



Transcript of Podcast with Nick Cecconi

Sheryl: Welcome to today's podcast, we have with us Nick Cecconi. He is located in Binghamton New York and Nick is the Mobility Management Coordinator at Mobility Management of South Central New York. Hello Nick. Nick is going to talk today about using Americorps. I guess they call them volunteers although they do get paid. As a mobility management staff member, Nick can you tell us a little bit about how this got started.

Nick: Sure Sheryl, we have a program here, Mobility Management Of South Central New York as you mentioned and one of the things we were interested in was operating a call center, kind of a one click, one call center, if you will, where we could provide transportation, information, in transit education service to the community. And we were thinking of how it might be best to staff given some of the limited resources we have as a small non-profit but also wanting to provide a certain level of service to the people who are calling in generally from a three county area in South Central New York.

So Tioga County, Broome County, Delaware County, and the decision that we made was that we could provide a really quality level of service and still have centrally something very similar to a full time staff center without actually having some of those cost associated with a fulltime person or people. We could do that by using the Americorps service program and since I have been here for about a year and a half maybe a little bit more than that we have been using Americorps representatives, 1700 hour term of service representatives to operate our call center.

And so some other mobility management works for us and we feel that it's a really good model in a lot of ways and we are certainly glad that we have had the experience with it so far.

Sheryl: Can you tell me what this Americorps volunteer does for you as part of his or her job for that one year?

Nick: So most host sites who have an Americorps representative only have one dedicated to a specific project, sometimes more than one, but generally those who have different kind of feels or projects that they are working on. We have two Americorps representatives working specifically with our call center. So the primary responsibilities they have is building phone calls concerning the transportation options in the community.

So they'll do an intake; they'll find out a little bit about the person who needs the information; and then they'll go through the options available for them and that meet their specific needs. Some of the other stuff they are responsible for is a little bit of the marketing and outreach work in the community, working a lot with some of the medical centers, health and human service agencies and the transportation providers themselves.

I mentioned we do some intake; well that gives us access to some really good data that we can report and collect and analyze for our community stakeholders and the partners with us in our projects. So a lot of the work we do is really focused on that outreach and those relationships and helping out the community stakeholders who work with us on that mobility management project.

Sheryl: And can you tell me a little bit about Americorps folks you get in terms of level of education and experience before they come to you?

Nick: Yeah, right now we are in our, it's really our third terms of service, third year long of service. I have had the pleasure of working with four Americorps representatives thus far; three of them have essentially been out of undergrad school, so doing a year of service really after their undergraduate experience. One was an older person who was looking to explore maybe a career field or get some experience working in health and human services case management something like that.

But you get people from all sorts of walks of life interested in doing the Americorps work. Personally myself I had done Americorps and that was actually how I got introduced to mobility management was through my Americorps experiences and I had done that out of graduate school. So it can really vary on the experiences and all that from, the people who apply and have been served.

Sheryl: And where did you do your service Nick?

Nick: I was just north of here in Cortland New York, which is right in the middle of the state.

Sheryl: What is some of the service, special skills that some of your volunteers have, well I guess they are paid, but the Americorps staff people what are some of the skills that they have brought to you?

Nick: Well Americorps representatives have a wide range of skills as you can imagine. One of the things that we have had the fortune of, skill set that we have had the fortune of utilizing relates to computers and database work, we have a pretty powerful database to a little [0:08:45.8] to collect information and provide it to, as I mentioned to our partners and the community. Improving that and making that more valuable to us has been a really excellent thing and something we weren't really looking for in Americorps person but we've had the luck twice now of having that certain skill set.

One of our current Americorps members have they background in medical systems with, actually has a job offer with one of our major hospital systems. So as most people we know who do mobility management, a lot of the need comes from medical transportation and people needing to access those services. So having someone with first hand knowledge of how hospital systems work has really been beneficial to us from that aspect as well certainly.

Sheryl: Okay, so we have heard a lot about some of the advantages of this unique set up that you have but let's explore the, some of the nitty gritty and then a couple of disadvantages for anybody who is considering, so they get the whole picture. So how does it work in terms of cost to your organization, what gets paid by Americorps and how the Americorps program operates?

Nick: Well I think of Americorps basically as a franchise volunteer system, so one of the host organization, the organization that actually employs me as a mobility manager, Real Health Network of South Central New York, they actually also operate our local Americorps program and the real health service core. So how that works is they are responsible for the administration and the local costs, they'll recruit Americorps members and they'll administer the program and monitor their progress at the local level.

Now a host site would have to go through an application process and also share in some of the cost hosting an Americorps person at their site. So we have two Americorps members working at mobility management, one year term of service for each of them, 1700 hours. So there is three of the specific cost that real health service core is responsible for and they pass that along to the host site that then are responsible for and we utilize a private foundation grant to meet the local share. So that works out pretty well for us.

