The Community Design Collaborative: Connecting Dreamers and Designers

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Summary

The Community Design Collaborative serves as a supportive intermediary between Philadelphia-area nonprofits with specific building needs and skilled volunteers with the expertise to evaluate project ideas and craft the initial designs, a role filled by no other local organization and few others nationally. This formal pro bono intermediary model is relatively uncommon, particularly in the areas of design and building support. But increasing use of such a paradigm could help nonprofit organizations take advantage of professional skills in their communities, and contribute to higher rates of and appreciation for skills-based volunteering by both nonprofit and for-profit entities.

Getting from Ideas to Housing

What do a high-tech housing development for seniors in North Philadelphia and a cluster of energy-efficient homes for low-income families in West Philadelphia have in common? Both are remarkable housing success stories,

dreamed up by forward-thinking local nonprofit organizations, and brought to reality through the intense efforts of these organizations' leaders, as well as the assistance of a unique group of designers in getting the initial design plans down on paper.

Nonprofits needing to construct or renovate buildings to enhance and grow the services they offer to the public face a Catch-22. They typically need to raise money for such projects, but to succeed they must present a thoughtful and credible plan to funders. It is nearly impossible to obtain capital funding without predevelopment, but predevelopment work is expensive and is seldom a line item in a nonprofit budget.

Philadelphia-area nonprofits are fortunate to have a local resource to help them bridge this gap between the identified need for and the ultimate realization of adequate financial support to undertake these projects. The Community Design Collaborative matches local design professionals, including architects, landscape architects, historic preservationists, urban planners, engineers, graphic designers and others, with nonprofit organizations in need of their expertise. The pro bono design services offered through the Collaborative help jumpstart nonprofit projects and direct community leaders toward cost-effective, realistic, community-oriented conclusions. Nonprofit leaders are then able to take the design plan generated and present it to potential funders, helping to bring building needs to fruition.

Two local organizations that have reaped the benefits of the Collaborative's assistance are the Mt. Tabor Community Education and Economic Development (CEED) Corporation and Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia. Both Mt. Tabor CEED and Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia were able to pursue bold ideas in part because the assistance they received from award-winning design firms illustrated that their visions were achievable.

The genesis for Mt. Tabor Cyber Village, a development that offers low- and moderate-income seniors an affordable and engaging place to live, arose a decade ago with Rev. Martha Lang and Rev. Mary Lou Moore, Ph.D., pastors of Mt. Tabor AME Church and leaders of Mt. Tabor CEED. Rev. Lang was concerned that "existing senior facilities were depressing. The seniors were lonely; they spent all day waiting by the elevators for visitors who never came to see them." Believing that "the Lord placed it in my spirit to create a happy place to live," Rev. Lang began work with Rev. Moore to create a housing option for seniors where community could flourish.

It took the pastors six years to get control of the vacant lots bookending their church, a process that entailed much more than a simple transfer of title for the land. Rev. Lang recalls the community organizing that was necessary to get the project off the ground: "There was prostitution and drug-dealing behind the church. So at the start of the project we held rallies and walked the

neighborhood; we preached them all out by holding Sunday service right in the lot and praying at them through megaphones."

With the acquisition of the land and community advocacy under way, in 2004 the church approached the Community Design Collaborative for assistance with creating a conceptual design to concretize their vision: affordable rental housing for seniors that uses technology to build a sense of community and connect with the larger neighborhood. The firm of Becker Winston Architects was matched with Mt. Tabor through the Collaborative to help the pastors, and devised a dynamic design that blends with the neighborhood fabric and replicates the rhythm of city row houses with its mix of materials. Today, the pastors' achievement, sitting amidst a brownstone church, a superblock apartment house and a scattering of row homes, is locally referred to as "the Miracle on Seventh Street."

Across town in West Philadelphia, on a September morning in 2009, Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia celebrated the culmination of a 5-year home-building project when the Wright, Wanamaker and Seawright families received the keys to their new, LEED-certified homes. Each family had dedicated 350 hours of "sweat equity" to building their houses, a core tenet of Habitat's institutional mission. Though all Habitat for Humanity building efforts are meaningful for the families who benefit from getting new housing, this project was of particular

importance because these homes are part of a seven-unit affordable housing development designed to have low energy costs.

