

An Evaluation of the Montana Public Health Corps and Communities in Action in Eastern Montana

JG RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

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Report Information and Acknowledgements

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The authors would like to thank the Montana Public Health Corps members, host site supervisors, and community partners who took time out of their busy schedules to share their experiences.

Funding for this study was provided by the Richland County Health Department through an AmeriCorps Grant.

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Executive Summary

Communities in Action (CIA) is a collaborative group in Richland County, MT rooted in the Mobilization for Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) process to improve community health. CIA is composed of action groups and a steering committee dedicated to addressing community health issues. CIA steering committee members include representatives from public health, county government, healthcare, education, mental health, youth organizations, and the business community. Action groups focus on specific topics such as cancer screening, mental health, youth engagement, and substance use with the help of community volunteers, AmeriCorps members, and diverse stakeholder groups.

In addition to coordinating CIA, the Richland County Health Department has been placing and hosting AmeriCorps members in eastern Montana since 2017. Over time, their involvement with AmeriCorps led to the development of the Montana Public Health (MPH) Corps, a statewide AmeriCorps program with an emphasis on community capacity building in rural, frontier, and tribal communities. Past MPH Corps member projects include organizing community health assessments, improving health department outreach via social media, developing youth specific community groups, and working on a variety of initiatives when an extra hand was needed. MPH Corps members also play a vital role in increasing the capacity of CIA.

The primary objectives of this evaluation include:

1. Evaluate MPH Corps' role in impacting the host sites' capacity for community engagement and identify strategies for program improvement.
2. Assess MPH Corps' overall project for impacts on community engagement and create learning opportunities for sustaining wins and improving on challenges.
3. Assess the host site and community experience working with MPH and CIA to determine community engagement outcomes and make recommendations for program improvement and expansion.

These objectives were evaluated by conducting semi-structured interviews among MPH Corps members, their host site supervisors, community partners, and CIA steering committee members.

Key Findings:

MPH Corps members are generally well received by community members, and their passion, perspective, and take-charge attitude are appreciated in rural, eastern Montana communities.

Host site supervisors and community partners frequently identified the increased capacity provided by MPH Corps members as one of the greatest benefits of members serving in their community.

Host site supervisors, community partners and CIA steering committee members identified enhanced communication as a key improvement strategy.

CIA has made improvements to the quality of life among Richland County residents, but the program could be improved by recruiting organizationally diverse and active members to participate.

Introduction

Communities in Action and Montana Public Health Corps

Richland County, MT Communities in Action (CIA) was initiated in 2005 by the Richland County Health Department to bring partners together with the purpose of coordinating efforts and resources to strengthen the health and wellbeing of Richland County residents. Guided by a steering committee, CIA utilizes the best practice framework of Mobilizing Action through Planning and Partnerships (MAPP) to engender healthy and resilient communities. MAPP is a data-driven, community-based approach to build effective strategies for health promotion unique to the specific needs and desires of individual communities. Throughout its tenure, CIA has relied on AmeriCorps service members to implement the MAPP process and support CIA goals.

The CIA steering committee adheres to the community building process detailed in the steering committee charter. The charter describes steering committee member composition, operating principles, the decision-making process, and action group expectations. Members serve as carriers of information between the groups they represent (mental health, education, public health, etc.) and the rest of the committee. The purpose of the charter is to provide a documented, organized approach that all steering committee members and individuals affiliated with action groups can reference as a guide to the process.

Beginning in 2016 with the aid of a planning grant, an effort to expand the CIA's reach and support public health program capacity, community engagement, and resources across eastern Montana, the Richland County Health Department developed the Montana Public Health (MPH) Corps in collaboration with the state AmeriCorps program. MPH Corps "is a state AmeriCorps program that develops stronger communities in rural, frontier, and tribal communities across Montana. Members strive to improve the capacity of local public health departments and their partners to lead communities in addressing social determinants of health challenges."¹ As CIA and Richland County staff seek to expand MPH Corps, it is important to understand the successes and challenges of the program as well as the experiences of those engaged with the program in various capacities.

CIA has been evaluated previously by Montana State University (MSU)². The report by MSU summarizes the perspectives of key stakeholders and community residents regarding CIA, and includes a detailed historical description of CIA as it has existed in Richland County since 2005. The intent of the current report is not to restate the history of CIA, but to gain an understanding of how CIA has evolved from its inception to the present, assess the development and effectiveness of the MPH Corps, and provide recommendations to strengthen these efforts.

Evaluation goals

The primary goals of this evaluation are:

1. Evaluate MPH Corps' role in impacting the host sites' capacity for community engagement and identify strategies for program improvement.

¹ <https://www.peacecorps.gov/returned-volunteers/careers/career-link/montana-public-health-corps-mentalemotional-wellness/>

² https://www.montana.edu/energycommunities/documents/Evaluation_CommunitiesInAction.pdf

2. Assess MPH Corps' overall project for impacts on community engagement and create learning opportunities for sustaining wins and improving on challenges.

3. Assess the host site and community experience working with MPH and CIA to determine community engagement outcomes and make recommendations for program improvement and expansion.

Collectively, these goals seek to identify the strengths and areas for improvement across the CIA and MPH Corps program's structures, processes, and outcomes. Additionally, the evaluators sought to gain an understanding of the experience of serving as a MPH Corps member from the members' perspectives and that of the people they worked with, including host site supervisors and community partners. Overall, this evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of CIA/MPH Corps and provide key insights to inform the future of the program.

Methods

The primary method of data gathering for this evaluation was semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with individuals representing three primary groups: MPH Corps members, host site supervisors, and community partners. The evaluators relied on Richland County staff to identify MPH Corps members and host site supervisors to interview. Community partners were identified by both MPH Corps members and Richland County staff. Interview guides were prepared for each category of participant, and the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2022 via telephone or virtual platform calls.

Additionally, the JG Research and Evaluation (JGRE) team convened a focus group of CIA steering committee members. Interview and focus group recordings were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded. The interviewers also took notes and made observations during the interviews. The evaluation team developed the coding scheme based on lines of inquiry from interview questions and emergent themes. Qualitative analysis was completed using NVivo Qualitative Software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2022). Through application of the broad coding scheme, themes were identified and are presented as the findings of the analysis.

Groups interviewed for evaluation

To address the evaluation goals, three groups of individuals were interviewed: MPH Corps members, MPH Corps member host sites, and community partners. A focus group with members of the CIA steering committee was also convened (Table 1). Each group was interviewed using an individualized, semi-structured interview guide with some overlapping themes to allow for the comparison of their unique perspectives.

