Keep Austin Housed
An AmeriCorps Project of Front Steps

Community Impact
50,238 Hours Served
192 People Housed
112 Jobs Gained

Recruitment
We’re still recruiting for the 2016-2017 service year!
Click here to view the application.

Find us on social media!
My time as an AmeriCorps member with Keep Austin Housed has been an invaluable learning experience. By being placed at the Trinity Center, I have sought to fulfill the physical and mental needs of our neighbors experiencing homelessness in downtown Austin. Throughout my time at Trinity Center, I have learned about valuable resources in the community, how to document and maintain vital record files and in-kind donations, and how to conduct successful and progressive case management meetings. However, the most treasured lessons I have learned come from my direct and daily interactions with those experiencing homelessness and poverty.

These lessons contain common threads that may include the interconnectedness of substance abuse, criminal activity, housing rights, or any of the countless issues that our neighbors experience. After learning more and more about what our neighbors struggle with, I have come to the conclusion that the most important way to help each other is through community. A lack of community, family, and friends too often leads to the disenfranchisement of individuals. It is of utmost importance that we, as community members, strive every day to be inclusive and welcoming to all of our neighbors, most especially those without a home and without hope.

In July, I will take every lesson that I have learned over the past service year and apply them in my new position as a Fair Housing Specialist for the Austin Tenants’ Council. Here, I will be working with individuals to combat discrimination in regards to fair and affordable housing. I am excited to remain working in Austin and to continue building stronger bonds between agencies, individuals, and the community as a whole. Thank you, Keep Austin Housed, for not only every lesson you have taught me, but for being a beacon of hope for those who feel marginalized in our community.

- Alex T, Trinity Center

What life after AmeriCorps holds for me is mysterious in terms of employment. I am open to anything involving my passions for harm reduction, public health, prevention, community strengthening, the environment, or recovery. I will be venturing to San Antonio, Texas to live in a beautiful, light duplex with my dear friend. We will be cultivating gardens in the yard, tending a glorious compost heap, and possibly caring for bunnies and chickens! I am dreaming of transforming the garage into an art studio where my imagination can be wild and free. The past eleven months have offered me complex growth and deepening understanding on many levels. The KAH experience has been an essential part of my journey, both personally and professionally.

- Alissa W, Front Steps ARCH
I sometimes hear native Austinites lament the growth of their city, complaining that the steady stream of people like me moving here every day further crowds the roads and stretches the resources available. I think many have an image in their head of the typical new arrival: young, hipster, interested in social justice or working in tech. The older adult population is often forgotten during discussions of Austin’s expansion, even though the Austin metropolitan area has the second fastest growing 65+ population in the country. By 2040, adults 65+ are expected to make up about 1/5 of the population in Central Texas.

Before serving as an AmeriCorps member with Family Eldercare, I planned to use my Master’s in Social Work to work in juvenile justice, serving children who find themselves entangled in our legal system. I have three wonderful grandparents and certainly had nothing against older adults, but they made up a population that I too forgot when considering my future in social work. My AmeriCorps year has dramatically altered my vision of that future. Next year I will attend the University Of Texas School Of Social Work and will begin my Master’s as a member of the GRACE (Gerontological Resources and the Aging Community in Education) program. I will have the chance to attend special educational events each semester highlighting the issues older adults and those who serve them face, to take part in the annual Aging in America Conference, and to complete a field placement at a nursing home, memory care facility, or senior day center.

I feel so much better prepared to advocate for older adults and meet their needs after my AmeriCorps year and am looking forward to bringing what I have learned to the GRACE program. Every day at the Rebekah Baines Johnson Center, the independent living tower for low-income older adults where I was based this service year, offered new tasks and learning opportunities. I learned to navigate some of the complexities of Medicare, to create budgets based on fixed Social Security income, to fight for my clients’ rights to accessibility and specially designed technology, and to negotiate and work with service providers and medical equipment lenders.

