



# Housing Action AmeriCorps Network

*Sharing Your AmeriCorps Service Experience*



AmeriCorps



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## Communications & Branding Guidance

How we talk about the work we do and the communities we serve matters. Using clear, inclusive language can help your story be easily understood by others. The following section outlines the terms, best practices, and messaging to use when sharing about your service in the Housing Action AmeriCorps Network.

### Terminology

- **Housing Action** is our shortened way of referring to Housing Action Illinois
- **AmeriCorps member** refers to individuals serving in our AmeriCorps network
- **VISTA program & VISTA Summer Associate program** refer to the specific AmeriCorps programs that members of our network serve through
- **Host site** refers to a community-based organization where an AmeriCorps member is serving; host sites in Illinois are also **member organizations** of Housing Action's coalition

### AmeriCorps Branding Guidelines

Use the following boilerplate language when describing AmeriCorps in communications:

**AmeriCorps**, the federal agency for national service and volunteerism, provides opportunities for Americans to serve their country domestically, address the nation's most pressing challenges, improve lives and communities, and strengthen civic engagement. Learn more at [AmeriCorps.gov](https://www.americorps.gov).

**AmeriCorps VISTA** is an AmeriCorps program that connects members to community organizations to fight poverty. Through fundraising, volunteer recruitment, program development, and more, members gain skills that put them on track for a life of service in the public, private, or nonprofit sector.

To avoid confusion when referring to AmeriCorps, always use the following guidance:

- Capitalize the A and C, without a middle space, so it reads **AmeriCorps**
- Use **AmeriCorps member** when referring to individuals serving in the AmeriCorps VISTA program; do not capitalize the m in member
- Use **"selected to serve"** as an AmeriCorps member, not *"hired to work"*



## Housing Action Illinois Branding Guidelines

Use the following boilerplate language when describing Housing Action Illinois:

**Housing Action Illinois** is a statewide coalition that leads the movement to expand and protect affordable housing and end homelessness in Illinois. We bring together more than 160 member organizations—including housing counseling agencies, homeless services providers, housing developers, and policymakers—to work toward a state where everyone has a good, stable home. We create access and housing opportunities for communities throughout Illinois by advocating for better policies, raising awareness, training member organizations, and spearheading statewide collaboration.

The **Housing Action AmeriCorps Network** receives funds from AmeriCorps to support full-year and summer AmeriCorps members in the VISTA program. Our AmeriCorps members primarily focus on projects related to housing and homelessness, but may also support projects that intersect with housing, such as education, hunger, health care, environment, and disaster services. The majority of our network serves within and throughout Illinois, but AmeriCorps members in our Housing Counseling Corps can be matched with housing counseling programs nationwide.

**Housing Counseling Corps** is an initiative of the Housing Action AmeriCorps Network that aims to build the capacity of housing counseling programs and establish a path for AmeriCorps members to become HUD-Certified housing counselors. Launched in 2021, AmeriCorps members in the Housing Counseling Corps spend their service learning about the housing counseling profession, becoming familiar with the specific programs and needs of a housing counseling agency, and preparing for the HUD Housing Counseling Certification Exam. Housing Counseling Corps members serve with housing counseling agencies in Illinois and throughout the United States.

### Housing Action Logos & Colors

When creating content that shares your service experience, you can use Housing Action's color palette and logos in your designs. Information about Housing Action and AmeriCorps logos can be found in the Communications Resources section.

<b>Navy</b> CMYK: 95, 72, 15, 62 RGB: 33, 49, 77 HEX: 21314D	<b>Cardinal</b> CMYK: 6, 93, 58, 28 RGB: 162, 43, 56 HEX: A22B3B	<b>Marigold</b> CMYK: 0, 31, 70, 5 RGB: 243, 163, 64 HEX: F3A340	<b>Light Blue</b> CMYK: 6, 93, 58, 28 RGB: 29, 145, 216 HEX: 1D91DB
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## Talking Points

It is common to get asked questions about AmeriCorps, Housing Action, and the affordable housing field during your service. Here are some prepared talking points to help guide these conversations and maintain consistent messaging within our network.

