Elisa: The Fresno Safe and Proud Neighborhoods AmeriCorps program is a grassroots, all hazards approach to safety and emergency preparedness. Our members do outreach and other activities related to public safety, crime prevention, disaster preparedness and volunteerism.

Martha: I’m a BRIDGES counselor, and I work with young adults with disabilities in the high schools. We provide services so they can become independent. They are in the transition phase of their lives so they often want to get a job or volunteer. Through Exceptional Parents Unlimited, we facilitate a teen group. They meet every month and talk about what they need to become independent.

Your collaboration picked a very specific activity for which to recruit volunteers—doing safety and preparedness presentations alongside the AmeriCorps members. Why did you pick this opportunity?

Martha: It was a good way to break the ice and get students familiar with AmeriCorps. Our youth got to work one-on-one with a member and actually experience what the member was doing on a daily basis as they went out and gave their presentations.

Elisa, was this different than the typical way you use volunteers?

Elisa: Yes, because normally we go out and get volunteers for the National Days of Service. Also, if the members have events that are specifically at their site, they recruit volunteers for those events. So it was a nice way, like Martha said, for the members to expose the CIL kids to what they do out there in the world, on a daily basis.

You recruited 10 youth with disabilities to volunteer alongside the Fresno Safe and Proud AmeriCorps members. Where did you find these volunteers?

Martha: Most of the volunteers came through the Exceptional Parents Unlimited teen group. We also promoted the opportunity at high schools in Fresno and in the rural areas.

What do you think appealed to the students who decided to volunteer? Why do you think they decided to try it out?

Martha: It was different. They felt important because they were part of something. One of the questions I’ve been asked, when we’ve spoken about this project is, “did you give them incentives to volunteer?” We never offered any incentives. That was because we had already built those relationships with them, so anytime we said, “Hey, we’re going to go do this,” they were willing to come.

How, as a team, did you prepare the Fresno Safe and Proud AmeriCorps members to work with the youth volunteers?

Martha: We had a basic training for all the members on...
disability etiquette, people-first language, having respect for everyone, asking first instead of assuming. We had a discussion about different types of disabilities.

Then we did an activity where the members had to experience a disability while completing certain tasks. For instance some had to wear earplugs, some wore fuzzy glasses, and some had to switch their shoes backwards on the wrong foot. Then they all had to do an ice-breaking activity where they had to ask each other questions.

Afterward, they had to describe some of the things that would have made it helpful for them to fully participate in the activity. A lot of the students said it would have been easier if people would have talked louder or if they could have gotten a particular paper in larger print. We did a lot of activities where the members realized the little things it takes to make it easier for people that have disabilities to be included in activities.

Elisa, do you think the AmeriCorps members were nervous about working with volunteers with disabilities? And presenting to audiences with disabilities?

Elisa: They were excited because it was a chance for them to get out there and continue making a difference. They were nervous because they weren’t sure how they were going deal with the disabilities. That’s where the training came in handy, because it gave them a chance to experience, “Okay, this is what I need to be sensitive to.” There was some initial fearfulness working with the volunteers because they thought, “Are they going to like me? Are they going to listen to me?” We decided it would be best have the volunteers and members meet in a casual no pressure type of situation so they could get used to each other. We met them at Exceptional Parents Unlimited and the volunteers and members sat and talked, as a group. Each member was then introduced to his/her volunteer. Then the members went off to the side and talked to their volunteers a little bit, not necessarily about what they were going to be doing, but just to find out their interests. Then once they felt a bit more comfortable, the member introduced how they would be working together.

Martha, you’ve said that parents of the youth volunteers had both aspirations for and concerns about their children’s involvement. Can you say more?

Martha: Yes. A lot of the parents were excited for their kids to be part of something in the community that didn’t have anything to do with disabilities. But they also had mixed feelings and some fears, “How will my child become a member? What does AmeriCorps do?” They had a lot of questions about how their child was going to be fully included in being a part of this organization, AmeriCorps.