Many of the clichés we like to bandy about regarding older adults are true: they are a source of great wisdom and fascinating stories, and I feel privileged to have gotten to know so many residents here at RBJ. However, it is important not to let such positives obscure the unique challenges older adults face like an increase in health-related concerns, lack of transportation, isolation, inability to work, changes in cognition and memory, and unfamiliarity with certain technologies. Such challenges are often magnified for low-income older adults like those we serve at RBJ. This vulnerability was highlighted at a presentation the RBJ team recently attended called “Who Will Care for the Most Vulnerable in Austin: Aligning Affordable Housing and Senior Health Services.” After my AmeriCorps year, I can say that I will do my best to be someone who will care!

- Molly M, Family Eldercare RBJ
Spring Retreat @ Garner State Park
As we gathered for one final reflection at our last KAH training, we considered how effective we were as case managers this past year. Most people concluded that yes, when all was said and done, we were effective; we connected people to resources, we equipped people with resumes and interviewing skills, we successfully applied for and obtained housing with many of our clients (which in the city of Austin is no easy task) and yet we also acknowledged that we did so much more, things that were harder to categorize. One of our KAH members spoke to the importance of listening, of accompaniment, in our day to day interactions with clients. How difficult it is to create a spreadsheet measuring the effective outcomes of the time we spend simply showing our clients the respect they deserve.

Just a few weeks before the end of our term, a new resident arrived at Posada Esperanza, the shelter where I have spent my last 11 months as an AmeriCorps member. When we receive new residents, it is easy to get caught up in all that needs to be done. Intake can look something like this: Hello, Welcome, Can you fill out all these forms?, Do you have any communicable diseases?, Where was your last stable housing?, Can I copy your ID?, Great, Let me show you where you will be staying… but that night the community of Posada Esperanza came together to give a proper welcome. As I began her intake process, I learned that she has been in a detention center for 16 months seeking political asylum due to extreme violence in her home country of Guatemala. She had no idea where she was being taken and her fear and uncertainty were palpable. And then one of our ladies, who did not share a language or culture with our new resident, swooped into the office and promptly offered to make our new friend a meal. They exchanged smiles and when she returned with a plate of rice, beef and vegetables, the new resident tied a handmade Guatemalan bracelet to her wrist. As we sat down at the table to enjoy the meal so lovingly prepared, women from two different countries (one African, one Central American) sat with us. They each pulled some fruit from the refrigerator and started slicing it to add to the feast. We sat for over an hour sharing stories and food and fellowship in a mix of Spanish, English, Tigrinya and our own form of international sign language. I watched this timid woman come to life through the warm welcome of our community.

The next day I would sit with this woman and set goals with her in order to develop a case management plan. We would start a resume, teach her how to take the bus, discuss employment and housing options, connect her to our legal clinic, encourage her to attend ESL, etc. We would set her up for “success”. And yet, thinking of success, I was reminded of the words of Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in LA. He writes:

“You stand with the least likely to succeed until success is succeeded by something more valuable: kinship.”

This past year we have stood with individuals that society may deem “least likely to succeed.” AmeriCorps mission to “get things done” is noble and valuable and what all of us seek to do through our service. But I also believe it naive to presume anything will get done without first entering relationships that foster dignity and respect. I take pride in the number of people we were able to help find housing or employment this year, but I do not discredit the importance of the rapport that was built along the way. As I continue to discern my next steps in the nonprofit world, I will remember the night around the kitchen table where one woman’s success story began with power of kinship and a few pieces of fruit.

- Julia W, Posada Esperanza
I work with individuals looking for employment and have seen the long spectrum of homelessness and unemployment manifest itself in the men and women who enter my office on a daily basis. From one side of the spectrum came Chris (not his real name) and from the other Jeremy (also not his real name). I was first put in contact with Chris by a Front Steps Case Manager who was working with him to find housing. Chris had previously been a successful employee in the food industry. However, he found himself working in a business that lent itself to late night parties and heavy drinking with colleagues.