### *What is AmeriCorps? What does national service mean?*

AmeriCorps is a federal agency that **brings people and organizations together** to help **strengthen communities** and **fight poverty**. AmeriCorps members commit to **servicing a community** for a year or summer by helping **build the capacity** of a local organization to expand their services and programs.

AmeriCorps members are not volunteers or employees, but are **selected to serve** with an organization. Serving in AmeriCorps helps **develop leadership and professional skills** while **making sustainable change** in a community.

### *Who is Housing Action Illinois? What does the organization do?*

Housing Action is a **statewide coalition** that **unites 160+ organizations** in a movement to **expand affordable housing** and **end homelessness** in Illinois.

Our members support **housing justice** and include organizations like housing counseling agencies, homeless shelters, housing developers, and Centers for Independent Living.

Housing Action empowers communities to thrive through several programs: **Policy Advocacy, Education & Organizing, Capacity Building**, and our **AmeriCorps Network**.

### *What does affordable housing mean? Why is it important?*

We all need a **place to call home**—a home that is **stable, safe, accessible, and affordable**. We believe that **housing is a human right** and view a home as a **foundation for building better lives** and **accessing opportunities**.

### *What is a housing counselor? How do they help?*

Housing counselors help **stabilize communities** by offering **free guidance** to individuals and families with **buying or renting a home, avoiding foreclosure or eviction, and improving credit and financial stability**. Their work addresses historic injustices in accessing and maintaining housing, and also helps households build generational wealth through homeownership. Housing counselors are **certified** after passing an exam administered by **HUD** (the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).



## Tips for Clear, Accessible Communication

Using plain language helps people understand what you are communicating the first time they read or hear it. For training and further information, refer to [Section 508 Guidance](#) and the [Plain Language Action and Information Network](#).

- **Keep it short:** While you want to get all the necessary information across, the more succinct your writing is, the easier it will be to quickly understand.
- **Break it up:** Walls of text can be intimidating. Use intentional formatting such as paragraphs, bullet points, and color blocking to make content easier to process.
- **Keep it Straightforward:** Avoid using formal, academic, or legal terminology when it isn't necessary. Jargon and acronyms can deter potential candidates, especially if they experience additional language barriers.
- **Make it active:** Using active voice is more direct and engaging (e.g. "Housing Action will review your application," *not* "Housing Action will be reviewing your application").

## Using People-First Language

We encourage *People-First Language* to avoid unintended marginalization and dehumanization in both formal and informal communications. People-first language puts the person before the descriptor or diagnosis, describing a person's situation or what they face rather than asserting an identity. For example, we typically say:

- "People experiencing homelessness" *not* "homeless people" or "the homeless"
- "People with disabilities" *not* "disabled persons"

## Communicating about Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

When discussing race and ethnicity, be as inclusive as possible. Pay attention to how members of different groups refer to and identify themselves, and model your practices off of those observations when appropriate. Below are some brief guidelines:

- Capitalize racial categories, such as Black
- Typically use Black, rather than African American
- Use Hispanic to refer to people of Spanish descent and Latinx or Latine to refer to people of Latin American descent
- Use *they* instead of *he/she* and avoid gender designations in role descriptions