So we had a meeting with the parents. They understood that we had received a grant from the Tarjan Center, and that the students were going to volunteer and then eventually once they had experience and they were ready to fill out the application, they would be encouraged to apply. They came to understand that there was a whole infrastructure with guidelines and applications.

What were some of the safety topics the members/volunteers presented on? How did they share responsibilities and work together?

Elisa: Some of the topics were fire safety, Red Cross emergency preparedness, and graffiti.

Martha: I want to comment on one of the presentations they did on fire safety because I thought the members and volunteer worked very well together. The member had a poster listing the things to do in case of a fire, and then the volunteer would act out some of the things the member was explaining. For example, when you’re home, during a fire, you need to be low to the ground. The volunteer role-played that scenario by crawling low on the ground.

This one little project fulfilled so many different parts of both of your missions. For example, the member/volunteer pairs presented to audiences that included a lot of individuals with disabilities. Martha did Fresno CIL identify the places where the teams presented?

Martha: Yes, they presented to a lot of teen and young adult groups. We wanted young adults with disabilities to see other young adult with disabilities participating in these types of presentations, alongside AmeriCorps members. We hoped the audiences would see our youth as leaders and maybe decide to volunteer as well.

In another instance of how you achieved multiple outcomes with one action, these presentations provided education and served as a recruitment tool,
as the members and volunteers, after providing safety information, informed audiences about how to join AmeriCorps.

Elisa: Yes. They explained about Safe and Proud Neighborhoods, handed out brochures and applications and stuck around to answer any questions. As a result, some of those audience members did fill out applications and they’re currently being processed.

Fantastic. The other really exciting element of this project is that you had a culminating experience where the AmeriCorps members and the volunteers gave a presentation about the project at the Western Regional Conference on Disability.

Martha: One of the CIL youth presented on the things she learned by volunteering. The AmeriCorps member explained about AmeriCorps and about the collaboration AmeriCorps had with the CIL youth. It was a big audience, so just going up and presenting was a great accomplishment, for the CIL student, as it showed how much confidence she had developed.

What kind of growth did you see in either the volunteers or members who participated in the service project?

Elisa: It was a good experience for the members because it made them more sensitive when they prepare their safety presentations. It made them think about how they could address audience members with special needs and it opened up their eyes to the resources that are available through CIL. CIL has been fantastic and they’ve let us know, from the beginning, that we can get in touch with them if the members need materials modified.

Martha: At the beginning, a lot of the volunteers were hesitant because they heard they might be speaking in public. In fact, they had a hard time speaking with some of their own peers. I saw them become more confident when speaking in front of a crowd.

Elisa, you took big steps in regards to inclusion because you partnered with some disability organizations, including the Fresno CIL to place AmeriCorps members in those organizations. Can you say more about what it took to make that happen?

Elisa: It was easy to bring on the Center for Independent Living as a host site. We had the ability to take on another partnership and they had expressed interest. It was a natural fit in terms of emergency preparedness since they would be one of the main players if we had a disaster either here in Fresno or an influx coming in from somewhere else. The CIL would be the ones charged with dealing with persons with disabilities. We recognized the neat partnership we had formed through this mini-project and wanted to continue that, particularly because it gave us the chance to reach a population that we were aiming to reach.

What do you think is most important lesson you’ve learned from your experience this year?

Elisa: We are lucky that we have the Center for Independent Living in Fresno. The project opened our eyes to the resources that are available to us.

Martha: I’ve learned that you have to really reach out and communicate with organizations in order to build the types of collaboration that bring the BRIDGES youth closer to being part of the community.

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This inclusive service project was supported by California Volunteers, California’s State Commission on Service. The Tarjan Center Service Inclusion Project works to increase the number of people with disabilities taking their places as community volunteers. For more information on the Service Inclusion Project or to share your own success story, call 310-825-0067 or send an email to kleventhal@mednet.ucla.edu.