What started as easy-going fun quickly turned into a destructive routine and soon Chris developed an addiction to alcohol. Eventually his performance at work suffered to the point where he was let go and his relationships with family and friends became increasingly strained. Chris admitted himself to a treatment center, and successfully completed his program there. Upon his release, he worked with a Front Steps Case Manager to find a sober housing program and after coming across one he felt would be a good fit, came in contact with me. He met with me to create a smooth transition for an entirely new area of employment. In our first meeting Chris told me he already had a job lead and simply wanted someone to review the application and resume he was going to submit. Soon after, Chris was hired on in his new position and has been successfully employed there for the past 90 days. Earlier this year Chris also reached 90 days of sobriety, something he is determined to keep going.

Jeremy was different. When we met the first thing that stood out were the bags under his eyes. Jeremy would do the lottery at the ARCH most nights, hoping to get a bed or a space on the floor, but sometimes having to stay outside. When we first met, I found out he had been experiencing homelessness for over a year after being released from incarceration. He was not sure what career field he was interested in. We continued to meet on a weekly basis outlining goals and how to reach them, and slowly began churning out applications to different businesses. Given his background he knew his options were limited, but I continued to stress the fact that opportunities were out there and although it would take time, if we, if he, remained persistent those opportunities would present themselves. His commitment to make our weekly meetings (sometimes twice a week), showed me that he would continue working towards his employment goal regardless of the time it took. He has since been hired as a full-time with a kitchen staff at a restaurant in Downtown Austin. He is optimistic that he can either move up with his current employer or use the skills he’s spent developing to continue searching for a higher paying job and one that could develop into a career. He’s opened his first bank account, created a budget, and at our last meeting shared with me that he’s trying to quit smoking.

Although on different areas of the spectrum, what Chris and Jeremy both had in common was the desire to utilize the resources that I could provide. It was their initiative that brought them to work with me and by being there I could support each of them in a unique way. Their progress is ongoing and both may stumble again, but hopefully through our work and support they’ll never fall as far as they’ve been and that they can pick themselves up – with a helping hand if necessary – and continue working towards the life they want to live.

- Sean M, Goodwill
Alumni Spotlight

Meet Brianna! Brianna served at Trinity Center in 2014-2015. She went on to serve as a VISTA in St. Louis, MO.

Interviewed by Sarah W, Caritas of Austin

To say that my experience with KAH was life-changing would be an understatement. My favorite part was being able to go to work every day and be around people who loved me and I loved them. I was able to create such strong relationships with the neighbors and really touch their lives, as they touched mine. The most challenging part about working there is that you want to be able to offer them all the services you can, but as a small organization we didn't have housing or an endless amount of money. It's tough to accept that you can only give so much. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about all the amazing people I met at Trinity.

Why Keep Austin Housed?

I chose KAH because I was looking to get out of New England and I have a passion for serving those experiencing homelessness. What I got was so much more! I made great friends who support me and Lori was an amazing coordinator – and has been there even when I needed her to this day!

How did you become interested in your field?

Growing up in New Hampshire I never saw homelessness. After moving to Boston for college, I was taken aback by the amount of people experiencing homelessness. It made me so upset to see the amount of people having to fend for themselves on the streets and the lack of dignity and respect they were given by those passing by.

What degrees or trainings do you have?

I have a degree in Holistic Psychology, and a minor in Social Work from Lesley University.

Where can we find you when you’re not working? What was your favorite Austin pastime?

I love spending time with my partner & appreciating all of wherever I’m living has to offer. My favorite Austin pastime is TACOS. All the tacos all the time – and enjoying free concerts/movies in the summer.

What have been the biggest challenges in your career? Did your experiences during AmeriCorps help you to overcome obstacles you’ve faced in ”the real world”?

One of the biggest challenges is actually getting a job – and it being one you love. No one tells you that you'll need to apply, apply, apply but once it happens it's worth it! AmeriCorps definitely helped me prepare financially - you can do anything after living on that stipend!

What is a quote or phrase that gets you through tough times?

Loving Kindness – always remember to practice loving kindness to YOURSELF & those around you

What advice can you give to current AmeriCorps members?

Take advantage of everything your site & Austin has to offer. Take advantage of the happy hours, all the free things & being in an awesome place. Take advantage of the knowledge that your supervisors have, and that Lori is there to help make this the best experience! If something's not working for you or you're having trouble, just ask for help!