

**APPLICANT FEEDBACK - Program Design**

2011 AmeriCorps State and National Grant Competition

<b>Legal Applicant:</b> <b>Board of Trustees of Western Illinois University,</b> <b>Peace Corps/AmeriCorps Project</b>	<b>Application ID:</b> <b>11AC124548</b>
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**Below are the comments from each External Peer Reviewer that read and evaluated the application. While Reviewers did engage in discussion about their evaluations, consensus was not required as part of their review. Therefore, there may be differing views in their feedback on the quality of the proposal.**

**COMMENTS:** The need of rural communities is described in a compelling and complete way. The local and community specific need is not defined with enough detail to be compelling. The criteria for community selection were not included. Returning Peace Corps volunteers will be ideal candidates for the project and will receive extensive relevant training and support for the project. Excellent member development opportunities are offered. The site supervision is strong and well documented before member placement. The returning Peace Corps volunteers would be well supported in their commitment to ongoing service. The training and advanced degree offered will be strong and valuable assets for completing members. A strong sustainable model for effecting change was presented. The members structured as 1/2 time and then full time ensures appropriate skills to meet the project needs. The applicant provided a well-designed project that links well prepared members to meet specific community need.

**COMMENTS:** The applicant has clearly described the issues and concerns of this area and the severity of the problem as evidenced by the statistics provided by such sources as Illinois Department of Employment Security's Local Area Unemployment Statistics, US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, US Bureau of the Census, Population Estimates Program, etc. These statistics also validate the severity of the problem of the target community. The applicant states plans to use returning Peace Corp volunteers to serve as AmeriCorps members, and clearly describes the methods used to recruit these volunteers. These members will participate in a two year graduate program at WIU, as well as participate in specialized training in community and economic development. This demonstrates the member recruitment plans, as well as the training of the members. The service plan, which includes clearly defined goals, plans, and guidelines, will be used for supervision and monitoring. Continued engagement in active civic participation is likely and has been evidenced by the skills acquired through experiences gained via training in Rural Housing and Housing Trends, Networking Skills, Rural Transportation Needs and Resources, etc. These trainings set a strong basis that is likely to create a service and civic responsibility in the program members. The AmeriCorps members are being used in this program so they have the opportunity to use their skills and commitment to national service, for the betterment of the program and communities. The

members will provide and implement skill development trainings to members of various communities, and they will recruit and manage local volunteers to be able to meet the needs of local communities. The number of AmeriCorps members being requested, has been identified as 10 as well as the terms of service needed has been identified as two years. The AmeriCorps members are suited to deliver the programs outcomes, as they are careful to develop dependency on their skills, and they devote a lot of time to ensure volunteers can continue to carry all projects forward. The anticipated outcomes have been identified as residents of these communities who participate in trainings will report an increase in skill development, and will prepare them for their community development and service assignments. Another outcome anticipated and identified is the 60 community projects such as downtown revitalization, health education, park and recreation development, environmental conservation, business retention and expansion, that are expected to take place.

**COMMENTS:** The applicant has designed a supervision structure that respects and relies on the maturity and professionalism of experienced, graduate-level returned Peace Corps volunteers. The opportunity to provide leadership and support on locally-driven community development activities is likely to be highly motivating and gratifying for members committed to service. The applicant supports the case for using AmeriCorps volunteers to solve the identified problem of limited community development resources in rural Illinois by citing the existing commitment to service demonstrated by returned Peace Corps volunteers and the importance of the experience and skills they are bringing back to the United States. In the discussion of sustainability, the applicant goes a step further in demonstrating not just sustainability of the program, but sustainability of the program impact on target communities by describing strategies to build community capacity and transfer of member skills to community volunteers. However, the applicant does not identify or provide a description of the communities to be targeted or the types of organizations or programs that members will be working with. There is no discussion of how target communities were involved in planning the Peace Corps Fellows Program.

**COMMENTS:** The applicant presents a comprehensive and clearly outlined project design that addresses each of the criteria in the NOFO. A well-delineated case is made for targeting the geographic communities identified in the proposal, with an understanding of rural vs. metro needs clearly stated. A strong connection with the academic partner, Western Illinois University, and the opportunity for continued engagement for the members through the graduate program is directly aligned with the AmeriCorps philosophy of a lifetime of civic participation and community service. The member's roles and responsibilities were outlined in a clear and concise manner, and several community linked service projects were identified as part of the project design. A vast array of training opportunities was also presented to build capacity for members over the course of their engagement with the grant. The community-led service (work) plan is directly linked to the measurable impact on community and the identified problem, and builds capacity for community to continue their development journey long after the AmeriCorps member has left. A large network of community partners were identified and engaged. The applicant failed to include statistics later than 2007 for review to determine if the appropriate outcome measures proposed for this grant are linked to previous data and outcomes. The strategy given proves to seek continuous improvement.

**COMMENTS:** This program provides an excellent opportunity for Peace Corp workers returning from service abroad to enter a graduate degree program that uses and enhances their experiences. By earning a Master's degree, the members use their skills and interests to make the transition to a career in community development and service. The required commitment from the local communities seems to enhance the success of the program. The process of granting a Master's degree is a very powerful way to evaluate the performance and success of the members and their projects. The applicant does not mention a number or percentage of members who complete their Master's degree. For this reason, it is hard to evaluate the overall success of the program.