

## 2018 Excellence in AmeriCorps Awards Nomination – Chelsea Bray

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*Nominating AmeriCorps VISTA Member Chelsea Bray for Most Compelling Member Experience*

*Nominated by Maureen Allen, director of community services for the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, mallen@ohiofoodbanks.org*

Chelsea Bray's story is perhaps best told in her own words, which she graciously shared with the other AmeriCorps VISTA members serving through the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. It starts about a year before her AmeriCorps VISTA service began:

"A year ago, my life looked so much different. I was living in hotels with dresser drawers as my pantry and a single burner hot plate, my kitchen. I was sleeping in the spare room of a stranger's house on an air mattress next to a stack of spare tires, with my clothes in a suitcase and a backpack full of textbooks and a ten-year-old laptop. I was living a life I had never imagined for myself – I was the face of poverty."

Chelsea describes struggling not only with the hardship of poverty, but also with persistent, chronic depression. Despite her enormous personal challenges, Chelsea threw herself into pursuing her college degree, even earning a 4.0 GPA the semester before she encountered issues with her financial aid. In June 2017, she began an AmeriCorps VISTA position with the Sylvania Area Family Services, focused on recruiting volunteers, improving processes for soliciting donors and tracking services provided to clients, and coordinating everything from produce procurement to community garden volunteers to marketing her site's programs to a wider audience.

She says, "When I pursued and accepted this VISTA position, I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing, but it was a new beginning with a promise of doing work I love, and some financial stability. AmeriCorps gave me hope and opportunity in a dark time."

As Chelsea puts it, if you had asked her a year ago if she would have her own bed, let alone a job or a college degree, she would have answered no. But now, at the end of her AmeriCorps VISTA term, she is simultaneously completing her final course at Owens Community College. She will be continuing her education by pursuing environmental studies at the University of Toledo in the fall. And perhaps most thrilling, her host site, Sylvania Area Family Services, has hired her as a staff member upon completion of her term to do the work she loves for a living.

As she reflects on her year of service and how it has transformed her, Chelsea says, "It may happen slowly, but things do get better, and the work we do as VISTAs helps make that happen for so many living the realities of poverty. I look forward to continuing to serve this community that I have grown to love post-VISTA."

We look forward to the bright future ahead for Chelsea, and proudly nominate her for *Most Compelling Member Experience*.