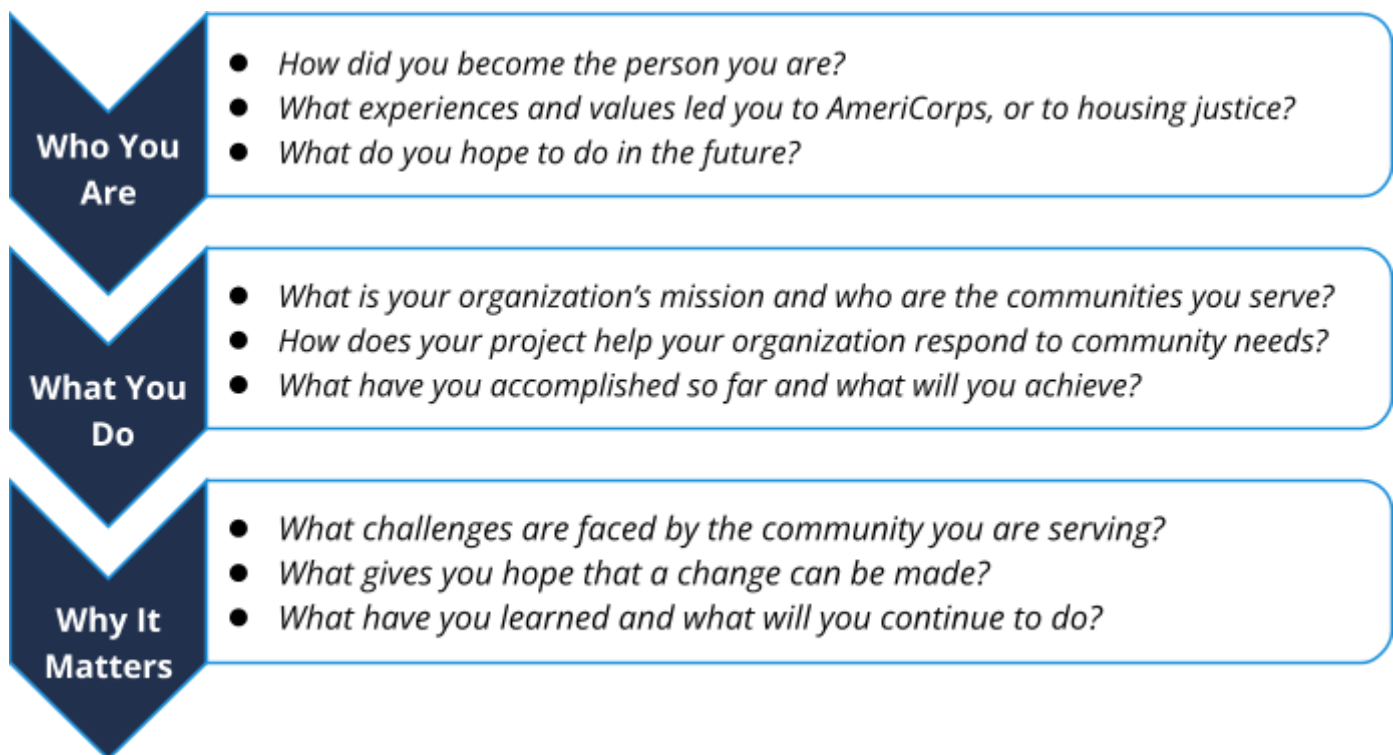
*Note: It is best practice to reflect the language that people use to describe themselves, which may be different than the guidance provided in this section. Never assume you know how someone else identifies or how they choose to share their life experiences.*

## Telling Your Story

Storytelling is a fundamental part of our everyday lives. We tell our story when talking to family and friends, interviewing for jobs, sharing on social media, and meeting someone new. This section has suggestions and tools for crafting your personal story and sharing your service experience to grow connections, community, and change.

### Shaping Your Story

Your story helps people understand **who** you are, **what** you do, and **why** you do it. The most compelling stories are ones that combine personal experiences with shared values. Reflect on the following questions as you consider what experiences and motivations you would like to share with others.



**Tip: Think about your audience!** What you share and how you share it might depend on who you are sharing it with. Talking about your AmeriCorps experience with a close friend will probably be different than how you describe your service in a job interview.



## Practice: Elevator Pitch

Sometimes you only have a brief moment to share your story and make a connection. This exercise gives you a framework to speak about your service experience in less than a minute.

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_.

I am an AmeriCorps member with organization.

State a problem or describe a change you want.

I serve by describe your activities, so that state a community benefit.

