

Continuity in Claremont: Reflections from ReThink Health: UCRV's Past and Current AmeriCorps VISTAs

Around this time last year, the finite reality of my AmeriCorps VISTA experience and the urgency to postpone my departure had just begun to settle in. Although I had only been working in Claremont, NH for a short time, I felt a sense of belonging that grew out of the relationships I had begun to develop with people across the community, from elementary school teachers and soup kitchen volunteers to business owners. Through my experience as a VISTA, I gained a profound appreciation for the efforts of service providers, like teachers, school nurses, social workers, and caregivers. And through my concurrent graduate research in the field of sustainable food systems and social change, I also gained a deep understanding of structural inequities that divide our food, health care, and education systems along social, political, and economic lines. These inequities require equally important work at the regional and national level through planning and policy reform. For this reason, at the end of my year of service I was ready and eager to join the ReThink Health: UCRV team as a Community Outreach Associate.



ReThink Health: UCRV's mission resonates with me because of its focus on systems-level thinking and action. I'm constantly inspired by the intersections between what I have studied in school and the work I am doing with ReThink Health: UCRV, now. For example, my graduate program is grounded in the idea of using scholarship to inform social and political activism, and similarly, a qualitative project I am working on now aims to leverage data for action to address complex social problems.

Last year, as a VISTA, I was tasked with a variety of projects, including nutrition and culinary education, community organizing around food access, and starting a community garden. In my new role with ReThink Health: UCRV, I am working on similarly diverse projects, such as analyzing qualitative data from the [Stories Project](#), assisting with the development of town-level health infrastructure, and overseeing our VISTA's projects in Claremont. Despite spending most of my time in our office in Lebanon, I have been able to maintain my connections to people and projects in Claremont through coaching JV Girls' Volleyball at Stevens High School and working with our current VISTA, Elena Karis. Elena has sustained important connections and relationships in Claremont, and she has also significantly progressed projects such as Valley Regional Community Garden end efforts to establish an EBT system at the Claremont Farmers' Market.

Elena began her service year in August with a visit to the Valley Regional Community Garden site at Valley Regional Hospital in Claremont, NH. At the time she visited, the dirt was piled 5-foot high at the edge of the parking lot and the building materials were still neatly packaged

nearby. Elena helped to organize a group of seven wonderful community volunteers who worked for two days to assemble all of the materials into a beautiful garden. I was thrilled to visit Valley Regional in September and see four complete garden beds planted with food and flowers after a year of fundraising, planning, and manual labor.

At the beginning of Elena's year of service, despite the connections she had already made within the Claremont community, she said she "still felt like the new kid" when she was asked questions about the garden that she didn't feel like she could wholly answer. She was bothered by people referring to the garden project as "hers," because as much as she felt attached to the goals of the garden, she said, "The project doesn't belong to me, or to Bella, or to any one person – it belongs to Claremont, and to everyone whose efforts brought us to this point." To facilitate this community ownership, Elena has established a Garden Oversight Committee comprised of representatives from the four local organizations that are taking part in the garden – [Valley Regional Hospital](#), 4-H Claremont Jaguars, [Claremont Cool Cats Special Olympics Team](#), and [West Central Behavioral Health](#).

Since her first day in Claremont, Elena has been heeding some advice that I gave her early on: get involved across the community, in as many meaningful ways as you can. She wasn't sure what would come from the connections she would make through pursuing her extracurricular interests, but she found many intersections between her fields of interest. At Dartmouth College, Elena was a sexual health and healthy relationships peer advisor, and as she explored other facets of public health work, she realized that working to reduce poverty was quickly becoming another passion of hers. Elena's experience with sexual health education and promoting healthy relationships motivated her to contact TLC Family Resource Center in Claremont about volunteering with their programs. TLC asked Elena to teach students about nutrition at Our Way Learning System (OWLS) program (SAU 6's alternative high school) and she eagerly agreed to a monthly visit to cover topics like healthy breakfasts and tips for quick and healthy cooking on a budget with OWLS students.

In October, Elena attended a four-day training for a violence prevention program, called [Green Dot](#), which recently launched in Claremont. Through this training, Elena formed close relationships with community members who also work in Claremont's social service sector and whom she wouldn't have otherwise met. Elena said the training taught her an important lesson: "A healthy community doesn't stop at working to improve food access – addressing poverty requires addressing every aspect of a community's needs because change can't happen unless people work together." Elena is excited to continue working with the OWLS Program, Claremont Farmers' Market, Claremont Soup Kitchen, and Valley Regional Community Garden over the next nine months, and we are so happy to have her on the team!

Both Elena and I began our years of service taking the time to build relationships with people and organizations across Claremont; this foundation helped us develop a sense of belonging in a new community. Each of us can do the same in our own communities where we live, work, or socialize. By taking the time to get to know our neighbors and build trust among one another,

we will inevitably be deepening our community's resilience and strengthening the social fabric that will support our community for generations to come.

By Bella Stachowski and Elena Karis