

SERVICE



Youth Health Service Corps

Waterbury, Conn.

757

Average number of students served during the school year

50%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Area Health Education Center Federal funding
- ▶ Conn. State funding
- ▶ Corporation for National and Community Service AmeriCorps funding

Creating an avenue for career exploration

Vibrant social connections and robust community involvement are part of what makes a strong America. Yet, among our nation's young people, there are relatively low levels of community engagement. While acts of service that elementary schoolers take part in will look different than service among young adults, there is a way for all individuals, regardless of age, to engage in service, and individuals, regardless of age, can benefit from acts of service. For children and youth, service learning is an established method to bring youth closer to their communities while also promoting positive youth development outcomes. Among young adults, service, such as national service, enables them to make similar personal and professional gains when given the opportunity to participate. The afterschool field is a critical partner to expand access and availability of service in a multitude of forms for youth and young adults alike. Together with education and community leaders, afterschool and summer learning programs are working toward the healthy development of both the next generation and our democracy.

Overview

Health360 is a nonprofit agency working toward building a healthier nation one community at a time. It hosts the Northwestern Area Health Education Center (AHEC), one of four regional centers that comprise the Connecticut AHEC Network. To advance their mission, Health360 promotes service learning as a tool to reduce local health disparities through the Youth Health Service Corps (YHSC) program. YHSC provides lessons, trainings, and service projects to introduce health professional careers, college exploration, and public health awareness to minority high school students.

A typical day for students

High school students meet afterschool with their YHSC program coordinator weekly to lay the educational foundation for service-learning projects. Each two- to three-hour session guides students through a five-module curriculum that prepares students for volunteer service in the health care field. As their training progresses, students get opportunities to design and implement service projects that address pressing community health issues.

Outcomes

In 2016, Health360 conducted a comprehensive multi-site evaluation of the YHSC program showing that participation in YHSC expands student knowledge, sparks interest in health care fields, and is a positive influence on career trajectory. After one year of involvement with YHSC, 90 percent of students agreed that YHSC taught them things they did not know about careers in health care and 71 percent of former YHSC program participants that are currently or had previously enrolled in college reported that their major or area of study was health care related. Overall, 65 percent of YHSC graduates said that YHSC influenced their interest in a health care career.

Program characteristics

Youth Health Service Corps is a structured service-learning program designed around a long-term strategy: improve access to health care for underrepresented populations by increasing diversity in health professions. Starting with high school students, YHSC aims to grow a pipeline of future health care professionals that understand the unique needs of local communities.

At Health360, AmeriCorps members serve as program coordinators who implement and facilitate the YHSC program. Program coordinators use a standards-based curriculum to engage high school students from diverse backgrounds in topics such as leadership, social determinants of health, cultural competency, and ethics. Students use these lessons to increase their knowledge of health care issues, gain exposure to new career opportunities, and apply what they have learned through service-learning projects. For example, YHSC participants identified nutrition education as a community health issue, and to address the disparity, students designed and presented a series of obesity prevention activities to students in local afterschool programs.



Challenges

Despite the positive impacts of service, the desire to be a positive force in the community is not translating into action.

Service opportunities at school: for some, not all. While trends show an increasing number of community involvement opportunities offered by schools and universities—for instance, 68 percent of principals reported that their students participate in community activities that are recognized by the schools, and 69 percent of college seniors participated in a service-learning course in 2018—too many individuals are not accessing these opportunities.

The type of service matters. A growing body of research shows the positive benefits associated with service. However, the majority of youth service opportunities are rooted in volunteering, rather than service learning, with the percentage of schools offering service learning declining from 32 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2008.

The equity divide. Participation in opportunities for service varies across different socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, based on the availability and access to surrounding institutions that facilitate and encourage service. For example, schools in low-income areas, often serving a larger percentage of minority students, are less likely to offer service learning when compared with other schools. For low-income young adults, in school and in the workforce, monetary and non-monetary costs of service act as a barrier to participation.

Read [Afterschool Supports Service Opportunities from Youth to Young Adulthood](#) to learn more.

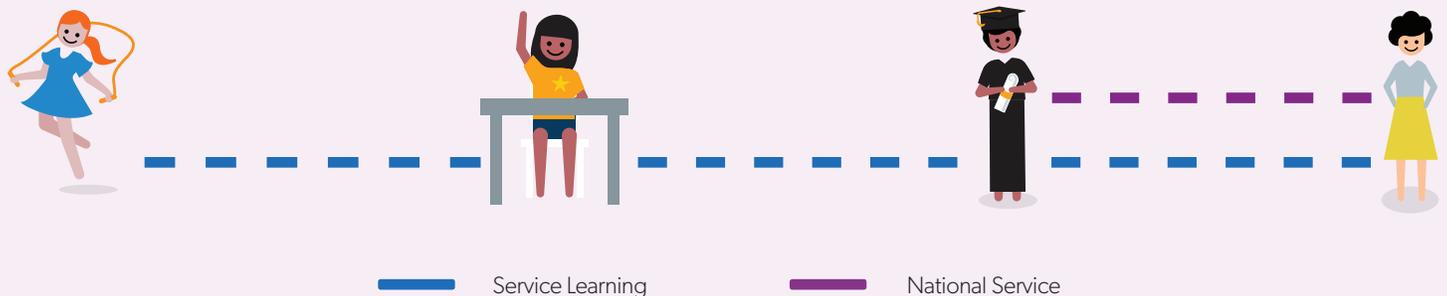
Service Opportunities at Every Age

Everyone, regardless of age, can take part in service. The service opportunity may look different depending on one's age, but the positive benefits are a constant. In addition to meeting the needs of a community, acts of service can foster greater community engagement, trust, a better understanding of the community, and compassion for others.

Service Learning

Through service learning, youth are active participants in thoughtfully organized community projects that advance a set of learning goals while meeting the needs of the community. For example, students in an afterschool program study their city's waste collection and recycling services. Students then plan and implement a series of local cleanup projects to apply their lessons on accessibility and use of these services. In addition to students helping with litter abatement and beautification efforts, the community is presented with students' sustainable waste management recommendations.

Example adapted from [Loyola University](#).



National Service

For young adults, service can also be a deeper form of experiential education through longer-term service projects that provide formative hands-on opportunities to assess and address community needs. For example, AmeriCorps State and National members placed at an afterschool program make a yearlong commitment to directly serve youth and their families. Members grow professionally, learn about the community they are serving, and support students' development. Students in programs benefit from AmeriCorps members' tutoring and mentorship. Afterschool programs benefit by receiving help with child enrichment activities and overall program implementation.

Program history

Established in 1995, the Connecticut AHEC Program has grown to encompass four regional centers, including Northwestern AHEC, hosted by Health360. In 2004, Connecticut AHEC created the YHSC program out of a need to address community health disparities. All four regional centers of the Connecticut AHEC Network currently implement YHSC either in school or through an afterschool program and serve 757 students across 15 high schools. The YHSC program is now expanding to other AHEC centers nationwide.

Recommendations

for creating an avenue for career exploration:

- ▶ Flexibility is key for program growth and development. Leave room to adapt aspects of your programming to meet varying student and community needs over time.
- ▶ Leading service-learning projects can be a heavy lift for small nonprofits. Develop strong community partnerships and consider adopting the AmeriCorps model to overcome time and budget limitations.