In 2005, with the assistance of the Community Design Collaborative, Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia began working with the architecture firm of Wallace Roberts & Todd and the Energy Coordinating Agency, which strives to support sustainable and energy-efficient building in Philadelphia, to perform a feasibility study for the project. The goal was to develop a sustainable design that would still be consistent with the composition of the surrounding neighborhood. The partnership included donated pro bono design services worth over $21,000. The resulting design became a pilot for Habitat's LEED certification for homes program and offered proof of concept for a style of construction that meshes with the surrounding architecture, is energy efficient, and can still be built by volunteers.

Making the Case for Skills-Based Volunteering

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Although "pro bono" is "widely interpreted to mean 'for free,' the term goes well beyond the boundaries of free service" (Cary 2010a). Nonprofit organizations and for-

profit corporations alike tend to focus on cash donations as the primary form of philanthropy and less often seek to take advantage of the skills that corporate employees have to offer. On one hand, nonprofit organizations, according to survey data, appear to be relatively unaware of skilled volunteer or reduced-fee resources available from for-profit corporations. Alternatively, for-profits often underestimate the impact they could make with donations of time and talent as opposed to, or in addition to, dollars.

The vast majority (81%) of nonprofit organization leaders surveyed for Deloitte's 2009 Volunteer Impact Survey "rated monetary donations as extremely important to the success of their organization, while less than half (46%) ranked skilled volunteers as extremely important" (Deloitte Development 2009). This discrepancy is particularly noteworthy because the nonprofit leaders interviewed for this survey were plausibly more likely than the average nonprofit leader to value skilled volunteer services; respondents had previously requested pro bono support from the Taproot Foundation, an organization that provides pro bono consulting services to nonprofits, consults with companies developing their own pro bono programs, and more broadly promotes an ethic of pro bono service (Taproot Foundation 2010).

On the other side of the philanthropic relationship, for-profit corporations often undervalue the staff talent they have to offer. Respondents to the Deloitte survey who were from for-profit corporations ranked skilled volunteer

support as less effective than financial donations, even assuming equal market value of the two. They also ranked skilled volunteer support as less effective than more traditional volunteering in which employees perform volunteer roles not necessarily aligned with their professional skills, implying a preference for having accountants hammer nails or paint murals rather than support an organization's financial functions.

Research by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Urban Institute (Corporation for National and Community Service 2008) further underscores this preference for general hands-on volunteering over skills-based volunteering, finding that no more than 37% of volunteers from any of the professions analyzed took part in skills-based activities.

Intermediary organizations such as the Community Design Collaborative, acting as hubs, can facilitate connections between nonprofit organizations and for-profit corporate volunteer resources, to the benefit of both. Nonprofits can actually get better value and longer-term involvement by engaging more volunteers in assignments that align with their professional skills. Monetarily, supporting tailored, skills-based volunteering helps nonprofits get more bang for their buck, because the cash value of professional activities generally exceeds that of general labor. For example, Collaborative volunteer design professionals have billing rates of $50 to $200 per hour, whereas construction workers in the Philadelphia

area generally earn around $20 per hour (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). Retention also appears to be stronger among volunteers who serve in skills-based assignments (Corporation for National and Community Service 2008). A study of rates of volunteerism among baby boomers found that a little more than half of baby boomers volunteering in general labor returned for a second year, whereas nearly three-quarters of professional or managerial volunteers stayed on (Foster-Bey, Grimm, and Dietz 2007).

Businesses can directly benefit in various ways from their employees engaging in skills-based volunteering. While any kind of volunteering may build morale, skills-based volunteering can develop or maintain skills that employees use at work. Novice professionals, such as lawyers or architects, might assume more responsibility and perform a wider range of tasks on a pro bono assignment than through their paid tasks. Volunteer assignments can also offer interesting and meaningful activity when business is slow and there is less to do for fee-paying customers. Businesses may further find that the relationships they build over the course of this kind of work can lead to paid engagements on future projects with the organization or with other organizational stakeholders, such as funders and board members (Wehrum 2009). The architecture world, in particular, has been hard hit by the current recession. In Boston, Studio G Architects, Inc. experienced a 30% drop in revenue in 2008 when 10

projects were terminated or put on hold. After the firm began providing 15–20 hours of pro bono preliminary design services per week, several of those new initiatives received full funding and Studio G was awarded contracts ranging in value from $16,000 to $100,000 (Flandez 2009).

