

AmeriCorps' recognizes Baltimore-based Notre Dame Mission Volunteers

WASHINGTON - The Notre Dame Mission Volunteers, an AmeriCorps program, has received a renewal of its grant for the 2011 fiscal year, but the federal funding cuts for volunteer-based programs make the financial future of Notre Dame-AmeriCorps program unclear.

So this year's Notre Dame-AmeriCorps awards recognition ceremony, held July 15 at a Washington neighborhood social services center, had extra significance.

John Gomperts, national director of AmeriCorps, attended the ceremony to recognize the joint efforts of volunteers from Washington and Baltimore who are with Notre Dame-AmeriCorps, a Baltimore-based organization.

The event honored volunteers who had completed 1,700 hours of service.

Speaking of Notre Dame Mission Volunteers' grant renewal for the 2011 year, he said that "to have won in this competition is really a big deal," when so many groups are vying for federal funding.

Sister Katherine "Sissy" Corr, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur and executive director of Notre Dame Mission Volunteers, told Catholic News Service, "For me, with my confidence in God, we will be funded. I'm already presuming we're continuing." She said she was dreaming of new ways to carry out the mission of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, the religious community that runs the mission volunteer group.

AmeriCorps programs across the nation have lost \$22.5 million in federal funding. The cuts are a result of the Corporation for National and Community Service receiving \$72 million less in the 2011 congressional budget appropriations than the previous year. The agency is responsible for funding the AmeriCorps programs.

In early June the Catholic Volunteer Network, based in Takoma Park, learned it was losing lose more than \$5 million in funding for its AmeriCorps Education Awards Program.

Gomperts spoke about “the miracle of the human spirit” and described the impact of AmeriCorps volunteers in Joplin, Mo., mere hours after a devastating tornado swept through the city May 22. The work of those volunteers was different than the educational programs carried out by the Notre Dame group, but he said their efforts were no less important.

Gomperts was eager to hear about the personal experiences of the Notre Dame volunteers and said he wanted to “use whatever platforms are available” to him to tell their story.

He told the 22 honorees, some of whom will return for a second or third year of volunteering, “I think it would be impossible to leave behind what you’ve learned and experienced.”

And by the stories told by the volunteers, it is doubtful they will forget their time with AmeriCorps.

“Never have I felt so accepted right away,” said Baltimore volunteer Alex Brecht.

Brecht recalled a camping trip he took with some of the kids he worked with, “most of them didn’t even know how to make s’mores! I take that for granted,” he said. “Without AmeriCorps, never would I have had the joy of watching a kid make a s’more.”

Corderrol Harris, a Washington-based volunteer, told the group that AmeriCorp was the greatest decision he’d made in his life, saying that an added bonus to his volunteer work was learning how to manage his money while living on the modest – or “doable,” as one volunteer described it – stipend from AmeriCorps.

Sister Corr said, “It’s so satisfying for young people. It’s their way of expressing their faith,” and is grateful to AmeriCorps for helping their program become more effective and pushing them to network and improve.

The Notre Dame Mission Volunteers program was founded by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1992. Three years later, the program began a partnership with AmeriCorps. The Notre Dame volunteers work in low-income communities and, among other things, they tutor children and adults; organize after-school enrichment activities; and teach conflict resolution and parenting skills.

Although she said she was confident the Notre Dame-AmeriCorps program will continue to receive federal funding for the 2012 fiscal year, Sister Corr stressed to the volunteers that “we have to help Congress understand your experience.”