### Elevator pitch examples:

*Hi, my name is Tanya and I am an AmeriCorps member with Housing for All. We believe that no one should have to choose between paying rent and buying groceries. I serve by creating communications materials and writing grants, so that more people know about our housing programs and more families can access our emergency rental services.*

*Hello, my name is Amar. I am an AmeriCorps member with Humane Habitats. In our community, there are not enough quality, affordable homes for everyone who needs one. I serve by recruiting and training volunteers so that we can build 5 new homes each year for families living on limited incomes.*

### Try it out!

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_.

I'm an AmeriCorps member with \_\_\_\_\_.

*State a problem or describe a change you want:*

---

---

I serve by \_\_\_\_\_

So that (*state a community benefit*) \_\_\_\_\_



## Using Data & Photographs

Tracking the outcomes of your project and visualizing your activities can help demonstrate the impact you are making and enhance the story you are telling. The following best practices can help you document your project in multiple ways.

### Collecting Meaningful Data

Incorporating both **quantitative** (concrete numbers) and **qualitative** (descriptions and characteristics) data into your story helps demonstrate the tangible impact of your project. Descriptions and stories provide context and create meaning, while numbers provide evidence to support that meaning.

Each month, AmeriCorps members are required to report quantitative and qualitative data for specific categories, such as fundraising, volunteers, systems, and beneficiaries. Maintaining accurate reports helps Housing Action monitor performance and track project goals, but these reports can also be useful for AmeriCorps members and supervisors during and after service. Data from monthly and final reports can further illustrate the impact of a member's project and help supervisors evaluate their organization's systems and processes.

### Visualizing Your Project

Using visual media can enhance how others connect to and understand your AmeriCorps project. Photographs or videos of your service can illustrate the events, environment, and emotions you are experiencing better than numbers or words. The following sections include tips and ethical guidelines for documenting your service experience through visual media.

### Ethical Practices

We encourage AmeriCorps members to document their experiences however they are comfortable. When you make photographs or videos at your host site, other people may be present and their preferences need to be considered. It is best practice to use a release form when sharing media where someone can be identified (their face or profile is clearly visible).

#### *Read the Room*

Not every moment is the right situation for a photograph or video. Before making any visual content, spend time in the space and start a conversation with those around you



about what you hope to do. Allow others to decide if and how they want to participate.

### *Informed Consent*

Always get explicit consent before taking a photograph or making a video where someone can be identified, even if they are in the background. The person pictured should know *where* (e.g. online, social media, brochure, research paper) and *how* their image could be used (e.g. to promote a program or service, to advocate for a policy, to raise funds, to support research).

### *Release Forms*

If you want to share a story that includes someone else (such as a staff member, a program participant, or another AmeriCorps member), release forms can be helpful ways to document their consent and discuss how they want their story and image to be used. A sample release form can be found in the Communications Resources section.

## **Making Compelling Visual Media**

Everyone views the world through a different lens. Even if two people are photographing the same event, they will likely focus on different details and frame the situation in different ways. By planning ahead and following best practices, you can create focused, engaging content that shares your unique point of view.

### **Preparing a Storyboard or Shot List**

Storyboards and shot lists are tools that help you plan out what photographs and videos you want to make. Shot lists are ideal for preparing to document a specific event and organizing media made in multiple situations or by multiple people. Storyboards can be used to gather inspiration, plan sequences of photos or videos, and map out overarching narratives.

#### Shot List Example

Shot lists should outline what a photographer or videographer should focus on when documenting throughout a multi-stage event or project. Shot lists are typically a concise, written list of images or videos to make, and can be referred to quickly during an event.