Montana Public Health Corps members

Eight members of the MPH Corps serving in Richland (3), Dawson (2), Daniels (2), and Valley (1) Counties between fall 2021 and summer 2022 were interviewed. The majority (6 of 8) of members were hosted at a local health department. Two were hosted at a community resource center, one of which was shared with a health department. The interviews covered the members' overall experience, the main focus of their service, the perceived effects of their service on the community, their experience of partnership building, and the quality of support they received from their host sites and Richland County staff.

Montana Public Health Corps host sites

Host sites included the local health departments in Richland, Dawson, and Valley Counties and the Community Resource Center in Daniels County. The five host site supervisors interviewed were asked about their decision to host MPH Corps members, the benefits and barriers associated with hosting members, the support they received from Richland County, and their experience with CIA. It is important to note that two host site supervisors interviewed were Richland County staff members who support the CIA/MPH Corps program.

Community partners

Community partners were identified by MPH Corps members and Richland County Health Department staff. In all, eight partners were interviewed representing perspectives from the faith community, youth organizations, local non-profits, economic development, and mental health providers. They were asked to discuss their organizations connection to health improvement, the benefits and barriers to working with MPH Corps members, how MPH Corps members were received by the community, and their experience with CIA.

CIA steering committee

The CIA steering is comprised of various community partners and health department staff. Members of the committee were convened for a focus group, rather than individual interviews, and were asked about the history of CIA, how CIA has evolved over time, the impact of MPH Corps on CIA, and areas where CIA could be improved.

Table 1. Number of individuals from each group interviewed.

Group	Number of Individuals
Montana Public Health Corps members	8
Montana Public Health Corps host sites	6
Community Partners	8
Communities in Action focus group	10
Total	32

Findings

Experience of Montana Public Health Corps members

Individuals serving in the MPH Corps program discussed their experience working in public health in eastern Montana, including challenges or barriers they faced during their service term; lessons learned from their experience; the effects of their service on the community; and the support they received from the community, their host sites, and Richland County staff. Members also shared their insights into how the AmeriCorps experience in general and MPH Corps specifically could be improved.

Pairing community needs with service projects

Members were asked to discuss the community health needs identified by their host sites, how those needs were identified, and if their projects were connected to those needs. Some members lead community health assessments (CHA), others drew a direct connection from a previously conducted CHA to their project, and some were more focused on capacity building within their host site than addressing specific community needs.

One member working on communication and outreach for their host site utilized the existing CHA to tailor messages to the community based on perceived needs: *So, I use that a lot when I do my social media posts to guide me. I focus on those areas, the number one being illegal drug use. And then we have alcohol abuse, obesity, cancer, things like that. So, I use that to guide me to focus a little bit more of my posts on stuff like that, because it's directly related to the county.*

Across communities, members frequently identified issues related to community mental health among adults and youth from CHA data or while working with community partners as their key focus. These issues were often related to a lack of available resources and stigma within the community. For example, one member discussed the upcoming retirement of a trusted community mental health provider and the urgent need to fill that gap. The same member identified other resource issues within the community:

In [town], the community is doing the best with what they've got. There are very little resources, mental health resources out here. If somebody needs to go to... Let's say they need treatment, or they need to go to a state hospital or something. The closest one is in Billings, and even then it's super taxing for somebody to get out there. It's difficult to get... Even just like, I don't know, just like the financial cost, the transportation cost, it's just exhausting in all realms.

The same member also discussed the limited capacity of community-based resources:

And for [organization], it could take up to two weeks before somebody can see somebody. So it's little things like that that we're finding out in the community that there's... There are resources here, but they're just exhausted because they're trying to support two different communities, sometimes even three.

Another member connected mental health needs to the CHA: *I think that for the assessment, for sure, it showed there's just a big gap between the mental health problem surrounding the area and the mental health resources available, and also kind of showed the stigma.* There were a couple different ways stigma was reported. First, privacy issues related to small town life, as discussed by a member: *I think that's a conversation that happens a lot here, is that people want to seek help, but they don't because it's a small town and small towns know everybody. And then if I know who's going there, then everyone is going to.* Second, members reported a lack of concern or understanding of the issues surrounding community mental health. As described by this member: *So kind of back to what I said about the principal, they didn't so much believe in mental health awareness and stuff.*

This member shares how their host site was committed to their project:

So, it's like myself and the [host site] brought those things here because we saw that it was a need and that I wanted to continue that work, and so they made it happen. And also, I am with super-great people that have super-big ambitions, and they are go-getters. So, if they want this done, they're going to go get it done. So even if I wasn't in this position, I feel like they would still have gotten this some way, somehow, but it just kind of worked out that I would be filling this spot come August. So yeah.

Challenges

The challenges identified by members ranged from topics like communication, planning, and lack of resources, to the timing and geographic location of their service. A common challenge among members,

and referenced by one of the host sites, was service plans or lack thereof. Host sites are expected to have a general idea of the project(s) the member will work on before they arrive and, based on the strengths and interests of the incoming member, a collaborative service plan is expected to be developed. In circumstances where service plans were incomplete or only a loosely developed outline of activities was provided, members reported feeling lost, confused, and that their time was not used as effectively as it could have been. One member reported:

Yeah. It's like a service plan essentially. And it says why you're here, what they need you for, what they want to do, what they want you to do. And gives you a general sense of direction as to where to go. I think that way more emphasis needs to be placed on that service plan. I should have had it in my hand the day that I started, and I've never even seen it. I'm sure it's somewhere, but I don't know where, and I think that's a big, big problem. The fact that it was mainly verbal as to 'We want you to help with our social media.' Well, that's a very general term, and I could also do a lot more than that.

Not only did the absence of a service plan with clearly defined goals and objectives lead to lost time and lack of direction, one member suggested a more detailed service plan would be a way to address whether the scope of their assignment was appropriate based on AmeriCorps guidelines.

Having some kind of [directory] where the host site, when they are trying to get an AmeriCorps working for them, to have a work plan already...that they want the AmeriCorps members to look at. Also, for the Richland County to look at those [work plans] and realize that: Do these need AmeriCorps members... or is this more of trying to hire a staff member?

Some members also reported that connecting with the right partners in their community was a challenge. They identified a perceived lack of trust from the community and limited knowledge of and familiarity with the small, rural communities where they served. When discussing community connections, one member whose service was based in a new community reported: *One thing that I found personally kind of a struggle was people were like, 'oh, well, when are you leaving?'* This comment highlights a perceived lack of trust from community partners who were wary of building working relationships with someone who would be leaving after their service term. Additionally, being new to the community often made it hard to identify who the gatekeepers were to get things done. As one member reflected:

I didn't meet some of the people that I probably would've benefited from knowing from day one until like month six. And I think the program could be that much more impactful if there was some overlap and like a base layer of knowledge about the community and knowing who to reach out to and knowing who does what and who works where. If that was kind of your base knowledge, right when you arrived and then you got to just bounce off that even further, you could just dive into the community that much more.

