

As FoodCorps service members (part of the AmeriCorps network), our role with Isles, Inc. has changed significantly since March. In March, we were anxiously anticipating our letters of whether or not we had been accepted to the program or not and if the program was even going to continue. Now, eight months into the pandemic seeing how drastically different service is and will continue to be is an experience centered around learning and adapting. In a normal service year we would be working in schools, classrooms, gardens, and cafeterias across Trenton, NJ. In the years prior to the pandemic, service members traditionally worked with students, teachers, faculty and staff creating an environment of hands-on learning. All schools in Trenton, NJ are virtually learning since the school reopened for the year. This means that our traditional hands-on learning with students had to adapt. Although adapting to virtual learning has not been the easiest we have made the best of it. So far with the Trenton Public School District we have been able to do distribution of grow kits, outdoor COVID safe gardening tutorials and science experiments, and food distribution assistance.

Outside of working with the Trenton Public School District in this capacity as service members we have also been presented with the opportunity to do things we would not traditionally be able to do in a regular service term. For example, we have been able to put together virtual programming, help with open garden hours, and work with other organizations that are doing work to also help the community. Virtual programming has been very successful as we have been able to do live cooking demonstrations, grow kit tutorials, and nutrition education so far. We have also hosted open garden hours at Roberto Clemente Children's Garden and our 33 Tucker Street Garden. At both of these gardens we have been able to host activities such as garden exploration, harvesting flowers, herbs, and vegetables, and art crafts. All of these activities have now been centered around other organizations instead of just students in the Trenton Public Schools. Some of the organizations we have been able to partner with so far are Upward Bound-Trio, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. auxiliary groups, and The Capital Area YMCA.

At Isles we have addressed the challenges of COVID-19 with creative alternatives, we were able to lean on the Community Planning and Development team at Isles. Relying on the rest of our team really means that as service members we have been able to ask the team members questions and have been given resources to complete our educational programming. So far the greatest fears we have moving forward are really centered around the pandemic- primarily the possibility of going back into a lockdown during the winter months. The lockdown that occurred in March does not seem like a distant memory as the numbers are continuing to rise in Mercer County and the state of New Jersey in general. If we do go back into lockdown this could mean the possibility of COVID-safe in person programming could no longer exist. We would only be allowed to do virtual programming which could become extremely draining as our contact with the outside world barely exists unless one needs to get necessities. Thus far we have been blessed in our ability to do both in person and virtual learning and interaction. The idea of going back to Phase 1 of the COVID 19 pandemic is terrifying.

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2020-2021 FoodCorps Service Members