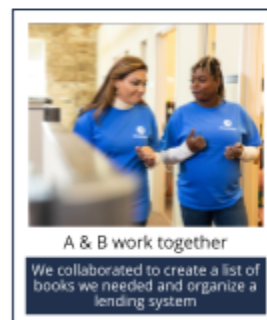
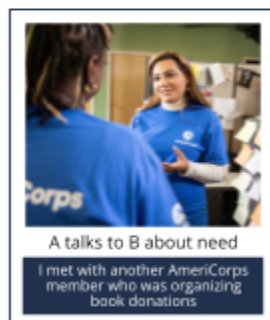
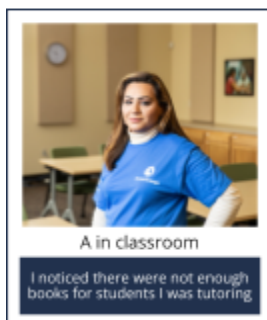
#### Shot List for Credit Building Workshop

- Set-Up
  - AmeriCorps member typing workshop curriculum on computer

- Member meeting with staff, preparing workshop packets
- Registration
  - Exterior of building w/ organizational signage, could include staff/member
  - Staff greeting people and handing out packets
- Presentation
  - Staff presenting material – slide that shows org logo, data about credit
  - Participant raising hand to ask question
- Activity
  - Participants working in small groups, staff assisting
  - Participants engaged in role-playing scenario
- End of Workshop
  - Posed group or individual photos, holding workshop certificates

### Storyboard Example

Storyboards should include visual representations (sketch or similar image) and written descriptions (interview questions, voiceover text, caption, visual action) that are laid out in chronological order. They are particularly helpful when planning to produce a video or a series of photographs that you want to tell a story.



## Best Practices: Composition

Before picking up your phone or camera, actively observe the environment you are about to document and consider the following questions to help decide where to record and what to focus on.

### *Where do I want people to look?*

Keep it simple. Minimize distractions and get close to what you want someone to see.



### *What would help the viewer understand the situation better?*

Set the scene. Observe the area from multiple perspectives and use the items in your environment to provide context clues. Include signage and logos when possible.



### *What catches my eye (in good and bad ways)?*

Trust your instincts. Colors, textures, shapes, and patterns make visual media more compelling, but too much clutter can be distracting. Prioritize spaces that are well-lit, comfortable, and tidy.





## Content Ideas

Everyone has a different story to tell, and we want to know yours! If you are unsure where to start, here are a few suggestions of ways to tell your story, examples of content from Housing Action's AmeriCorps Network, and a list of potential interview questions to answer for yourself or ask someone else.

### Get Us Involved

We want to hear from you! Reach out to [AmeriCorps@housingactionil.org](mailto:AmeriCorps@housingactionil.org) with suggestions of upcoming events or accomplishments to spotlight. You can schedule a time for us to interview you about your experiences and make visual media to share your story. If you are comfortable writing, taking photos, or making videos, we encourage you to create something for Housing Action to share on our website and social media. Let us know your ideas, and we can help you along the way!

### Submit Your Stories

We created a [story collection form](#) for AmeriCorps members and supervisors to share updates, accomplishments, memories, and media (such as photographs, videos, or graphics you create during your service). Use this form throughout your service to share written stories and visual media with Housing Action.

### Story Suggestions

Your story can be as short as a quote or take a longer form, such as a personal essay, Q&A, social media post, photo series, or video. We are always looking for your creative ideas! For more inspiration, read through examples of previous [AmeriCorps blog posts](#) and [host site testimonials](#).

- *Craft your own story*
  - Share lessons learned or tips and tricks
  - Describe a day-in-the-life as an AmeriCorps member
  - Detail a project or event you supported and the community impact it had
  - Create a photo series or video that illustrates your AmeriCorps experience
- *Collaborate with someone else to tell a story*
  - Interview another AmeriCorps member or alumni in our network
  - Interview staff or program participants at your organization
- *Collaborate with Housing Action to tell your story*
  - Interview with Housing Action staff or AmeriCorps VISTA Leader
  - Invite Housing Action staff to attend an event at your organization
  - Work with Housing Action to make photographs/ video about your service

## Interview Questions

Use this list of questions as jumping off points for sharing your story or interviewing others. At the end of every interview, always ask if there is anything else the interviewee would like to share.