Some professions have more established traditions in pro bono, skills-based work than others do. For instance, Cary (2010a) notes that "pro bono service . . . is most frequently associated with the legal profession, in part because attorneys are active in the promotion of pro bono service as a fundamental component of professional standing." The American Bar Association's (ABA) Model Rules of Professional Conduct highlight every lawyer's professional obligation to "provide legal services to those unable to pay," to individuals, groups and organizations serving the public good (American Bar Association 2010). Survey data demonstrate that members of the legal profession are the most likely to volunteer in their area of expertise (Corporation for National and Community Service 2008). Programs to promote organized pro bono legal activity also seem to be more common than in other professions. The ABA coordinates a network of regional "transactional" pro bono programs that help match legal volunteers to organizations and businesses needing legal services. Philadelphia VIP's LawWorks (Philadelphia VIP 2010) recruits and trains legal volunteers, matches them with carefully screened organizations, and supports the

relationships for the duration of their involvement.

Accountants frequently serve on nonprofit boards in financial oversight roles. In Philadelphia, Community Accountants has connected accountants with grassroots nonprofits to promote high standards of financial management for 34 years, focusing its work on technical assistance and training for nonprofit leaders. In the realm of media, the Ad Council has been organizing marketing services for public interest campaigns since the 1940s (Ad Council 2010). A few programs cut across professional boundaries; Taproot Foundation coordinates pro bono services in leadership development and human resources, strategy management, marketing and information technology (Taproot Foundation 2010).

The profile of pro bono and reduced-fee organizing projects is growing in architecture and design. The Association for Community Design serves as a national network of community design centers, university design workshops and firms that perform pro bono work. The Community Design Center of Pittsburgh and Baltimore's Neighborhood Design Center were each established in 1968 to connect design volunteers to community groups. North Carolina's Design Corps, founded in 1991, has run a Community Design Fellows program for ten years, placing design fellows on rural housing and community development projects. San Francisco's Public Architecture is a web-based national clearinghouse for architects wanting to donate time and nonprofits seeking assistance

(Public Architecture 2010). Philadelphia's Community Design Collaborative, the focus of this article, has been connecting nonprofit organizations with volunteer design professionals since 1991.

Origin and Role of the Community Design Collaborative

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The Collaborative was founded during the recession of the early 1990s by young architects looking to put their design skills to work for the community. The organization steadily matured, hiring its first staff member in 1995 and becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 1996. Its mission has also grown more targeted. Today, the Collaborative's primary focus is "building neighborhood visions through communities and volunteer design professionals working together." The Collaborative developed its service grant model to leverage resources, attention and action, while ensuring that its projects are fundamentally responsive to community needs and supportive of community revitalization efforts. With seven current staff members, including two AmeriCorps*VISTA members, the Collaborative has grown into an important contributor to the Philadelphia area's nonprofit ecosystem.

All of the Collaborative's projects are site-specific and are identified through a systematic application and selection

process. As a first step, community groups approach the Collaborative with ideas for capital development, which are evaluated and defined before going through the selection process. The Collaborative's project manager, a registered architect with 20 years of experience, screens these initial applications and conducts a site visit, offering an early consultation and clarifying the types and extent of services that Collaborative volunteers could offer. Following the site visit, the Collaborative gauges volunteer interest in the potential project, to assess possible matches. The Project Selection committee, which includes architects, landscape architects, construction management, and economic and real estate development professionals, as well as an attorney and representatives of the public sector, awards service grants on a quarterly basis. The staff tailors and recruits volunteer teams based on the scale of the approved project.

After an orientation meeting with Collaborative staff, the teams work directly with the client to solicit input and develop a design. Each team has a leader and, to ensure high-quality work, presents its design at two peer reviews during the course of the project, one at the midpoint and one at the conclusion. The project review meetings are usually attended by 10–30 area design professionals. Richard Winston, AIA, Project Review committee chair, noted that the reviews also give experienced design professionals like himself an opportunity to contribute to projects that they may not have time to volunteer for, "in

terms of design, of suggesting important questions to ask clients, and sometimes by making simple suggestions such as, 'add another exit on that side of the building.'"