It was clear from the MPH Corps members' experiences that building trust with community members was essential to making headway on their service projects in these small, close-knit, and rural communities in eastern Montana. Yet, building trust requires time and patience, which are limited by the relatively short duration of service terms, which were as few as six months.

Additionally, those members focused on providing mental health resources and education faced the compounding challenge of addressing mental health stigma. One member felt that, even within the MPH

Corps program, the perception of both mental health services and MPH Corps members in the counties served other than Richland County have a considerably different experience of stigma. They explained: *Our experience... is world's different from what they're experiencing in Richland County, literally worlds different. People's views, people's perception on the stigma around mental health and even perception of us being there for the help, way different. Way different.*

A challenge recognized by some members was communication among different organizations within the community. Even in the small, closeknit communities in eastern Montana, members found undeveloped channels of communication lead to duplication of work or missed opportunities for collaboration. As new members of the community, it may have been easier for them to identify these opportunities than partners who have been doing the work for years. As one member said:

Oh. I think there needs to be better communication between all of the different entities in town that are doing work. Gosh. So, between the police department, the health center, the mental health center, all the different people that provide mental health services, they need to work as a team and not as siloed individuals that are working towards the same goal but individually. I think if there was more teamwork, even including adult and child protective services, and everyone that we talked to, honestly, well, not quite everybody, but a lot of the people that we spoke with, if they worked together, I think that alone would make a huge difference, even though the services wouldn't change. I think the impact would be a lot greater.

Support

Members were asked about the support they received from the community, their host sites, and the Richland County staff coordinating the MPH Corps. Members shared an overall sense of support from all three groups and provided specific examples. They also suggested ways in which support could be improved.

Despite the challenge of building trust, all members mentioned feeling supported by the communities they were there to serve. For some, it may have taken a bit of time, like this member: *But once they realized that we weren't there to change anything per se, but just to kind of help better things, they were really accepting.* For others, the experience of acceptance was more immediate: *Yeah. So, it's just like, as soon as I got out here, I had families that were reaching out to me, making sure I was settling in okay.* Some of this acceptance was partially accounted for by members because of a history of AmeriCorps service in the region and residents' familiarity with the different programs referenced in Appendix 1.

Many of the members talked about doing volunteer work in the community outside of their MPH Corps position. One member explained: *Sidney, the people are always looking for us to volunteer, lots of different groups and organizations in town are very excited to have us.* Another member shared a specific example: *I actually did volunteer for their Thanksgiving dinner, and the community was very supportive on that.* Others reported their positive MPH Corps experience led them to accept positions and stay in the community: *Yeah, I love it here. That's why I'm staying.*

When asked specifically about support from Richland County staff members, nearly all members agreed that they felt supported and shared that, if they ever needed something, they felt they could ask for it and get it. One member reported: *So I felt supported, because if I needed anything, I know that they would help me. And I know that they would be there if I reached out to them.* Another said: *100%, I think that the team*

that we worked directly with every day was great, but also the Community in Action team was great, and it was wonderful. Even members who needed assistance in communities outside of Richland County reported feeling supported by staff. One member discussed a time when they were addressing a specific issue: That was just super helpful to know that they would literally make time to sit down face to face with us and be like, 'What are the three things that we could tackle and help you tackle?' That was just super great. They were wonderful.

Overall, members also felt supported by their host sites. Several members had overwhelmingly positive experiences interacting with their host sites. When asked if they felt supported, one member reported: *Absolutely. I have never been in a more holistically welcoming and comfortable environment to work in. It's probably the best place I've ever worked.* Others mentioned they felt like they were treated as an equal member of staff and not as separate from the host site because they were an MPH Corps member. One member remarked: *I feel supported because I [was] able to ask questions and get answers.* Some members even mentioned invitations from co-workers to community events, holiday gatherings, and other activities outside of the work environment.

A few members, however, did express some frustrations, particularly around communicating with their host site. For one member, the support from their host site was mixed, and misunderstandings seemed to stem from their host site's lack of understanding of AmeriCorps and the MPH Corps in particular. When asked about the support of their host site, they explained:

Yes and no because yes, they were there. They helped me out, but a lot of times I felt they didn't know what AmeriCorps in detail is because every time my host site would present me, they called me a VISTA, which... As I understand, a VISTA is different from what I am because I'm a Montana Public Health Corps member, not a VISTA.

In general, members felt that if they faced a challenge or had a question, they could find answers from either their host sites or Richland County staff members. Areas for improved support included the host site having a clear understanding of the MPH Corps program, and AmeriCorps in general, and setting clear expectations for members' service.

Lessons learned

Members shared insights they thought might be helpful for future MPH Corps members, site supervisors, and staff to hear and recalled lessons they learned along the way that will continue to help them in the future. One member reflected it may have taken them too long to start asking for help or direction during their service: *Asking for help would've been great. And that's on me.* This sentiment may help future MPH Corps members engage with their host site supervisors earlier to avoid prolonged periods of confusion.

Most members were from other parts of the country and found the culture and belief systems in eastern Montana to be different from their own. While this dichotomy did not cause any overt problems during their service, they thought it was important for future MPH Corps members to have this understanding beforehand to be prepared for questions about themselves. As this member recalls:

They are very politically driven there, and my political views didn't necessarily align with theirs, which was fine because we're not up and talking about that stuff. But they'll ask you your religious and political views. So, kind of to them, [asking gets at] another thing...Can we trust this person? Not saying that they think all people that don't think the same are

untrustworthy, but it's a little harder, especially if we were in the schools. Well, I don't want this person teaching my child things. They don't believe the same things I do. That was a big thing in the community. It was kind of hard to get away from that because I didn't want to not have their trust, but I just didn't feel comfortable discussing my religious or political views. So, the big thing was just being like, "oh, AmeriCorps just says that we can't discuss our views," just so it didn't cause me tension or anything.

While communicating with members of the community came with its challenges, members explained that building strategic relationships and finding creative ways to connect with gatekeepers were key to establishing trust in the community and making progress on projects. For example, one member suggested that persistence was key, either related to getting folks to return calls and emails or gaining access to the groups they were there to serve, primarily youth. When discussing programming at schools, one member shared:

So, getting into the schools is very, very difficult here. The principals can be very stubborn. So, what I did instead of... Obviously, I didn't ignore the principals, but I, I made connections with specific teachers who then spread the word for me and then was able to form relationships with them instead of going through the higher ups and was able to bring my project into specific classrooms.

