

NEW YORK STATE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF STORM RECOVERY: ELEVATING RESILIENCE WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



The New York State Governor's Office of Storm Recovery implements the Resilience AmeriCorps program at the state level. Serving within the Office, the AmeriCorps members engage citizens and community partners to build and sustain resilience in vulnerable neighborhoods throughout New York.

“So much of our work is nose to the grindstone planning, and this program has allowed us to look up and connect nationally, share what we’ve done, what we’ve learned, and work with other communities that are thinking proactively about resilience work.”

CHELSEA MULLER
GOSR SENIOR PROGRAM MANAGER

In recent years, several severe storms have left citizens in New York State reeling, including Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee in 2011, and Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Homes, infrastructure, and businesses struggled to recover from the damage wrought by these shocks.

In June of 2013, recognizing this new reality, Governor Andrew Cuomo developed the Governor's Office of Storm Recovery (GOSR) to centralize recovery and rebuilding efforts across the state. GOSR assists New Yorkers with housing recovery, small business recovery, infrastructure improvements, and community-wide resilience planning through the innovative NY Rising Community Reconstruction (NYRCR) Program.

GOSR PROGRAMS GUIDED BY RESIDENT INPUT

According to Jamie Rubin, former Executive Director of GOSR and current New York State Director of Operations, the office is focused “on the notion that community engagement is the critical piece of resilience.” Resident engagement helps guide programmatic decision-making at GOSR.

“We want citizens to tell us what they feel is the greatest need,” said Chelsea Muller, Senior Program Manager at GOSR. “Using the NYRCR Program, we promoted a holistic understanding of resilience, and asked communities to inform us.”

Now that GOSR is in the implementation phase of the NYRCR Program, it was looking for new ways to connect to communities. GOSR staff were excited to hear about the Resilience AmeriCorps model, which is built on strong community relationships and citizen engagement. “The program aligned with the work we were already investing in, and what we wanted to elevate,” Muller said.

Cities of Service launched the inaugural class of Resilience AmeriCorps members at the municipal government level in 2015. In the Cities of Service model, Resilience AmeriCorps members are embedded in city halls to help communities prepare for acute and ongoing challenges.

GOSR wanted to implement the Resilience AmeriCorps program at the state level. In 2016, two Resilience AmeriCorps members, Sara Chin and Leigh Scudder, were placed at GOSR for their year of service.



Cities of Service's work is made possible with generous funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies. Resilience AmeriCorps is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and Walmart Foundation.



CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PRIORITIZED IN NY STATE RESILIENCE PLANNING

Through the NYRCR Program, GOSR connected neighborhood organizations across the state with professional planning firms, grant opportunities, and government resources to develop interactive, neighborhood-specific recovery and resilience plans. The plans, based on both expert advice and extensive community input, include immediate recovery measures as well as opportunities to rebuild neighborhoods to be more resilient in the future. The plans are especially empowering in low-income communities, which are disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and frequently have limited access to recovery resources.

While the plans are vital resources for communities in need, Muller believes that the process itself has had benefits. The AmeriCorps members had the opportunity to participate in the planning and implementation processes and to “devote bandwidth to capturing the great byproducts that come out of engagement like this,” said Muller. The AmeriCorps members are also working to quantify and track the benefits and best practices of community resilience education.

The AmeriCorps members also had the opportunity to explore their individual interests while embedded at GOSR. One AmeriCorps member was interested in green infrastructure, and was able to work with experts on stormwater management and retrofitting projects. The other AmeriCorps member worked with GOSR’s nonprofit partners that assist with statewide project implementation, “capturing what’s working, what isn’t

working, and supporting them in their day-to-day activities,” according to Muller. Chin and Scudder have also coordinated summits for citizens and statewide partners to come together for knowledge sharing.

AMERICORPS MEMBERS PROVIDE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON RESILIENCE WORK

AmeriCorps members in GOSR’s pilot program have connected with Resilience AmeriCorps members across the nation to share best practices and lessons learned. “We get to integrate our members with the different cohorts, and work collaboratively,” said Muller. “So much of our work is nose to the grindstone planning, and this program has allowed us to look up and connect nationally, share what we’ve done, what we’ve learned, and work with other communities that are thinking proactively about resilience work.”

After the success of the first year of the Resilience AmeriCorps pilot program at GOSR, the office is planning to embed three new AmeriCorps members to assist with its continued recovery work. One of the new members will focus on strengthening the relationships between GOSR and nonprofit partners. Another will focus on implementation analysis, and “analyze how we tell the story of

our resilience work,” according to Muller. The final Resilience AmeriCorps member will work on affordable housing. “Some public housing in the state is receiving resilience upgrades. We’re looking to fold a Resilience AmeriCorps member into that project,” said Muller. “We want to ensure that there is significant resident engagement included in the process.”

The Resilience AmeriCorps model has opened the door for new opportunities and enthusiasm at GOSR. The AmeriCorps members have allowed the office to devote time to new projects, track successes in existing projects, and to enhance the citizen engagement component of all the work done at GOSR. “The AmeriCorps members have genuine interest in the mission-driven work, and fuse enthusiasm into the projects they work on,” said Muller. “We’ve been able to have a much larger impact thanks to the unique perspective they provide.”

Opposite page: Rockaway Institute for Sustainable Environment (RISE) in Far Rockaway, New York, part of the NY Rising Community Center network.

This page: (from top left) Resilience AmeriCorps member Leigh Scudder, volunteering on a Superstorm Sandy home repair project.; Resilience AmeriCorps member, Leigh Scudder, convening a NY Rising Community Center Service Provider Summit.

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