

The Massachusetts Service Alliance (MSA) is pleased to nominate AmeriCorps Legal Advocates of Massachusetts (ALA-Massachusetts) for the 2016 Harkin Award for Excellence in AmeriCorps Programming and Service for “most compelling member experience in either building an ethic of civic responsibility or having positive change in their life.” ALA-Massachusetts members provide civil legal assistance to low-income individuals, families, elders, children and people with disabilities. Over the last decade, MSA has seen firsthand the tremendous positive difference ALA-Massachusetts makes, both in the lives of vulnerable individuals as well as the lives of AmeriCorps members who serve with the program.

The ALA-Massachusetts program model is unique. AmeriCorps members are placed with legal aid organizations across the state that struggle to meet demand for services. As a result, ALA-Massachusetts touches the lives of thousands of people who would otherwise go without any legal assistance. The AmeriCorps members provide support to individuals at the most difficult moments in their lives. By informing them of their legal rights and helping to protect their rights, ALA-Massachusetts members help clients maintain stable housing and avoid homelessness, handle domestic violence situations, resolve immigration problems, and address discrimination in a variety of contexts.

As part of their service, ALA-Massachusetts members also recruit volunteers. From 2005-2014, members recruited a total of 3,825 volunteers who provided more than 35,000 hours of volunteer legal assistance and provided services and educational programs for 1,089 veterans. The interventions that these AmeriCorps members provide—to more than 3,000 people over the course of a service-year—demonstrably improve lives and our communities in countless meaningful ways. The service has a similarly profound impact on the career trajectories of members.

The ALA-Massachusetts program truly distinguishes itself as a breeding-ground for future public servants and public interest attorneys. AmeriCorps Legal Advocates are usually recent college and law school graduates; exposing these young professionals to the importance of legal assistance for indigent clients leads many members to serve multiple years and continue their careers in the field; an impressive number of ALA-Massachusetts alumni go on to careers in public interest law. For those who go onto different fields, they describe an “unparalleled” and “life-changing” experience that will inform their future work. There is a strong ALA-Massachusetts alumni network, and a growing number of ALA-Massachusetts alumni are now staff at host-site partners, and many of them supervise and support current AmeriCorps members.

Lastly, in their most recent final evaluation, one member described their experience this way: “As I complete my second year of service as an AmeriCorps advocate, I look back on the invaluable experience I gained as a legal services attorney. I leave the program with the commitment and burden of continuing the fight against poverty through legal advocacy.” This comment is representative of many ALA-Massachusetts AmeriCorps members’ transformative experiences. The program-- and its focus on protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, including the working poor, immigrants, people with disabilities, and veterans-- is consistent with Senator Harkin’s legacy and values and would be a worthy recipient of this great honor.