

# VISTA CORRIDOR RECOVERY



*2009 Year-in-Review*

*Welcome* { **Looking back at 2009**

**W**hat a tremendous year!!! Many talented individuals from around the country and some from own backyard signed on to be AmeriCorps\*VISTA Corridor Recovery members. With the sponsorship and support of the Community Corrections Improvement Association (CCIA) many great community betterment programs have been created and expanded. BRIGHTEN, VITA, MLK Day of Service and VISTA Corridor Flood Recovery are just a few shining examples of their outstanding work.

The AmeriCorps\*VISTA members enthusiasm for service work and drive have produced the tremendous results as displayed in the following pages. Please read on and understand that these individuals are tomorrow's leaders. Their actions give inspiration to all and their commitment is second to none. On behalf of all of the members of the community that have been directly impacted by their work I would like to thank them.

Sincerely,  
Bruce Vander Sanden  
VISTA Program Manager



**Our Impact,**  
*By the Numbers...*

**197** Homes mucked  
and gutted.

*Families  
returned* **334**  
*home:*

**65,542** hours  
and 45  
minutes

*worked by  
volunteers  
in 2009,*

AND

**151,867.61**  
hours worked by

*AmeriCorps\*VISTA*  
**Members.**

## Origins of the Program

The Flood of 2008, in which the Cedar River crested at a record 31.2 feet, damaged some 5,390 houses, along with 1,049 commercial properties. The cost of the damage has been estimated at \$231 million.

Shortly after the disaster, the Corporation for National and Community Service granted CCIA 100 AmeriCorps VISTA summer associates. Within two weeks, 60 of the positions were filled with people ready to work.

In 2009, 65 full-time VISTAs continued to help the community rebuild from the flood, along with other improvement projects.

## Johnson County Program

The CCIA-run AmeriCorps\*VISTA program's commitment to filling the needs of the community goes beyond Cedar Rapids. It extends down Interstate 380 to the Iowa City area, which is home to the University of Iowa.

The Johnson County part of the program was established in the summer of 2008, when 23 new VISTA Summer Associates stepped forward to assist in recovery efforts from record flooding and the resulting damage to individuals, agencies providing services to people in need, cultural and historical resources, local city and county governments,

and the university.

In addition to flood recovery, Johnson County VISTAs in 2009 have provided recreational, nutritional and mentoring programs for children and youth in low and moderate income areas through the Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County. They have also worked with Shelter House to redesign its Emergency Overflow program. And they have helped in the operation of the Johnson County Crisis Center Food Bank.

To learn more about VISTA's role in Iowa City / Coralville, call (319) 625-2117.

## Awards and Recognitions

CCIA's Central Cedar Rapids Weed and Seed initiative received the Weed and Seed Coordination Honor award during the 2009 CCDO National Conference, held July 13 through 16 in Tampa, Florida. The program was one of six to receive the award, given to recognize the sites for their successful collaborative efforts.

Also in 2009, VISTAs were recognized during the 26th Annual Governor's Volunteer Awards. They received the Individual Disaster Volunteer Award from Governor Chet Culver, a special category added to thank those who have helped with disaster recovery in the State of Iowa.

## Community Partnerships

- ▶ Block by Block
- ▶ Cedar Rapids Neighborhoods
- ▶ Central Cedar Rapids Weed and Seed
- ▶ Community Corrections Improvement Association
- ▶ Jane Boyd Community Center
- ▶ Linn Area Long Term Recovery Coalition (LALTRC)
- ▶ Linn County Public Health
- ▶ Matthew 25
- ▶ Mission of Hope
- ▶ Neighborhood Centers of Johnson County (JC)
- ▶ Paul Engle Center
- ▶ Shelter House (JC)
- ▶ United Methodist Committee on Relief
- ▶ United Way of East Central Iowa
- ▶ W.R.A.P.
- ▶ 6th Judicial District Department of Correctional Services

## Volunteer Income Tax Assistance

January 15th to April 15th, 2009

**V**olunteer Income Tax Assistance, or VITA, is a national program that provides free tax preparation for low to moderate income individuals and families.

