in schools in neighborhoods that are identified as low in income, but rich in older adult resources: the South Bronx; Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn; Central Harlem; and Southeast Queens. Because Experience Corps volunteers come from the very neighborhoods in which they serve, their “buy-in” to, and engagement with, the program is extraordinary.

Experience Corps has yielded tangible results. Throughout the program’s operation, CSS has monitored student outcomes through testing which has consistently demonstrated impressive results. In 2007, CSS participated in a rigorous national outcomes evaluation that showed that Experience Corps has a statistically significant positive effect on the reading abilities of first- and second-graders.

With thousands of baby boomers turning 55 in New York City each year, there is a constant and growing pool of prospective volunteers willing and able to make significant contributions to children, schools, and communities throughout New York City. CSS is proud of its volunteer cadres. They make New York a better place to live for all of us.

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