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## **Removing Blight, One Block at a Time.**

A nonprofit founded by mayors is helping seven cities finance and organize community service projects to revitalize low-income urban neighborhoods.

Mayors in seven cities have won a competition to receive a full-time AmeriCorps VISTA member, a \$30,000 grant and on-going technical assistance for three years of neighborhood revitalization work.

Cities of Service, a national nonprofit organization, awarded the grants as part of its ongoing "Love Your Block" program, which focuses on urban neighborhoods and uses volunteers from the community to try to improve the local quality of life. Cities involved in the program organize volunteers to pick up litter, plant trees, clean vacant lots, create community gardens and remove graffiti.

Cities of Service is supporting a specific method of government-organized community service for eliminating neighborhood blight, which it explains in an online how-to guide. Part of the initial \$30,000 will go toward planning. Cities may raise additional money from local foundations and then offer small grants to volunteers with proposals to improve a single block. Cities also look for ways to supplement the volunteer efforts by training a host of municipal services on the area to fix signs, repair potholes and replace damaged trash bins.

The winning cities announced Feb. 11 were Birmingham, Ala.; Boston; Lansing, Mich.; Las Vegas, Phoenix, Richmond, Calif., and Seattle. The awardees all plan to focus on improving low-income neighborhoods, though they outlined slightly different strategies. Volunteers in Las Vegas will work near low-performing schools; in Richmond, Calif., they'll target only areas surrounding public housing.

To receive the grant, cities had to demonstrate that their mayor would spend time and attention on the project, said Myung Lee, the executive director of Cities of Service. "We're not here to be just a funding source and then just walk away," she said. "We are looking for partners."

The grants are an extension of work that began in New York City under former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. His administration created an office in 2009 (NYC Service) that organized volunteers to address social problems. The office focused on data collection and measured the impact of volunteerism in several issue areas, such as health, education and the environment. Bloomberg's initiative was itself inspired by a 2009 federal law aimed at expanding community service.

The year after NYC Service launched, the Rockefeller Foundation awarded \$100,000 grants to 10 cities for a paid staff position in the mayor's office to create and oversee their own version of NYC Service.\* Bloomberg Philanthropies has since offered additional grants to expand the program and in January 2014, it helped fund the creation of an independent nonprofit, which is overseen by Lee, a former deputy commissioner of children's services in New York City.

By now, the service model has a record of tangible results in participating cities. In New York City, volunteers have coated at least 618 rooftops with a reflective surface that reduces a building's

heating costs. In Flint, Mich., volunteers scrubbed at least 17,000 square feet of graffiti. Cumulatively, Cities of Service have recorded the removal of at least 1.9 million pounds of litter and the creation of at least 520 community gardens or other types of green space.

The biggest benefit from the latest round of grants isn't the money; it's access to technical expertise. Both the AmeriCorps employee and the supervisor who runs the service programs have to participate in monthly phone check-ins and webinars with Cities of Service. Staff from Cities of Service also conduct site visits to all their grantees.

Each city will report back on the immediate accomplishments of service projects, such as the number of volunteers who participated or pounds of litter collected. But Lee said the long-term goal is that as residents invest their time and energy in these blocks, the city will see measurable impact on crime and people's perception of safety. The newest round of grants encourage cities to track those deeper indicators that might change as the aesthetics of the neighborhood improve.

"We're trying to change how the world deals with volunteers," she said. "Don't think about how many volunteers are coming out. Think about what the volunteers are trying to address."

\*CORRECTION: A previous version of the story said the first Cities of Service grants were awarded in 2009. They were announced in 2009 and awarded in 2010.

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