Since the Cedar Rapids VITA program began in 2006, over \$2.75 million in federal refunds and \$1.2 million in EITC refunds have been returned to the community of Cedar Rapids. In 2009, volunteers contributed over 800 hours to file 977 returns, making the 2008 filing season the biggest the Cedar Rapids VITA program has seen to date.

For the upcoming 2009 filing season, the Cedar Rapids VITA program is looking to file 1,100

tax returns and provide new and additional financial education resources to the citizens of Cedar Rapids. Incidentally, the Earned Income Tax Credit threshold will be set at \$49,000, which could result in a large influx of tax clients for the 2009 season. In order to prepare, the program has been working diligently with committed volunteers to assist with tax preparation.

If you fall under the threshold, find out how you can take advantage of the program by visiting the Cedar Rapids VITA website, or by calling United Way at 211. Toll free, call 1-(866) 469-2211, and from your cell phone, dial (319) 739-4211.

## Super Tax Saturday

February 7th

**S**uper Tax Saturday may end the football season every year, but it has also kicked off the tax filing season in Cedar Rapids. Super Tax Saturday is held in February in conjunction with the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program.

The 2009 event was held in six locations. The 2010 event is at Coe College on February 12.

For more information on VITA in 2010, visit:

<http://volunteertax-assistance.com>



*Above:* VISTA Lynne Peterson folds laundry during the donation drive  
*Right:* A volunteer takes a break from gutting to smile for the camera.

## MLK Week of Service & Donation Drive

January 19th to 22nd, 2009

**D**r. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized the power of service to strengthen communities while reaching for a common goal. Following the devastating Flood of 2008, community has become more important than ever before, and Cedar Rapids will recover through the community spirit.

Acknowledging the devastation, suffering, and the enormous needs of the community, service providers joined together to form an MLK Task Force and expanded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Wide Day of Service to an entire week of volunteerism. Cedar Rapidians were invited to "make it a day on, not a day off" January 15 through January 22, 2009.

Initiated by Congress in 1994, Martin Luther King Day of Service is a nationwide effort to transform the federal holiday honoring Dr. King into a day of community service. Community service, grounded in his teachings, will help solve social problems.



# Alternative Spring Break { March 14th-20th, 2009

The annual St. Patrick's Day parade wasn't the only attraction drawing individuals to Cedar Rapids on March 17. Alternative Spring Breakers also gathered to help rebuild the Cedar Rapids community.

VISTA members assisted in the coordination of over 100 volunteers in various activities throughout the flood affected areas. Volunteers from The University of Iowa, Iowa State University, the University of Wisconsin-Stout, the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, and John Burrows High School out of St. Louis, Missouri.

Students and faculty with the UI mucked and gutted three homes along Second Avenue, while the Burrows students helped clean up Ushers Ferry Historic Village over a course of 3 days for their annual spring break service trip.

It was a day of optimism and cheer throughout the Cedar Rapids. "Everything is fixable," according to University of Iowa president Sally Mason.



*Clockwise, from top left:* Iowa Law school volunteers in front of the CRC, a volunteer shovels debris at a muck and gut site, two students install dry-wall.

## Visual Assessments { June 5th, 2009

Throughout June 2009, teams consisting of AmeriCorps\*VISTA members walked the flood impacted blocks to visually assess the condition of each residential structure.

They surveyed 5,093 homes and found that just over half of them had completed rebuilding at the time, while another 16 percent were in the rebuilding process. Mucking and gutting had been finished at nearly 10 percent of properties and in progress at 8 percent. Under 6 percent of homes had not been touched and 4 percent were demolished.

## BRIGHTEN { June 20th, July 18th, August 15h, 2009

BRIGHTEN is a grassroots initiative to address housing and zoning code violations without involving the city but with the help of the neighborhood to help their neighbors. The goal of this project is to restore pride and safety in the five core neighborhoods: Mound View, Northwest, Oakhill Jackson, Taylor and Wellington Heights.

Since the floods of June 2008, the non-flooded neighborhoods of Mound View and Wellington Heights have been the targets of the BRIGHTEN Project, as the remaining neighborhoods are in the process of rebuilding from the flood.