Echoing the thoughts shared above about connecting with individual teachers, another member suggested the importance of getting out into the community and trying to meet as many people as possible. Members also shared that establishing their own connection to specific, respected individuals at the host site lent them credibility: *It helped to have our team members in the community, and people know you can trust [supervisor] or [supervisor] or whoever we are working with. So, they're like, oh, [member] is with them. I think that we could trust them.*

Collectively, these lessons suggest MPH Corps members connect with as many community members as possible and be prepared to have uncomfortable conversations with them, as these interactions develop trust and build relationships.

Areas for improvement

MPH Corps members identified areas of improvement, including increasing opportunities to connect with other AmeriCorps members in the area, continuity of service terms, and increased information sharing across the program. Specifically, facilitating a connection between all the AmeriCorps members serving in eastern Montana was mentioned by several members as something that could have improved their experience. One member mentioned how useful it could have been to meet other members earlier in their service term,

We had our symposium in March, and we got to find out that there are other AmeriCorps members in other programs living in Eastern Montana that we had no idea about. And we really wished that we would've known that they were there the whole time, because that could have been connections we could have made for more people who are in the same position as us in case we ever felt lost or needed more community of people who understand exactly what we're going through. And so that would've been nice to have the whole time.

Members also suggested a connection, either in person or via documentation, with MPH Corps members serving immediately prior to them, especially if the new members were tasked with carrying existing projects forward. Members felt this level of continuity would facilitate easier connections within the community earlier in the term, resulting in less time spent idle while waiting for responses:

But basically, and I know that this is across the board with everybody that I've talked to in AmeriCorps local to where I am, is the first probably three months of your service is just spent figuring out what the heck you're doing and where you are. And I feel like that can be so easily avoided with a little bit more organization.

Some members suggested better integration and resource sharing within their host site and among the members of the MPH Corps as another area of improvement. As this member related: *I often just felt we were out of the loop, I guess you could say. And often jealous of the opportunity that the members had in Richland County, because they were very much so involved in everything, and we were always the last to find out and the last to know what's going on. And that was definitely frustrating.* Similarly, at their own host site, they did not feel included:

When I say included, I don't mean invite me out to dinner and stuff like that. I mean included in the sense of what's going on in the [host site], what every department does and what every department is in charge of and all of the services that they offer. They just were [like] "Oh, it's another AmeriCorps member. Great. She's helping with [project]. And they didn't really utilize me to my fullest potential. I kind of had to force my way in. So, I think they could do a better job at making us feeling included in the professional sense.

While some of the areas for improvement suggested by members stem from challenges related to the AmeriCorps program structure more broadly, their recommendations centered on creating a well-connected community of service members within the MPH Corps program, both across time and space—service terms and geography.

Host site experience

Host site supervisors shared their experiences working with and hosting MPH Corps members, including the benefits and barriers of hosting members, the effects of members on their organization, the community response to members, and the support they received from Richland County. Like the members themselves, host site supervisors provided suggestions to improve the MPH Corps.

Benefits and impacts of hosting

According to the host sites, one of the biggest benefits of hosting a MPH Corps member was the added capacity they bring to their organization allowing them to provide opportunities in the communities they serve that would otherwise not be feasible. For example, members initiated successful after school programs, youth groups, safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, and community gardens. A host site reflected on the benefits: *They come with energy and the willingness to learn and serve the community.* After their service term, some members: *stayed around here, which is pretty neat.* Host sites also expressed that their experiences hosting members have always been generative regardless of the project outcomes: *Sometimes we've learned what we didn't want, but every single one of them has brought something, and it's a real asset for our community. We're fortunate to have them.*

Host sites also appreciated exposure to the members' differing perspectives, both professionally and personally:

And I think they're very helpful in many aspects, especially it's nice to get a new view, not just in work, but in our personal lives, getting to know each other and everything and seeing what everybody else's lives were like. And it's just nice to have a new aspect. So, it's nice to get people from out of state... [it's] been very nice and helpful.

This sentiment was reiterated in the benefits the members transferred to the communities they served. Not only was the outside perspective appreciated, but their status as a "newcomer" could be advantageous,

The whole purpose is you come in with an outside view. What's the problem that you see that we didn't see? And they get here, and they'll look through data. They'll get out into the community; they'll meet people. People will say things. They're an outsider. They're a safe place of complaint because who they're complaining about, they're not going to know, and that's usually sometimes where they get their ideas.

A specific example mentioned by a host site was a member's ability to help with technology. They created a text bot for Covid-19 follow-up that saved the health department a considerable amount of time communicating with patients, an improvement that would not have been possible without the member. As this host site supervisor recalls: *And it cut down, the efficiency, [the time] she saved us was incredible and none of us had those skills to build that.* In addition to the fresh ideas and perspectives they bring from their own experiences, the energy the members bring to their communities to implement the new ideas did not go unnoticed. Several supervisors mentioned feelings of fatigue and burnout among host site staff that can often be buoyed by the energy members bring to their organization. As this supervisor shared: *This is truly a unique opportunity to get expertise and energy, to help you with something that you just haven't been able to devote the time to.*

Host site supervisors were also asked to describe a project they supervised that, from their perspective, was viewed as the most impactful. One supervisor recalled work related to a youth-specific action group that was identified as an important missing piece of CIA:

If it's able to remain sustainable, and we're able to get the support, we have a member who created a youth action group that we have interest in from the community. But the sustainability beyond that, if we can keep that sustainable, I think that would be one of the greatest that our members have been able to implement. Realizing, when I first got here, I was looking at communities in action and the piece missing is the youth. We're constantly trying to recruit youth and how can we support youth, but none of the groups have youths.

Host sites commented that, beyond specific projects, members effectively increase the diversity of perspectives present in their rural communities: *I think it broadens the perspective of our community to bring in people from other walks of life and other areas of our country. A lot of them have become very immersed in our community and in our culture.*

Other sites echoed the increase in capacity that members provide, and those with a more historical perspective of CIA shared the original intent of bringing AmeriCorps members to the community was to help with the work of the CIA action groups. One host site supervisor put this into context:

Anyway, no, the thing is, in Eastern Montana we just don't have the capacity to do a lot of the work that we need to do. So, for CIA, not only did we do the strategic planning and get these action groups to work together, we were able to also, okay, as an agency, you want to work with this action group and work on your capacity. We were able to supply an AmeriCorps member to help with the work, which that is incredible.

A specific example of the positive effect on capacity provided by a host site was related to COVID-19 vaccinations. It was not a part of the member's work plan, but they stepped up anyway: *helping us with calls and helping get everything moving and volunteering for things that they really didn't have to.* One comment summed up the overall sentiment nicely: *Just the increase in capacity. Our organizations are able to get so much more done.*

Barriers to hosting

Some of the most frequently mentioned barriers by host sites included the brief nature of service terms and the uncertainty that comes with being able to continuously recruit members year after year. For these host site organizations serving rural communities in eastern Montana, MPH Corps members have the potential to offer significant benefits to organizational capacity and community engagement, but there are notable concerns related to long-term sustainability.

