



home > city hall > press releases

AmeriCorps Lends a Healthy Hand



City staff and AmeriCorps workers pose for a photo at the Perris Green City Farm Program. Back row: Assistant Director of Administrative Services Isabel Carlos, Program Assistant Arsenio Ramirez, AmeriCorps staffers Jasper Davis, Kimberly Titus, Jamie Zhan Del Castillo, Madison Moore, Roger Van Dyke, Emma Post and Program Assistants Armando Panchi and Crystal Lopez. Front row: AmeriCorps staff members Mackenzie Morse, Jonny Koren, Paris Brady, Ashley McClinton and Katelyn McCoy.

A group of 11 young adults wrapped up two weeks of civic service in Perris, where they cleaned and maintained the City's community garden, assisted at nutrition-education and exercise programs at area schools and learned valuable lessons about healthy eating and exercise.

The team from AmeriCorps, who range from 18 to 24 years of age and call nine states home, said they were impressed with the City's commitment to improving the health of residents through education and a "Perris Green City Farm Program" on the City Hall Campus.

The green city program employs a variety of innovative growing techniques to produce lettuce, tomatoes, corn, onions, zucchini, cauliflower, broccoli, celery, citrus, strawberries and herbs.

City staff hosted a lunch for the AmeriCorps team Thursday, Feb. 16, and said they appreciated the hard work and enthusiasm the group displayed while working in Perris.

"They got an up-close look at our community-garden project and how that program is helping residents of our community," said Crystal Lopez, a City program assistant working on the garden project.

AmeriCorps team members echoed the sentiment.

Jasper Davis, 22, the leader of the AmeriCorps team, praised the City for its "very forward-focused vision" and commitment to community gardens.

"Starting a community garden means the City of Perris is thinking about how it can improve the lives of generations in the future," said Davis, a University of Tampa graduate. "It's a long-term vision that will make a big difference."

Davis said the AmeriCorps crew "feels greatly privileged" to contribute to Perris' commitment to healthy eating and active living.

Madison Moore, 19, of Pueblo, Colo., said the AmeriCorps team was given "an amazing welcome by the City of Perris." She also praised the community garden at City Hall as a "really great educational tool" for Perris residents.

"This garden matters to the community," she said. "It's a really good source of healthy food."

Perris officials are working to establish 30 community gardens within the City by partnering with schools, faith-based and neighborhood groups. Produce from the gardens would provide healthy eating options for many Perris residents who suffer from diabetes, high-blood pressure and high-cholesterol. The program's ultimate goal is to make every Perris resident travel no more than a mile to access locally produced fruits and vegetables.

In addition to their work in the City garden, the 11 AmeriCorps members spent time at Perris elementary schools teaching nutrition and exercise classes. They also worked at an after-school program in Hemet, which includes a community garden. While in Southern California, they received a stipend and housing allowance.



AmeriCorps worker Mackenzie Morse leads youngsters at May Ranch Elementary School through an exercise routine to demonstrate the importance of exercise to a healthy lifestyle.

Support from elected reps

Mayor Michael Vargas and other elected officials said they appreciate the positive comments from the AmeriCorps visitors and remain committed to the community-garden.

"We practice what we preach," Vargas said. "I fully support what we are doing, especially our commitment to reach out to assist our schools in educating their students about the benefits of eating healthy. Our community garden is a great way of getting our residents involved in their community. It's a great tool to teach our youngsters about the benefits of eating healthy."

Mayor Pro Tem David Starr Rabb said he is pleased that the AmeriCorps team provided their "time, efforts and energy to make Perris a better place." He said he hopes team members take the lessons and gardening techniques learned in Perris when they return home in the coming months.

"It would be great to take what they've learned here and spread that knowledge to their home towns across the country," Rabb said.

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke said members of her family have struggled with obesity and diabetes. So eating healthy is personal to her and her loved ones.

She said that the City's outreach to youngsters, senior citizens, experienced gardeners and new green thumbs makes for an all-encompassing program that ultimately will improve the lives of many residents.

"Our community garden is a regional gem," Burke said. "It gives me great pleasure to hear our visitors from AmeriCorps say such positive things about our garden. I appreciate young folks helping us make our City a healthier place for current and future generations of Perris residents."

City Councilman Malcolm Corona met with Darleana McHenry, who heads St. Carries Center Academy, which includes an after-school community garden that uses the AmeriCorps workers. McHenry wrote the application seeking AmeriCorps assistance with her program. After explaining Perris' commitment to bringing community gardens throughout Perris, Corona said it was natural to partner with McHenry and bring the group to the City.

"It's was a great way to collaborate," Corona said. "We're showing off our City and they are providing their labor, energy and enthusiasm."

Corona said the City's community-garden concept "is not only about cultivating food but also cultivating a sense of community."

City Councilwoman Rita Rogers said young people like those from AmeriCorps have the skill and spirit to bring about needed lifestyle changes in themselves and others.

"It's a wonderful blessing to have dedicated young people who want to improve cities and communities working here in the City of Perris," she said. "I commend these young people for their willingness to be change agents. Their presence and support shows we are getting our message out."



AmeriCorps worker Madison Moore, 19, of Colorado, helps herself to a healthy snack while working on the Perris community garden during a recent two-week stint with the City of Perris. The AmeriCorps team harvested crops and provided maintenance from the garden, known officially as the Perris Green City Farm Program.

On the job

The AmeriCorps team in Perris was divided into two units. One worked cleaning and maintaining the vertical growing towers and beds on the community garden. The other traveled to an elementary school campus to spread the word about the importance of exercise and healthy eating habits, including trading soda pop for water flavored with fruits like oranges and strawberries.

Emma Post, 23, a West Virginia native, liked what she saw.

The City Hall Campus garden employs vertical towers employing a variety of growing methods, including aquaponic, hydroponic and aeroponic systems along with traditional garden beds. Post and others cleaned the towers and harvested spinach and Swiss chard under the supervision of Perris city employees.

"These growing towers are awesome," she said. "Perris is an amazing place. The City is so helpful, so organized and has given us a lot of support. We've only been here a few days, and we love it already."

Jonny Koren, 18, of Minnesota, said the growing towers "make gardening cool."

"A lot of people think gardening is about getting dirty while pushing seeds into the ground," Koren said. "But this makes gardening fun."

At May Ranch elementary school, Perris nutrition specialists spent the morning explaining the benefits of drinking water flavored with fruits over soda pop and other sugary drinks. AmeriCorps representatives led groups of students in hula-hooping.

Paris Brady, 18, from Texas, said educating children about the value of exercise and nutritious diets yields benefits that last a lifetime.

"It's really important to get youth involved in the nutrition choices they make," Brady said. "Kids like to learn and they like to be active. Providing those outlets is important."

The AmeriCorps contingent who worked in Perris includes Jasper Davis, 22, Georgia; Paris Brady, 18, Texas; Jonathan Koren, 18, Minnesota; Ashley McClinton, 22, Missouri; Katelyn McCoy, 23, Louisiana; Madison Moore, 19, Colorado; Mackenzie Morse, 22, Massachusetts; Kimberly Titus, 20, Ohio; Emma Post, 23, West Virginia; Roger Van Dyke, 19, Colorado; Jamie Zhan Del Castillo, 19, Texas.



AmeriCorps staffer Jonny Koren, 18, of Minnesota, works on a growing tower at the Perris Green City Farm Program.

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