Throughout the process, the Collaborative's project manager provides advice and troubleshooting. The clearly defined process and expert project management are consistently cited by clients and volunteers as major contributors to successful projects. Each project team produces a final report that includes drawings, photographs, a narrative and a cost estimate. The report gives the nonprofit's governing board solid information upon which to base decision-making regarding a proposed project's feasibility. Upon completion of the design phase, the team reviews the final report with the client to ensure that they can present it independently to third parties in a way that helps to get the most value out of the conceptual design. If the nonprofit decides to pursue the project, the report will be a powerful tool in community organizing and fundraising efforts.

In *The Power of Pro Bono*, John Cary (2010b) explores funders' reticence to finance capital projects:

One leader noted "perceived leverage," viewing capital projects as having inherently less impact than program support. Others described such giving as "conservative grant-making," typically reserved for big institutions, like universities or museums, where a family or foundation name on a building is a status symbol. Yet the single-

greatest concern expressed was about cost: Buildings are expensive to build and expensive to maintain.

However, by providing a solid conceptual foundation, the Collaborative's services have enabled nonprofits to obtain funds — typically in amounts ranging from $30,000 to $100,000 — for further planning, resource development and physical improvements.

The narrow scope of services that the Collaborative offers to its clients is an important component of the success of its projects and its volunteer retention. Collaborative volunteers focus on early design and development challenges, offering tailored feasibility studies. They evaluate sites, survey buildings, assess structural, mechanical and electrical systems, analyze space and accessibility needs, help write requests for proposals, design conceptual plans and offer opinions of probable costs. To accomplish these tasks, the Collaborative manages a pool of over 700 volunteer designers in the Greater Philadelphia area. Volunteers generally work in compact teams of two to six individuals over a six-month period. Generally the teams comprise individual contributors drawn from firms and disciplines within the architecture, construction and engineering industries, and may include landscape architects, historic preservationists, lighting and graphic designers, planners and cost estimators.

In 2002, the Collaborative recruited its first project team

fully staffed with volunteers from a single firm; the firm of Francis Cauffman Architects worked with the Allegheny West Foundation to develop fresh ideas for contextual residences to be built on lots left vacant by row-home demolition. By participating in the project, the firm was able "to offer professional development for its associates, allowing them to earn credits toward the National Council of Architectural Registration Board's Intern Development Program in-house" (Rastorfer 2008: 106). Since then, the Collaborative has expanded its work with firm-organized teams, and the number of "firm volunteers" has grown steadily. In 2008, 43 firms and 132 design professionals volunteered through the Collaborative, delivering over $425,000 in predevelopment services to more than 30 local nonprofits. In 2009, the Collaborative delivered nearly $610,000 in pro bono early design assistance to 25 nonprofit organizations throughout Greater Philadelphia, awarded 27 new service grants with nonprofit organizations, and created opportunities for 74 design firms and 187 design professionals to volunteer their skills in service of neighborhoods.

Becker Winston Architects, now BWA architecture + planning (BWA), and Wallace Roberts & Todd are excellent examples of firms with deep engagement with the Collaborative and dedication to helping its clients leverage their resources effectively.

When Richard Winston and William Becker founded their firm, they wanted to create a hybrid business model that

incorporated both work-for-fee and pro bono work. The firm currently has eight full-time staff members, and they have tested a range of community service models. When BWA volunteered to help Rev. Lang and Rev. Moore of Mt. Tabor CEED develop a conceptual plan, they did the project on staff time. In a subsequent project, Winston encouraged junior staff to take on a Collaborative project as a team, on their own time, with Winston serving as mentor/principal in charge.

Although BWA was the architect ultimately chosen for construction of the Mt. Tabor Cyber Village, and made an effort to offer brief answers to targeted questions even after that project was completed, when Rev. Lang and Rev. Moore subsequently began planning to build a community center on another vacant lot adjoining their church, BWA suggested that the conceptual design be done through the Collaborative. Winston described the added value in working with the Collaborative as "knowing all the intermediaries, all the resources, and having the ability to provide clients with a larger structure or game plan than an architect alone can provide." Though, in this instance, BWA did suggest Mt. Tabor CEED work through the Collaborative rather than simply retain their firm based on a previous relationship, the firm does engage with nonprofit clients as a part of its regular business for modest fees. For example, BWA has a paid contract with Achievability to work on housing in the Haddington neighborhood of West Philadelphia. Winston has found

that the repeat business that comes with establishing long-term working relationships with nonprofits means that his firm can do projects for reduced fees and build that work into a business plan.