BRIGHTEN restores neighborhood pride regarding property upkeep, which in turn will deter possible criminal and anti-social behavior. This approach has proven to be effective as evidence by the "broken windows" research. The properties appeal to community stakeholders, and the concept of community by neighbors working together for a common goal is apparent.

The third Saturday of June, July and August were designated as BRIGHTEN community work days. Volunteers gathered on these dates to complete projects such as painting homes, minor repair work, litter pick-up, and mowing.

## Summer VISTA Program { June-August, 2009

Instead of taking it easy during the summer of 2009, 52 people rolled up their sleeves and helped in the cleanup of Cedar Rapids as VISTA summer associates, spending 8 to 10 weeks with the program.

The demographic of our summer VISTAs was diverse: some were students in their late teens and early 20s, taking a break from school. Others were age 25 and older, coming to gain experience in disaster recovery and non-profit work. Some liked it so much, they joined the VISTA program full-time upon the completion of their summer term.

Like the full-time VISTAs, the summer associates came to Iowa from far and wide. They lived

and/or attended school in the area, but also came from places such as Minnesota, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Mississippi, Indiana, Rhode Island, New York, Florida and Michigan.

Yet despite these differences, the common thread found among these people is that their main reason for coming to Cedar Rapids was to help a community still trying to pick up the pieces from the worst disaster it has endured to date.

VISTAs who completed their summer term received a living allowance plus a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of \$1,000 to pay for college or pay back student loans or an end of service stipend.

## Tenant Assistance { August 1st, 2009

Members of AmeriCorps VISTA Corridor Recovery joined forces with the Community Corrections Improvement Association and Iowa Legal Aid on July 31 and August 1 to canvass residences originally run by a landlord convicted of insurance fraud.

The Tenant Assistance Project set out to learn more about the people who make their home in these properties and provide them with information on the resources available to them, such as a series of forums designed to help tenants understand the process of foreclosure.

## Sandbagging in Palo { August 27th, 2009

*Right:* VISTAs Renae Hyronimus and Luisa Sondie ride with volunteers to place sandbags.



*Above:* VISTA Matthew Aswegan and others fill and tie sandbags. *Right:* VISTAs Mike Applegate, Tabby Smith, Shea Henry, and Lauren Yergeau take a break at the red cross truck.



Volunteers In Service To America, or VISTAs, have to be ready at a moment's notice to drop whatever it is they're doing and provide services in an emergency. That moment's notice came at about 2:30 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 27, when they received the call that the city of Palo was in need of sandbaggers. 43 VISTAs gathered at the Community Recovery Center, where we were told where to go and given ponchos and boots to wear. Carpools were then formed to go over to Palo.

At approximately 3 p.m., they arrived at the fire station, and immediately started helping to fill sandbags, tie them and load them onto trucks so they could be transported to areas where flooding became a real concern. Operations eventually moved to the former site of the Palo Community Center. More people came to help out at the community center site as they got off from work and school. Media crews were also there to document the volunteer effort. VISTAs spent about three hours in Palo.

## Service Salutes Harkin { September 3rd, 2009

Being Superman is not a requirement to lend a helping hand in your community. All the same, it's not bad to have him in your corner. Norwalk, Iowa native Brandon Routh, the latest actor to play the Man of Steel on the big screen, came to Cedar Rapids in the fall to help promote the cleanup efforts taking place in the Corridor.

Routh, the star of the 2005 film "Superman Returns," joined federal lawmakers Senator Tom Harkin and Representative Dave Loebsack, plus Major General Ron Dardis of the Iowa National Guard, AmeriCorps VISTAs and other members of the community in a call to service during a special kick-off ceremony at the Community Recovery Center on Thursday, September 3. The event raised awareness of what has been done and what still needs to be done in the wake of the Flood of 2008.

Senator Harkin was honored for his support of service efforts in Eastern

Iowa, while those people who serve their community were recognized as well. Harkin, Loebsack and Routh all spoke at the event, as did Jimmy Kelly and Steve Thomas, representatives from the VISTA flood recovery effort.