Host sites suggested that relying on MPH Corps members from year to year can be difficult because it is necessary for individuals to apply to the program, and they cannot guarantee a constant presence. For one site in particular, the gap between members was long enough that the momentum for projects was gone by the time the next member was placed. Due to a lack of applications, the gap was longer than expected and resulted in the member's late placement. In addition to losing project momentum, the member missed out on opportunities to bond with others. As this host site supervisor reported,

So then [the member] didn't get here until January, and so that was harder, because it would've been better if [the member] had started with us all at the beginning, because the things that they do with group building and bonding with other AmeriCorps people, they had done all of that. By the time [the member] got here, there wasn't so much available, and [the member], I think, felt a little left out and lost.

Host sites cited the inability to guarantee MPH Corps members as a reason they do not have clear tasks planned for the members upon arrival. They do not want to prepare work for a member when they may not receive a placement. As one host site summarized the issue: *if you don't get somebody, then who does the job?* A similar sentiment was shared by another host site with a longer history of hosting members:

Some of the discouragements, and I know that this isn't super specific to the Montana Public Health Corp, but we really can't count on getting them because recruitment is an issue. So, we're lucky to get them, but I can't necessarily reserve projects thinking that I'm going to get an AmeriCorps member because I might not get one.

Funding was also identified as a barrier. While the MPH Corps program makes increasing capacity more affordable, host sites can find it difficult to come up with the matching requirement to host a MPH Corps member when resources are already stretched thin. As this supervisor related: *And I think the funding is also where it falls, trying to make sure that we have that funding because I think there's a matching problem with the county. Everything we do goes through the county, so we don't really have much freedom.*

Related to challenges with recruitment and being able to secure funding, some host sites acknowledged a lack of program and staffing sustainability as a potential barrier or downside associated with hosting MPH Corps members due to the length of service terms. Host sites suggested a greater emphasis on sustainability in their own planning could alleviate some of the effects of this issue. One host suggested: *For sustainability, I think that we need to focus a little bit more on that sustainability portion though. I'm not sure our communities are always prepared to take over where the AmeriCorps members leave off.*

Host sites also shared that the unpredictable levels of training members arrive with can be challenging to navigate. In instances where members are not as autonomous as the host expected, they may perceive an additional burden of having to train and shepherd a new member more intensively than was necessary with previous members. For example: *And then this year, it's just really hard to compare. The personalities are very different. The abilities are very different, and being only one person, and then a whole lot less guidance this year, for one person. So, it was never going to be comparable really.* However, as another host suggested, mentorship and training is part of the responsibility of the host site:

This is not an employee. So, in addition to you have this idea of what they're going to work on, the other piece, which is a unique part of this, is the mentorship part. The idea is they're coming to you with a certain amount of knowledge and energy, but they want to get something out of it too. So, it's that time piece that you've started out is the willingness to meet with them and get to know them and mentor them or at least help them guide them with their projects and be with them in the community. It's like an employee, but I think it's a little bit, a little bit more that. You just can't train them and let them go. It's more of a consistent piece throughout the year.

Support from Richland County

Overall, host sites felt well-supported by Richland County staff. Although they did not share specific details regarding the type of support they asked for or received, they did share the sentiment that Richland County staff would be there when and if they needed them. One host site reflected this experience: *I mean, [if] there's anything that I have ever asked, or anything, it's been, they've been really responsive.*

Host sites primarily mentioned issues related to service plan development when describing where they would appreciate additional support. Supervisors shared occurrences when the site did not have a service plan in place or had difficulty pulling one together. As this host site supervisor recalls: *Plus with the second year, we didn't have a work plan in place. I don't know if that was an oversight or because it was the middle of the year, or because we just knew that everything with COVID was our priority.* Another site supervisor shared feelings of confusion resulting from the lack of a service plan and not having a clear understanding of what should be included:

That wasn't really very well communicated, I would say, because we didn't know if there [were] certain things that they needed to focus on and stuff like that. So, it was hard to figure out where to put [the member] and what to have them do and just [have] things for them to focus on, we didn't exactly know which area to do that. So, that's where a site plan would come into handy.

Areas for improvement

When asked to identify areas in which they felt the program could be improved, host sites mentioned clearer guidance and support when recruiting and onboarding service members and increased communication and feedback from the Richland County staff supporting the program.

Host sites and Richland County staff identified a few areas where improved communication could be a benefit moving forward. First, host sites would like to receive feedback regarding how they are performing. One host suggested: *And I should get some feedback, too, how we are doing or how I'm doing. And I haven't had any.* Second, host sites would like to receive a more formalized orientation that includes a discussion regarding what is in the MPH Corps manual and more training on service plan development and allowable activities.

When asked about areas of improvement, Richland County staff said they were already thinking about some of these things. One staff member suggested: *I already foresee some possible things that I should be providing next year. I want to do regular host site check-ins, which I have not done. And I see that needs to be done after some issues that we've had this last year.* Another Richland County staff member shared the importance of service plans: *We found there's more success with the host sites that work closely with their member and have check-ins and are a part of their service plan and a desire to make sure they are developing and utilizing the service plan.* Regarding the service plan, one member said: *me and [the staff need to be] a little more specific, like, "Hey you guys have a month to figure it out, and then we really need to see that service plan of where you're at with your member and know that's going to be your guide for the next year."*

Community partners

Among the community partners interviewed, there were representatives from county departments, youth-focused non-profits, a church, and mental health services. Partners discussed their experiences collaborating with MPH Corps members in the community with responses ranging from general impressions to specific projects they partnered on. They also shared benefits and barriers to working with MPH Corps members, insights regarding community perception and acceptance of MPH Corps members, and their thoughts on becoming host sites.

Benefits of working with members

When speaking about the benefits of MPH Corps members in their communities, partners mentioned the members' ability to integrate themselves throughout the community, the increased capacity they provided, and their fresh perspective and consistent presence. As one partner remarked:

I think that they just, I guess, and this could be just the two different sets that we've had, but they're just involved in everything. They are ready to try everything. And it's kind of impressive that they're able to come into such a small community, especially for the [members] we've had in the past that come from pretty big communities, that they're so willing to just be involved and be in projects. They've come to every meeting I've invited them into. They've always been willing to just do whatever the community has to offer, I guess.

Another partner reflected upon their experience working with MPH Corps members: *AmeriCorps is vital to continuing to grow the mental health awareness in our community. I can't speak for anyone else's community, but in our community they're vital. Without them, many of the initiatives that have been thought*

up would've probably stalled out. And finally, regarding a specific project: Absolutely. It wouldn't have happened without them. Yes, absolutely.