### *AmeriCorps Members:*

- What called you to serve in AmeriCorps or made you interested in housing justice?
- What challenges have you and/or your organization faced?
- How do you see your AmeriCorps project impacting the communities you serve?
- What is something unexpected that you learned during your service year?
- How would you describe your AmeriCorps service in 5 words or less?
- What is something most people don't know about AmeriCorps, but should?
- How has AmeriCorps service influenced what you hope to do in the future?
- What advice do you have for someone interested in joining AmeriCorps?

### *Supervisors/Host Sites:*

- What challenges are faced by your organization and the communities you serve? How has your AmeriCorps member built your capacity to respond to community needs?
- What drew you to this work? Why did you join your organization?
- How did your organization get involved with the Housing Action AmeriCorps Network?
- Share a favorite moment or something you learned with your AmeriCorps member.
- What do you wish more people knew about the work that you do, or about affordable housing and homelessness?
- Where do you find inspiration and motivation?
- What would you tell someone who is interested in hosting an AmeriCorps member at their organization?

### *Community Members:*

- How did you find out about our program/organization?
- What do you wish more people understood about your community or experiences?
- What advice would you give to someone else in a similar situation?
- What does having a stable home mean to you?



## Communications Resources

### General Messaging & Storytelling

- [The Opportunity Agenda](#)
- [Storytelling for Good](#)
- [Narrative Arts](#)
- [Housing Action Storytelling Resources](#)

### Accessible Communications

- [Plain Language Action and Information Network](#)
- [Section 508 Guidance](#)
- [Literacy Works - Clear Language Lab](#)

### Free Tools

- Design: [Canva](#)
- Social Media: [Hootsuite](#), [Buffer](#)
- Transcription: [Transcribe](#)
- Video Editing: [Free Tools](#)
- Audio Editing: [Audacity](#)
- Photo Editing: [GIMP](#) & [Pixlr](#)
- Stock Photos: [Freepik](#), [Pixabay](#), [Pexels](#), [Negative Space](#), [Unsplash](#)
- Data Visualization: [Datawrapper](#), [Flourish](#), [Looker Studio](#)

AmeriCorps Logos - [Download online](#)

### Housing Action Logos

Contact [AmeriCorps@housingactionil.org](mailto:AmeriCorps@housingactionil.org) for full-resolution files.



A stronger Illinois begins at home



**Housing Action Illinois**

A stronger Illinois begins at home



A stronger Illinois begins at home



A stronger Illinois begins at home



## Story Release Form

I, **Full Name**, understand that my story is my own, and I hereby grant Housing Action Illinois permission to collect and share my story. I consent to my story being kept in collection and shared for up to 3 years (**Date-Date**). I understand that – because my story belongs to me – I have the right to reach out and revoke my consent at any time by asking for it to be used differently or not used at all. I will contact [americorps@housingactionil.org](mailto:americorps@housingactionil.org) with any changes to the information provided below.

**Organization:** \_\_\_\_\_

**In my story, I want to be identified by:**

*[Check One]*

- Full Name:
- First Name:
- Initials:
- Pseudonym (preferred pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_)

**I grant Housing Action Illinois permission to share my story on the following platforms:**

*[Check all that apply]*

- Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram – *starting fall 2023*)
- Website ([www.housingactionil.org](http://www.housingactionil.org))
- Electronic Mail (Email newsletters, impact reports, recruitment messages)
- Educational & Promotional Materials (Fact sheets, brochures, annual reports)

**Along with my story, I give Housing Action Illinois permission to share:**

*[Check all that apply]*

- Images of me
- Recordings of my voice
- Videos of me
- None of the above

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature / Full Name\***

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

*\*By typing my name above, I understand and agree that I am signing this document electronically, in lieu of a manual signature.*

**If Housing Action Illinois needs to contact me about my story, I can be reached at: **Email** and/or **Phone Number****