Immediately following the ceremony, Harkin, Loebsack and Routh went to a nearby house and helped AmeriCorps VISTA workers with one of their projects.



Above: VISTAs Mike McCabe, Josh Mackliet, Jordan Medalia, Alex Lyon and Mike Applegate pose with Superman actor Brandon Routh, third from right. Right: Sen. Harkin and Brandon Routh.

## 9/11 Day of Service { September 11th, 2009

On Friday, Sept. 11, the eighth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and Pentagon in Washington was marked by the United States of America with the first ever National Day of Service and Remembrance. The East Central Iowa Volunteer Center and AmeriCorps VISTAs proudly took part in this event, and were joined by members of the community in working on flood recovery projects in the Cedar Rapids area.

Those projects included gutting, cleaning and rebuilding homes affected by the flood

## Make a Difference Day { October 24th, 2009

On October 24, VISTAs participated in Make a Difference Day, an annual nationwide service project sponsored by USA Weekend magazine encouraging people to make a difference in their community. Projects taken on by the program included finishing drywall, painting, carpentry, raking and collecting donations.

One group spent the day tearing down tomato cages at a farm in northeast Johnson County that supplies various produce to approximately 360 families in the Corridor area.

"It's great to have them, otherwise I would have to do it myself," said Daniel Jutz, whose aunt runs the farm.



Above: VISTA Tina Michaud helps an organic vegetable farm in Solon, IA, prepare for winter weather.

## Sleep-Out for the Homeless } November 14th, 2009

Survival was the name of the game for VISTAs as they spent the overnight of Nov. 14-15, 2009, in downtown Cedar Rapids' Greene Square Park.

They were among the nearly 100 people who braved freezing temperatures and slept either in a box or on the grass as part of the 4th annual Linn County Sleep Out for the Homeless.

The event, which raised approximately \$8,600 for programs that help Linn

County's homeless, kicked off at First Presbyterian Church with remarks from Rep. Dave Loebsack, plus a proclamation sent by Gov. Chet Culver.

The event wasn't all serious. Musicians performed, Clifford the Big Red Dog made an appearance, and door prizes were handed out to participants. VISTAs took second place for best cardboard box design.

*Right:* VISTA Vikki Bailey saws cardboard for the Sleep-Out VISTA Van.



## Flooded Arts Exhibit } November 20th-21st, 2009

Photographs, sculptures and other artwork from members of the VISTA Corridor Recovery initiative and other local artists brought in \$1,300 for the Community Corrections Improvement Association, the sponsoring organization of VISTA Corridor Recovery.

The Flooded Arts Exhibition took place on the main floor of the Cherry Building in downtown Cedar Rapids on November 20 and 21, 2009.

Artists included VISTA volunteers Matthew Aswegan, Luisa Sondie and Tina Michaud, as well as local artist T.S. "Thor" Anderson.

According to Aswegan, approximately 100 people attended the exhibition, which focused on photos from inside flooded homes, where many artifacts remained. Organizers say the photos are meant to show the human side of the 2008 flood.

Items that were on display in the gallery were also sold via silent auction. In addition, the items were made available for direct purchase during and after the Flooded Arts Exhibition.



*Left:* VISTA Luisa Sondie stands beside one of her photographs in the Flooded Arts Exhibit.

## Harvest of Hope } November 27th-28th, 2009

The Cedar Rapids community has hope for the holidays, thanks to a group of volunteers who spent part of their Thanksgiving weekend rebuilding in the city's flooded areas.

On Friday, Nov. 27 and Saturday, Nov. 28, 2009, high school and college students, the National Civilian Community Corps, and other volunteers joined in mucking and gutting homes, plus mudding drywall.

Volunteers were served an alternative Thanksgiving lunch Saturday afternoon in the St. Wencslaus Gym Building



*Left:* VISTA Sarita Manigat guts a flooded home. *Above:* VISTA Mike McCabe sweeps the floor of a house under construction in the Rompot neighborhood.



# VISTA CORRIDOR RECOVERY

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