The members also provide community partners with additional capacity they otherwise would not have. For example, through a partnership with two MPH Corps members, a community partner shared that they were able to add a communication committee to their coalition with the sole focus of providing information about available community resources to support mental health, physical health, and treatment. Without the work provided by the members, the partner explained that they would not have been able to address this particular need that was identified in their CHA.

A community partner who is active on their county's Local Advisory Council (for Mental Health) credits much of the growth of mental health awareness in their community to the work of MPH Corps members. As they shared:

Part of my time on the board of the regional side of things is I got to see and interact with LACs all over Eastern Montana. And so, it gave me perspective of just how awesome our county is doing and in the large part that's because of AmeriCorps and what it's been doing and how it's been serving. It's just, I've met and interacted with many AmeriCorps members that are really awesome, that do really good work.

Barriers to working with members

One community partner mentioned the members placed in their community sometimes arrive in their positions lacking real world experience. This same partner followed up that this was not necessarily a "negative" because they are there to learn, and that is part of why they are working with community partners in the first place. To address this, one community partner suggests:

[The] other part of it is, just on my end, I try to take the position of asking questions more than making statements. I've been in meetings before where other adults older than me would be like, "No, that won't work here," kind of a thing. And I'd rather not say that. I'd rather go, "Well, why do you think this would work here?" And so, I try to ask those kind of questions to at least have them think critically and then maybe a different perspective of, well, this is a great idea, but does it work here and why would it work here? Often that question to me ends up leading to a really good discussion of the context in which they're working, so I don't really have to say a whole lot after that

Partners discussed the stipulations around the types of activities members could participate in as another barrier. As this community partner explained: *The rules are they're not supposed to do all the work. They're supposed to find or get volunteers... So, that's sometimes challenging because they need to...It's a delicate balance to try to... They need to work alongside of them. In small towns, sometimes you just have to... Everybody has to pitch in.* When asked how this issue could be addressed, the partner stated: *Rather than do it themselves. It just... Building relationships takes time.* While the rules regarding member participation are limiting, community partners can work within the guidelines to get the work done.

Community acceptance

Partners shared that the community is excited to embrace new MPH Corps members, and members typically receive a warm welcome: *Oh, I'd say they're very welcomed. Yeah. Certainly not negatively.* Another partner shared: *We love getting new AmeriCorps [members] because they're everywhere all the time, and it's so*

great. A partner with a historical perspective on AmeriCorps presence in eastern Montana shared that it may not have always been that way, but the community did not take too long to embrace AmeriCorps members:

Initially there definitely was a little bit of suspicion. And there were some that, if they had a bad experience in the past... But over the years, that fell away and honestly people were really happy to have them. After they saw how much they gave to the community, people were very happy to have them in the community. They were well- received, and people were really happy.

Overall, the community partners interviewed expressed that AmeriCorps members are welcomed by the community. Similar to what host site supervisors shared in the previous section, community partners shared stories of members who did not fit with the community, but, again, this was a rare occurrence.

In general, community partners expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with MPH Corps members and shared few barriers and several benefits of these partnerships. While partners did not feel that they had the funding or supervisory capacity to host members themselves, they felt that their partnerships provided considerable benefit for their organizations and the community. Based on the feedback from partners, the MPH Corps program effectively increases community engagement for community partners.

Communities in Action steering committee

CIA steering committee members shared the history and role of CIA, how CIA has affected the community, and the involvement of MPH Corps members in CIA. In addition to the focus group, community partners and host sites with a history of working with CIA shared their experiences during interviews. Both groups discussed challenges and successes and offered suggestions for improvement.

When speaking generally about CIA, steering committee members, as well as community partners, were able to articulate the process involved in CIA. This included using the results of the CHA to identify where the CIA action groups were in alignment with community needs and where efforts may need to be shifted. Steering committee members also reflected on the importance of CIA for achieving Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) accreditation:

I started going to the steering committee meetings to find out exactly what everybody was doing and where I could pull documentation from and who I need to be in touch with. Basically, the overall, everything that's happening in Richland County. It was impressive of actually how much I did learn about what was going on around here in our county, and it was, like I said, it was a huge, huge way that we [had a] successful way for us to get accredited.

Steering committee members also discussed how the Richland County CIA was able to share its success with surrounding counties. As this steering committee member described: *Let's just say Sheridan County didn't have a behavior health local advisory council, and with the help of us here in Richland County and Daniels County, we help them implement or help them restart their behavioral health local advisory council using the CIA's structure.* Community partners reflected on the importance of collaborating to achieve similar goals:

I love the collective impact. I like having people that are down with the same goal, working together, having multiple organizations invest some of their time and resources to either put

on an event or just do anything that's within the strategic plan. That would absolutely be my favorite part.

And the benefit of having a diverse group of partners working together:

Oh, it's really opened a lot of doors to us. So, my staff will always say, "Why do we go to these meetings?" But after they go for a while, they'll see, "Oh, we can partner with this group on this," and "Oh, this group is helping us with that," or "Oh, we can help this group with that." So, it really helps us create partnerships in the community and that's essential for a nonprofit.

MPH Corps and CIA

Sustainability was mentioned as a barrier to working with MPH Corps members by some on the steering committee. A few of the specific issues related to sustainability included:

[a member] had everything on the computer. And a year and a half later we're wondering, we can't even find the damn computer. That was a mess. That was something that shouldn't have happened, but we didn't think about it when AmeriCorps will work on something and they're here for a year and then they're gone and what he or she was working on, that was it, and there's no continuity to the next AmeriCorps or the next volunteer.

Other steering committee members offered a different perspective while considering the short term that MPH Corps members are there. As discussed by this steering committee member: *The problem that we run into sometimes is, like, the whole purpose is continuity or sustainability. It's the action group; they're supposed to be working with the action group to say, "Who is this action group is going to take on ... What organization is going to take over?"* In this light, it is not the responsibility of individual MPH Corps member to make their project sustainable, but rather, should be a collective effort among the community organizations that make up the action group to see to that the program or initiative is sustainable moving forward.

One MPH Corps member shared their involvement with CIA:

So, my primary goal through my service term was actually to start a Youth Wellbeing Action group that could serve in Communities in Action to unite all the key stakeholders in the community working with youth and then eventually evolved to youth led engagement as well. So, I want in the future for there to be a subcommittee.

This member further reflected on the successful rollout of the action group and the planning that had occurred to address sustainability and future leadership of both community stakeholders and MPH Corps members.

Similar to the remarks of community partners in the previous section, steering committee members discussed the benefits of the outside perspective that MPH Corps members bring to the CIA. As this steering committee member shared: *And, of course, more benefit is going to be having that ... what [a steering committee member] said earlier, having an outside perspective, having somebody else come into our community and teach us something new, bring a new perspective into our community.* Another steering committee member highlighted the importance of that outside perspective for youth in the community: *I*

think it's been really good for our kids to get a different perspective. I think we've gotten some new programs going that we didn't have before, some new initiatives.

