This is to nominate James Taylor, an alum of Public Allies Chicago, for the category of an AmeriCorps member with a disability who significantly contributed to disability inclusion efforts for national service programs.

In the Fall of 2012 the Peace Corner Youth Center contacted Public Allies Chicago to ask if the AmeriCorps program would host an intern who had limited professional work experience, but boundless enthusiasm. James Marvin Taylor came to Public Allies Chicago’s office full of nervous energy and a determined, persistent approach to everything he worked on. He shared that he was homeless and had been staying at Breakthrough Urban Ministries’ shelter.

James said that he had attempted to enlist in the Army but during his physical he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He further shared that he was bi-polar, had no family who lived nearby and he needed new eyeglasses. On top of all this, James spoke very quickly with a thick Mississippi accent--he didn’t always enunciate as he talked with energy and enthusiasm. For those meeting James for the first time he could be difficult to understand so he was often ignored and overlooked.

James quickly and effectively handled projects as Public Allies’ intern. With each project he went above and beyond expectation. As an intern he participated in many of the activities and discussions held for Public Allies Chicago’s AmeriCorps members and he soon started to build friendships. Over the course of his time as an unpaid intern his confidence grew and he saw that he possessed many of the same qualities and skills as the young leaders participating in Public Allies. He decided to apply to the AmeriCorps program.

Public Allies Chicago’s partners at Chicago Public Schools Office of Diverse Learners were committed to hosting an AmeriCorps Ally who had similar life experiences to the youth they served and when they met James and learned that he had MS they enthusiastically agreed to host him.

James’ challenges did not dissolve overnight just because he received a living stipend and a newfound support structure. It took months for James to find transitional housing because of credit and furniture obstacles. James built a network of supporters though his willingness to bring his genuine self into each and every interaction.

Public Allies Chicago worked with James on his writing skills, they helped him practice enunciating his words and slowing down his speech. With each step James also brought a great level of proficiency and expertise to his work at Chicago Public Schools. His role was to help his department refine their system for tracking special needs students from year to year and ensure students are being provided the proper accommodations.

James said when he was a student with special needs he was allowed to fall through the cracks and he wanted to ensure that no child would be allowed to do the same on his watch. James meticulously combed through previous year’s records, tracked down students who disappeared from year to year and according to his supervisor he revolutionized how CPS tracked their diverse learners.

At the term’s end James’ supervisor said that she had gotten funding to hire James as a full-time employee at CPS. The impressive thing about James is that he never gives up; he embraces adversity and humbles himself so that he could better serve others. James worked at Chicago Public Schools Central Office for a little over two years but due to recent budget problems he was laid off. James’ passion and commitment to serve others are undeniable and we at Public Allies Chicago are confident that he will once again overcome the odds and find another organization who knows how to value someone with all of the gifts and passions he possesses.