Wallace Roberts & Todd (WRT), with over 200 employees in seven offices nationwide, is a "collaborative practice of city and regional planners, urban designers, landscape architects, and architects who create vibrant imaginative and sustainable places" (Wallace Roberts & Todd 2010). In October 2009, the firm received the Collaborative's inaugural Gold Medal Firm award for extraordinary dedication and service. Since the Collaborative's founding, more than 60 volunteers from WRT have provided over $200,000 worth of pro bono services. Although the firm does not have an official volunteer policy, WRT principal and Collaborative Board member Mami Hara, AICP, ASLA, explained that the firm actively encourages individuals at all levels in the firm to volunteer their time to broaden their exposure to issues that may be relevant in their work at the firm. Hara noted the important professional development benefits of volunteering with the Collaborative, especially for young designers:

At a midsized firm, the level of involvement that you have with projects has to increase incrementally as you gain the experience to perform at the level needed to take on a leadership role. However, having the opportunity to stand on your own two feet and see a project through early on in your career is very healthy. Young designers need to have

new experiences to grow, which includes opportunities to engage directly with clients, lead a project, and present your project to great design professionals.

Maarten Pesch, AIA, LEED AP, the WRT principal who led a team from the firm in their work on the Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia green affordable housing development in West Philadelphia, has found that for many nonprofits, “working with the Collaborative is a jumping-off point for conceptual thinking about their built environment.” Pesch, who gravitates towards Collaborative projects that are complicated, where he feels that he can add value, notes that “a building is never a building on its own; it is always part of a street, a neighborhood, a community and a city.”

Megan McGinley, AIA, who has volunteered with the Collaborative since the start of her career, describes how volunteer projects allow young professionals like herself to “take on new assignments with the benefit of an experienced mentor, so that when you use those skills at your firm, it is not the first time.”

What Makes the Community Design Collaborative Distinctive

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Intermediary organizations like the Community Design

Collaborative have a lot to offer both professional volunteers looking for an assignment and the organizations that might be able to use their services. The Deloitte 2009 Impact Survey found that leaders from the nonprofit organizations surveyed generally do not know which companies to approach or whom to approach within a company to request volunteers. These organizations also have relatively little capacity to manage volunteers, with nonprofit staff typically inexperienced in volunteer recruitment and management and instead devoted to cash fundraising (Deloitte Development 2009). Intermediary groups can help connect these nonprofit organizations to the professional volunteers and help manage the projects where the organizations lack that capacity.

Organizations dedicated to improving the quality of Philadelphia's built environment are flourishing. These include the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia (DAG), the policy voice for the design and architecture communities; Penn Praxis, a university-based design center that coordinates work on big-picture planning projects; and the American Institute of Architects' Philadelphia chapter. However, the Collaborative's niche of connecting design talent with nonprofit leaders who understand how to serve their communities and then providing support through the design process is unique in this constellation of organizations.

The Collaborative's intermediary role solves some of the

problems of nonprofit organizations and design professionals working together independently. Nonprofits unfamiliar with the individual players in the local design scene can be connected to the right people and groups through the Collaborative. Firms or individual designers with limited experience working with relatively small nonprofit organizations can benefit from the Collaborative's vetting process as well as the input from collaborators with more experience with these types of clients. The Collaborative's experience bridging the two communities is also helpful. As Richard Winston of BWA noted, it is invaluable for architects to learn how to tap into community groups whose life knowledge is crucial to making a design work for its users. In his words, the real value in working with community leaders is their ability to "ask appropriate questions; to create a shared language; to engage in a community decision-making process: knowledge which is applicable to almost every situation architects encounter."