The MPH Corps members' work has resulted in new programs and positions with the positive effect of increasing capacity not only to their host organizations but to the CIA initiative as a whole. This steering committee member shared the following:

Some additional benefit is going to be that they create programs, but also they create positions, right? So, we've had a few AmeriCorps members would come in and created this position that we have later been able to get funding for. And that doesn't happen too terribly a lot in some of the communities around us. So, we're very unique in that aspect, and so that's been a huge win for our community.

Lasting contributions of MPH Corps members include the resources they create during their service. This steering committee member reflected upon the importance of one project:

We had a couple of our AmeriCorps members many moons ago created [who] a workbook, if you will, or a toolkit so that other communities could take this program and [use it] in their communities. And I have done that with two other communities. So, Daniels County and Sheridan County follow the same ... a similar process and were able to get some of their different coalitions up and going specific to behavioral health because of the Communities in Action work that we did, and then because of the toolkit that was created by an AmeriCorps member.

Often, as this steering committee member shared, the impact of MPH Corps members can simply be summarized: *I think that's the impact... to help lighten the load of the people.*" This sentiment was consistent among individuals across the CIA network, including community partners, members of the CIA steering committee, and host organizations.

Challenges and suggestions

A main challenge for CIA, as identified by study participants, is to continue its effectiveness over time. This idea was reflected in many of the comments made during the focus group. Study participants also discussed the related challenge of expanding the implementation of the CIA model to other communities in eastern Montana. This steering committee member shared their thoughts about the applicability of CIA to other communities:

And they're not big enough to where they're going to be able to have a CIA. And part of that is because they don't have somebody ... So as an example, CIA right now only continues to exist because we have an organization that has made it ... So, it's always been kind of at the health department and so the health department is always given an employee to kind of maintain the administrative pieces of CIA. And then now we have the AmeriCorps program that truly is funded to maintain CIA. So, some of these smaller counties, they wouldn't necessarily be able to, without the help of a staff person to be able to maintain CIA. So that doesn't mean that they can't use the structure of CIA to kind of help coordinate those different siloed organizations or those different siloed coalitions in their counties and that kind of stuff. In a bigger area, they could do this, no problem.

Steering committee members called out issues impacting CIA that were a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including engagement with volunteers and the perception of the health department. During the pandemic, folks who would typically engage with CIA as volunteers remained largely isolated due to health precautions and reengaging with them has been challenging. Regarding the effect of the pandemic on community perception of the health department, this steering committee member said: *for a long time during COVID, everyone just associated the health department with COVID and that can have a negative connotation depending on whether you thought it was a good interaction or not.*

While reflecting on the original intent behind forming CIA and its evolution over time, steering committee members shared their interpretations of the process. The initial motivation was to engage leadership from a diverse group of community stakeholders whose influence could affect policy change. With this in mind, CIA recruited county commissioners, non-profit leaders, foundations, and business and economic leaders. Committee members also desired someone from outside of the health department serve as the chair, bringing a different perspective from those who: *were doing it for a living.*

As CIA evolved and focused on community and public health, the steering committee membership changed to reflect this focus. However, steering committee members still sought to involve decision makers, motivating them to make a change in member composition to attract individuals in leadership positions. Despite their intent, a combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of leadership engagement has brought the CIA steering committee back to where it started: *so now it's back to all of us worker bees. So, everybody here that shows up, they're also part of this one or many action groups and we're the ones that are doing the work and giving the input and that kind of stuff.*

Many of the suggestions to improve CIA can be categorized as process changes, whether in the form of improved communication from the steering committee to action groups or in the composition of the steering committee. For example, one steering committee member suggested providing greater autonomy to action groups by getting out of the way after giving them suggestions on how to address a community issue: *then they can work on the problem, and [we can] trust them to work on the problem.*

Regarding the makeup of the CIA steering committee, this former member recalled:

When I first got on the Communities Action I was on the steering committee and there were like 50 names on that list from all these different places that I'm talking about, but none of them ever came to the meetings. And so it would be the Health Department and me and now the steering committee has shrunk up...

The desire to diversify participation in CIA was shared among community partners. A few community partners thought mixing up steering committee membership, or at least who attends the meetings, to change the perception that CIA is primarily an extension of the health department could be beneficial. One community partner shared: *I think the business community, and I think the schools, the schools have played a real small role, and I think the schools need to have a heavier role and probably the medical community as well.* Another community partner suggested that, even though the CIA has been: *in operation for over a decade, there are: still a lot of people in this community, most of the people I would say, don't even know that it exists.* Although this is only one partner's perspective, an emphasis on outreach could have positive effect in the effort to rebuild and re-envision CIA.

Related to the perception of CIA being an extension of the health department is the idea of shared oversight, including leadership and decision making. As explained by this former steering committee member:

So, as a health department, we probably didn't do a great job of explaining to other agencies, maybe, how this whole thing worked and engaging other people in that process. So, a lot of times it looked like we were the one, we were pushing it, we were carrying it, which we were. So, it looked like we were driving the bus. Yeah. It was a health department's project.

This same participant went on to say: *But you got to let other agencies be in charge. And probably that maybe we didn't let go of enough.*

Among those who were formerly active in CIA, some shared they eventually became unsure of what their role or contribution was. One former member reflected that they continued to “represent” a sector that they had not been professionally involved in for many years. As another former member saw it: *We're not super relevant to cancer prevention or the increase of physical activity and decrease of obesity. So, for me, I didn't feel like I had a lot of relevance with what they had going on, albeit something I wanted to support.*

Finally, one former member pointed out the problem faced by nearly all collaborative community efforts: *I think the problem which always is, it's the turnover on the leadership role. You get these relationships going and then somebody leaves, or their position changes and, really, trying to get this process integrated.*

The CIA steering committee has ebbed and flowed over its tenure. Now, as it reflects on its purpose and structure, what is clear is that the MPH Corps program has a notable effect on CIA's ability to achieve its goals and expand the impact of CIA across eastern Montana. One steering committee member stated: *I think that we would have a really hard time if we lost the AmeriCorps program.* Another member explained that the intention of establishing the MPH Corps program was to be the boots on the ground moving CIA's vision forward. Despite the challenges and changing circumstances CIA has faced, MPH Corps has proven to be a buoy to the initiative.