Sheryl: And what's the range of cost to your organization approximately?

Nick: The cost, well I would say, I am not really sure about this but I believe for a year it could be anywhere from five to seven maybe to ten thousand dollars, I think that could possibly change in terms of the geography, but that is where I would put it, it may be safe to say between five and ten thousand dollars per Americorps person who is serving for a full year.

Sheryl: Right, so that and their level of education has a really, has a major benefit since you are paying a lot less than you would if you were paying the entire cost for college graduates.

Nick: Right, so if you are paying a full time or two in our case, full time employees, not to mention the benefits and all that stuff that would go a long way with that, so those costs can, those are difficult costs to bear for a non profit in a lot of ways. So we need to explore this option in part as you mentioned for the cost savings and we think it gives us a really unique engine and beneficial solution.

Sheryl: So let's talk a little bit about some of the downside, so we get the advantage of having this unique person with all of their education and the different skills and experiences that you only get that person for one year. So less involved that you have to, what are the challenges of having the great employees for only a year and what do you have to do during that year for each of them?

Nick: The first thing is, so we'll do the application process, we'll learn a little bit about the people who are interested in this position and generally at that point their interest, their skills, their previous experiences, inform us a little bit as to how we could use them best in service of the mobility service project in our call center. But gain as you mentioned in a year we'll be doing the exact same process, looking for two more people and analyzing their abilities and their interest in applying the, it can be a little difficult to take two people on, teach them about transportation.

Mobility management, the options in the area, have them establish relationships with our stakeholders, our coalition of providers and agencies, and then they get really a level of confidence, when they get a level of expertise in working the call center and providing all these

other services, before you know it, their term of services is halfway gone and before you know it it's over and you are looking for the next group of people. So the turn over is by far the most difficult part of employing or utilizing Americorps representatives for sure.

Sheryl: And I would think that also trying to preserve some of the institutional knowledge that you were talking about before that some of these people have unique knowledge that it would be nice to keep and they are going at the end of the year, have you found anyways to preserve some of that knowledge and incorporate it into your operation even though you have to accept to turn over each year?

Nick: Right so our best way forward acknowledging that difficulty is really incorporating the notes and observations of our Americorps representatives themselves, what works for you, what didn't work for you, how can we design our next training program for the Americorps representatives who would replace you, how can we do that best, what is important for them to know what's the best way to acculturate them into how we work and how this whole mobility management process is done.

And then we are revisiting that constantly and thinking about is everything where it needs to be, is everything explained the way it needs to be and how can we do that better. It's not a thing that you just look at once and think it's done, it constantly has to be, the systems and the process and the protocol all have to be optimized in a way that makes it easy for that turn over to have basically, to mitigate the negative effects of the turn over.

Sheryl: Right and it seems like a great way to asses you internal performance each year.

Nick: Right and we have metrics that we are responsible for, regardless of the people who are actually doing the on the ground work, regardless of whether these people are here for a year or here for two years or so forth, the numbers have to be where they are, relationships have to be where they are and the level of transportation, expertise has to be at a certain level. So those things have to be at a specific place regardless.

Sheryl: So given the benefits and these constants if you will. That the cost, the actual expense is pretty low and you are getting these great people however only for a year. They do have to keep up sort of almost a constant hiring and training program, do you feel that it's on the whole, it's a good way for mobility management programs that are a little strapped for cash, do you think that this is a good option for others?

Nick: I would say yes, because of the, as you mentioned there is cost issues, there is control issues, a lot of people would probably consider either hiring a full time employee or maybe trying to do it with just volunteers and there are cost associated with any option, but for us and for our particular situation we find that the level of candidate we can get and how we can train them and the results we get with them is that meets our need and meets the communities needs and for the cost we can do, I think it's been a great innovation for our program to use these Americorps people and provide the service that we do.

Sheryl: And it was your step into transportation as well.

Nick: Right, that's correct, I was interested in transportation myself out of trade school and was wondering how I could get in the game really and the Americorps opportunity presented itself, it basically fell into my lap, I was working at a bookstore at the time wondering how I could get into this interesting world that I thought might be a good career path and it basically again fell into my lap and that's just three or four years on and I am still doing mobility management and enjoying it for sure.

Sheryl: Well great and we are glad to have you, you've contributed a lot and I thank you very much for speaking with me today about this really great idea and I am not sure a lot of people are aware of it and it'll give other mobility management programs another perspective on hiring and getting good people to help run their program.

Nick: Glad to talk with you Sheryl thanks for calling.

Sheryl: Great, all right I'll talk to you soon Nick.

Nick: All right have a good day.

Sheryl: Bye, bye.