City, county honor local AmeriCorps volunteers

April 06, 2017

National service volunteers working throughout the Moab community were honored April 4 with “National Service Recognition Day.” Elected officials in both Moab city and Grand County proclaimed the special holiday, acknowledging that the many volunteers serving locally — all associated with the federal AmeriCorps program — meet direct needs in the community.

From teams working on trail building and habitat restoration to individuals committed to capacity-building at local organizations, Moab's volunteers gathered at the city council chambers on March 28.

“I just want to say thank you very much for your service,” Moab Mayor Dave Sakrison told the volunteers. “It means a lot to us in this community and I think we all appreciate it.”

During his official proclamation March 28, Sakrison called service to others “a hallmark for the American character,” saying that the work “is central to how we meet our challenges.”

Those who interact with Moab's national service volunteers on a daily basis, say the volunteers are doing exactly that — helping the community meet its own unique needs and solving local challenges.

Rhiana Medina, executive director of the Moab Valley Multicultural Center (MVMC), said AmeriCorps VISTAs (Volunteers in Service To America) have enhanced the center's curriculum, built a summer camp program, and created more “robust” language programs.

“The VISTA program is designed to grow capacity for organizations that serve people in poverty,” Medina said. “The capacity that VISTAs have given to MVMC is almost immeasurable.”
At present, Moab is host to national service volunteers from Utah State University’s Utah Conservation Corps, Four Corners School’s Canyon Country Youth Corps, the National Civilian Conservation Corps as well as eight VISTAs.

Community members have become most familiar with the VISTA program, as the volunteers spend at least one year in the Moab community at organizations working to alleviate social issues. They receive a small, below poverty wage stipend for their year of service.

“Many organizations in our community would suffer without the contribution of AmeriCorps VISTA volunteers,” said Grand County Community Development Director Zacharia Levine.

Levine, who served as a VISTA in Moab himself, recognized a need for more organizational capacity and community engagement within his own department. He thought that role could be filled with a VISTA volunteer.

That VISTA, Kaitlin Myers, has produced two resource-based websites for Grand County — moabhousing.com and moabhousingplan.com — which provide community members with information and tools related to affordable housing.

“Truly, our community is better off because of their infusions of talent, effort, and commitment to service,” Levine said. “Plus, many have stayed in the community and gone on to serve in leadership positions.”

Myers, and others, do hope to remain in the community. She called serving in Moab, working on affordable housing — an issue she “had been passionate about my entire life” — an opportunity that “seemed too good to be true.”

“Most of us are fairly recent college grads that are bright-eyed and passionate about making a difference in a place, especially in a place in which it is so easy to fall in love with the people and the geography,” Myers said.

From Community Rebuilds to the Moab Free Health Clinic, Seekhaven and Moab Regional Hospital, AmeriCorps members organize volunteers, write grants and expand programming. Although they are helping these organizations, many say they are also experiencing an impact on their lives personally.

“Moving to Moab to complete my VISTA term, and working at WabiSabi, has definitely expanded my world view,” said AnneMarie Muller. “It is one thing to learn about social inequalities while sitting in a classroom, it is an entirely different thing to be in the midst of them, doing hands-on work to combat those inequalities.”

The Trump administration
recently announced a $385 million cut to the federal program, which could mean the elimination of AmeriCorps.

“It is not a core function of the federal government to promote volunteerism and therefore these programs should be eliminated,” President Donald Trump’s March 23 budget outline states. “To the extent these activities have value, they should be supported by the private and nonprofit sectors.”

For those interacting with AmeriCorps volunteers on a daily basis, the program does have value. According to its umbrella organization, the Corporation for National and Community Service (NCS), over 4,500 mayors and county leaders proclaimed April 4, 2017 as “National Service Recognition Day,” a figure that represents approximately 195 million Americans.

“[Local leaders] all know the amazing impact that people ... who have the energy, talent, and drive to serve can do for a community,” Beth Joseph told the county council April 4.

Joseph is the coordinator for the national service volunteers in Moab and the executive director of the Moab Free Health Clinic. She first moved to Moab 13 years ago to serve as an AmeriCorps volunteer for the Youth Garden Project.

Former VISTA and current volunteer coordinator for the MVMC, Katlyn Keane, said that situation is not unique. Former AmeriCorps volunteers are in leadership roles peppered throughout the community, Keane said.

“I have seen many of my fellow VISTAs stay on with their organizations or move into paid positions at other local nonprofits,” Keane said. “At least in Moab I think we can confirm that the VISTA program brings talent, new ideas, a good work ethic and a sense of social responsibility to a place.”

Megan List, a VISTA at Seekhaven, attributes the Moab community’s welcoming attitude toward the AmeriCorps program as a reason for its success locally. Now serving in her third position through AmeriCorps, List said she is “astounded” by how the Moab community integrates national service volunteers.

“I believe that the open arms and warm reception that Moab offers VISTAs are what enables our projects to flourish, and that none of it would be possible without such an invested community,” List said.

ByBy Molly Marcello

The Times-Independent