The Collaborative's volunteers continue to volunteer at relatively high rates. Mami Hara of WRT observed that the Collaborative's high volunteer retention rate is due to the clarity of its process, which allows design professionals to focus on bringing their professional expertise to bear and feel sure that their time is not being wasted: "Taking advantage of professionals' skills in a way that makes them as useful as possible is key. As a professional, you know the dollar value of your time and with the

Collaborative you feel that it's being used fully instead of contributing a fraction of what your time is worth on the market."

Finally, pro bono predevelopment assistance may create lasting relationships and help generate billable work for design firms. Habitat for Humanity Philadelphia hired WRT to take the conceptual design that the firm developed through the Collaborative through schematics. Now, the firm is doing pro bono work to prepare for a similar, smaller development of homes to be built across the street.

Early Engagement Leads to Long-Term Benefit

The Collaborative's focus on the early design stages of building projects and its supportive role can serve as a model to organizations promoting pro bono service both local to and outside of the Philadelphia area. In architecture as well as in other professions, skills-based volunteers and the nonprofit organizations that need their services can benefit from an experienced intermediary organization providing project support in a structured process.

The value of the services provided by the Collaborative range from under $5,000 for smaller projects to well over $40,000 for larger ones, with an average of about $20,000.The $1,000 fee charged by the Collaborative on

accepted projects to help offset administrative costs can be a lot of money for small organizations, but is nonetheless a significant discount from the cost of purchasing those services on the market, as can be seen in the value of the services for each project (what the work of those designers would have cost at their actual billing rates). Importantly, the plans that the Collaborative helps to generate for these organizations often serve as a bridge to the more substantial funds needed to complete the actual project; in other cases they help organizations avoid costly mistakes and misallocation of resources.

The Community Design Collaborative is a capacity-building organization that supports direct service organizations across multiple sectors. Of the 28 organizations for which projects were completed in 2009, four of the clients were dedicated to educational efforts, two to economic development, six to housing and community development, five to open space, five to social services, three to arts and culture, and three to religious groups.

Clients who see their relationship with the Collaborative as a long-term partnership get ongoing support, advice and resource referrals from the Collaborative staff, even after the conceptual design is complete. Furthermore, according to Mami Hara,

The Collaborative's process, including the design review, and stakeholder engagement, creates a more robust

social network for the city and the region. Not just the clients but the city and the volunteers benefit from the social cohesion that develops. The Collaborative's work also produces tangible outcomes: clients get tools to build support for their vision and pursue funding, and an education from the volunteers who can inform them about all aspects of realizing their projects.

Conclusion: More Bricks and Mortar

Conclusion: More than Bricks and Mortar

Brian Szymanick, who helped design the building when BWA was later hired for the construction of the Mt. Tabor Cyber Village, noted when talking with PlanPhilly, a news project affiliated with Penn Praxis, at the January 2009 ribbon-cutting,

Mt. Tabor Church asked us from the very beginning of the project to really work on developing community – community in the neighborhood, community with the church, community for the residents. The biggest amenities for them were to include a large- and smaller-scale community spaces. There's a lounge on each floor, a game room, a library and a large community room on the first floor where the entire population of the building can gather.

Rev. Moore gave the firm and the final design high praise,

commenting, “It has such a feel! The people just love it.” Both of the pastors encourage other nonprofits embarking on capital improvement projects to “do the homework” of thorough planning and predevelopment work. And the pastors added their personal touch to the inside of the building, choosing the warm red and yellow colors of the lobby and filling the facility with artwork. Their work continues: they are expanding the back patio to include a community garden in another vacant lot.

Haley Loram graduated from Swarthmore College in 2008 with a major in Political Science and a minor in Latin American Studies. She has worked at the Community Design Collaborative as an AmeriCorps VISTA for two years, the first of those as a Philly Fellow and the second as a VISTA Leader through the Empowerment Group.

Bernard Brown began studying social enterprise and the nonprofit sector at Johns Hopkins University’s Institute for Policy Studies, where he received a

master's degree in public policy. He works as a State Program Specialist for the Corporation for National and Community Service, managing a portfolio of Senior Corps and AmeriCorps*VISTA projects. He previously helped launch the Atlanta office of microlender ACCION USA, where he served as an AmeriCorps*VISTA member and later as a staff loan officer and outreach director. He has a B.A. in Social Studies from Wesleyan University.

Bernard Brown did not write this article as a representative of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the views expressed do not represent the official position of the Corporation.

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