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Civic Works at Ten Years: A Program Assessment

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Founded in 1993, Civic Works is a Baltimore-based community service program. It aims both to provide essential services and to improve the educational and employment prospects of the inner-city youth who serve as program volunteers (corpsmembers).¹ Annually, over 100 corpsmembers participate in one of a wide array of year-long part-or full-time service projects.² In addition to serving youth and the community, these projects aim to foster youth development and civic engagement. Several Civic Works projects are funded partially by AmeriCorps, the national community service program.

In November 2002, Civic Works engaged Abt Associates Inc. to conduct a program assessment that would address the following sets of research questions:

1. What kinds of individuals serve in Civic Works?
2. What do corpsmembers do in Civic Works? What kinds of job and life skills do they develop? Do they form friendships and relationships with individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds as a result of their participation?
3. How do corpsmembers perceive their experiences in Civic Works? How do they believe the program may have impacted their lives?
4. How was the program implemented at specific sites? In what kinds of activities did corpsmembers engage? How did community members, service recipients and other key stakeholders at these sites perceive the program?
5. Is there a net cost or benefit to Civic Works programs? How can the program's benefits be quantified in financial terms?

This evaluation answers those questions. In order to perform this study, Abt Associates surveyed the 2002/2003 corpsmembers and conducted case studies and a cost/benefit analysis of two Civic Works service projects.

Data from the corpsmember survey addressed the first three research questions. To administer it, Abt Associates developed an instrument that included questions about participant characteristics, attitudes and perceptions of their experience in Civic Works and requested all active Civic Works corpsmembers to complete it in June 2003. Over 80% of corpsmembers completed the survey.

Though surveying corpsmembers provided a great deal of information about participants and their experiences in Civic Works, this methodology did not provide information about the way in which Civic Works operates at specific sites or about the way in which community members and other program participants perceive the program. For that reason, in order to address the fourth set of research questions, Abt Associates conducted case studies of two representative Civic Works projects.

¹ *Civic Works: Baltimore's Youth Service Corps*, Program Promotional Materials, fall 2003.

² *Civic Works: Baltimore's Youth Service Corps*, Program Promotional Materials, fall 2003; *Civic Works Team Descriptions 2001–2002*. Program Promotional Materials, fall 2003.

Finally, Abt Associates conducted cost/benefit analyses of the two case study projects. Conducting this analysis enabled Civic Works staff to understand the value of these projects in monetary terms and helped them to ensure that project expenses are a prudent investment of public monies. As such, it addressed the fifth set of research questions.

Following is a summary of the findings from that research. It is organized according to the five sets of research questions.

1. What kinds of individuals serve in Civic Works?

In the 2002–2003 program year, the majority of Civic Works corpsmembers were African American women. Most corpsmembers were between the ages of 18 and 21 when they enrolled in Civic Works. Slightly over half of the corpsmembers had at least some college experience. Corpsmembers who had higher levels of education tended to participate in Education and Literacy service projects.

2. What do corpsmembers do in Civic Works? What kinds of job and life skills do they develop? Do they form friendships and relationships with individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds as a result of their participation?

Corpsmembers engage in a broad array of activities in Civic Works. In the 2002–2003 program year, most corpsmembers participated in Education and Literacy service projects, though significant numbers were engaged in home rehabilitation projects, urban beautification projects for the Maryland Department of Transportation, other urban revitalization activities, and homeland security projects. In the 2002–2003 program year, a majority of corpsmembers felt that they developed new skills through Civic Works. Specifically, corpsmembers believed they gained skills that would help them find jobs, go on job interviews, perform well at jobs and advance in their education. Corpsmembers also reported that they formed relationships with staff and other corpsmembers. Approximately 50 percent reported that they often met and learned from interesting people who were different from them and higher percentages of respondents reported forming meaningful relationships with program staff.

3. How do corpsmembers perceive their experiences in Civic Works? How do they believe the program may have impacted their lives?

In general, corpsmembers felt positively about their experiences in Civic Works. High percentages of respondents asserted that they were very or somewhat satisfied with their Civic Works experience, and that, looking back, they made the right choice by enrolling in Civic Works. A majority of corpsmembers felt that the program provided them with some technical and interpersonal skills that would help them in their professional and educational lives. In addition, 61 percent reported that they believed that participating in Civic Works made them more likely to participate in future community service activities.

4. How was the program implemented at specific sites? In what kinds of activities did corpsmembers engage? How did community members, service recipients and other key stakeholders at these sites perceive the program?

We studied Civic Works at the Community Lot (CL) and Recreation and Parks (R&PC) service projects. Although the two projects are quite different from one another, they share several qualities in terms of the way in which the program is implemented. In both CL and R&PC, corpsmembers work under Civic Works site supervisors who provide them with guidance and

direction and with whom they often form close relationships. Similarly, in both projects, corpsmembers work in teams and form relationships with one another.

Although both CL and R&PC provide corpsmembers with opportunities to acquire job skills, foster community engagement, and provide services to economically disadvantaged communities, activities at the two projects are extremely dissimilar. CL corpsmembers perform manual labor to beautify abandoned and run-down urban spaces, while R&PC corpsmembers provide tutoring and educational enrichment activities for economically disadvantaged Baltimore elementary school students.

CL and R&PC community members, service recipients and other key stakeholders report satisfaction with their Civic Works experiences. Despite this fact, at both sites, corpsmembers complain about low wages and corpsmember turnover is a problem. In addition, staff and community members assert that the programs do not have sufficient resources to meet the range of needs faced by underserved youth who serve in the corps (in CL) or underserved students whom corpsmembers serve (in R&PC). This suggests that both service projects are strong in terms of staff and program structure, but would be enriched if they could be provided with additional resources that could be used to provide corpsmembers and students served with needed support services.

5. Is there a net cost or benefit to Civic Works programs? How can the program's benefits be quantified in financial terms?

The results of our analyses suggest that the CL and R&PC projects were cost effective because both generate greater net benefits for society than costs. Although we cannot say that it is possible to generalize these results to other Civic Works programmatic years and projects, we can assert that the CL and R&PC programs appear to be a prudent investment of resources in 2002–2003.