Key takeaways

Benefits of MPH Corps

- Members effectively increase organizational capacity and community engagement of host sites, community partners, and CIA network
- Members introduce new perspectives and innovative ideas to increase community engagement and promote behavioral health outreach and education
- Members have successfully introduced new programs and resources in rural eastern Montana communities
- Collectively, MPH Corps has expanded the reach and capacity of CIA
- In some cases, members have stayed in the community in positions related to their service, resulting in a long-term increase in capacity for the community

Barriers of MPH Corps

- While the MPH Corps structure is more affordable than hiring a full-time staff member, generating sufficient funding to meet the matching requirement can be challenging for organizations

- Consistent recruitment of new members is challenging and threatens the sustainability of programs
- The length of service terms is relatively short and, without overlap or continuity between terms, there is an unnecessary catch-up period for new members
- Lack of communication between Richland County staff, host sites, and members can result in misunderstandings and confusion that result in members feeling lost or having to duplicate previous efforts, costing time and momentum

Areas for improvement of MPH Corps program

- Communication across the MPH Corps program (i.e., between members, between Richland County and host sites, and between members and host sites)
- Continuity between service terms either through direct communication between outgoing and incoming members or a compilation of resources by the outgoing member
- Explicit guidelines and training for new host sites regarding MPH Corps program rules and expectations
- Improved marketing for service positions and stronger strategies for member recruitment

Recommendations

Member experience

- Continue to recruit members to serve in the MPH Corps. Outside of a few occasions when a particular member placement did not work out, there was nearly universal praise for members from host site supervisors and community partners alike. The energy, perspective, creativity, and increased capacity provided by the members is invaluable to communities continually combating issues related to limited resources.
- Clearly and consistently communicate the types of activities that fit within the scope of MPH Corps members' role. The communities in eastern Montana are familiar with and welcoming to AmeriCorps because of the long history of service in the region through a variety of different AmeriCorps programs identified in Appendix 1. However, this can sometimes lead to confusion among community partners and host sites as they may not be aware of the subtle differences regarding allowable activities of the different programs. At times during the interviews with community partners, it was apparent they lacked clarity about any distinctions between the allowable service activities of different AmeriCorps member types.
- Members support the consistent use of service plans. They would prefer to have a detailed service plan in place, created in tandem with their host site supervisors, to use as a reference to guide their service. They felt this could reduce time spent spinning their wheels, primarily at the start of their service term, and keep them focused, feeling confident they knew what they were supposed to be doing. Some host sites also suggested that they would like guidance and support in developing service plans. Richland County staff recognized the issue and plan to emphasize service plans in the future.
- Identify times and strategies to bring together MPH Corps members as well as those from other AmeriCorps programs serving in the region. Members expressed an interest in knowing earlier in the term that there were other AmeriCorps members, aside from the MPH Corps, residing in eastern Montana. In addition to the practical benefits of improved collaboration in the

community, members suggested that having someone to connect with who is going through many of the same things could be beneficial. This is highlighted by the fact that many of the members come from across the United States and have very different backgrounds from many of the residents in the communities they serve.

- Ensure members are well-integrated into their host sites. Some members shared that they felt like they had been relegated to one specific task and were not given the chance to get to know the other programs at their host sites. Especially among those with a focus on communication and outreach, members expressed that it would have made their job more productive if they had a broader understanding of the host site. Host sites should be encouraged to treat MPH Corps members as part of their organization's staff and provide opportunities for members to develop rapport within the organization.

Host site experience

- Provide regular feedback to host sites regarding their performance. Some site supervisors mentioned an interest in hearing "how they were doing" from the Richland County staff. They shared their experience reporting the required elements of the MPH Corps but lamented they never received any feedback. By receiving feedback throughout the service term, issues of miscommunication between host sites, Richland County staff, and members will likely be minimized, and members will more consistently have clear direction for their projects.
- Identify strategies to bring different partners into the fold as host sites. Most host site supervisors interviewed for this evaluation were from health departments. Community partners were asked during interviews if they had ever considered hosting an MPH Corps member, and while some had in the past or in a previous position, others responded that they hadn't considered it because they didn't know they could.

CIA and community partner experience

- Invite non-traditional partners to participate in CIA. Although the membership list of CIA may appear diverse, those who participated in interviews and the focus group suggested attendance is typically made up of the same familiar faces. There was a sentiment expressed by some that the CIA steering committee feels like another health department group, consisting of mostly health department staff. This was partially attributed to the pursuit of PHAB accreditation, requiring the health department to increase documentation of CIA activities, and to the feeling that someone needed to move things forward, and the health department had the staff to ensure that happened. While neither of the reasons is inherently bad, diversification of membership and sharing of decision-making authority may help strengthen CIA moving forward.
- Related to the previous recommendation, identify gaps on the CIA steering committee. Identify both traditional and non-traditional public health partners who are in a position to contribute leadership skills and time to action groups. To address concerns from community partners who are unsure of their role in CIA, utilize data sources complimentary to the CHA or evidence-based practices demonstrating successful public health partnerships with organizations that represent their sector (i.e. business).
- Enhance communication. Share the successes as well as the goals and objectives of CIA action groups with the community. During the course of this evaluation, participants who had previously been involved with CIA reported a lack of awareness of the current action groups. Additionally, a

former steering committee member and community partner suggested there is a large portion of the population in Richland County that is unaware of CIA and the work it does.

- Continue to incorporate youth into CIA. Progress had been made to add a youth-specific action group, thanks to the work of a recent MPH Corps member, and should be prioritized moving forward. MPH Corps members, host sites, and community partners all agreed that an action group focused on youth, with youth leadership, needs to be supported.
- Be strategic about how MPH Corps can support and broaden the CIA program, ensuring that members are not simply more hands-on deck but there to implement the CIA framework in their respective communities. The CIA program is a consistent presence that can help support MPH Corps members while addressing some of the issues of program sustainability that were mentioned regarding the MPH Corps.

The MPH Corps and CIA have made real, concrete improvements to public health amid challenges associated with limited resources and low population densities in eastern Montana. MPH Corps members have applied their energy, creativity, and differing perspectives to connect with local youth and provide opportunities they likely would not have had otherwise. These include providing safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and opportunities for youth to learn about and discuss the transitions from middle school to high school and from high school to college, trade school, or a full-time job. Members have also been critical in carrying out community health assessments. Their roles in the CHA process have included planning, implementing, and analyzing and sharing data. These assessments frequently identify mental health and a lack of mental health resources as community issues, and MPH Corps members frequently work on projects to address these issues. The community outreach they provide has addressed mental health stigma through conversations with residents, and the additional capacity helps bring in more resources for mental health like Catalyst for Change.

CIA has helped the community address a housing shortage resulting from the Bakken oil boom, provided a process and opportunity for collective impact, and aided in the Richland County Health Department achieving Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) accreditation. The addition of the MPH Corps as a strategy to increase capacity for CIA has led to the creation of new, permanent positions at the health department and partner organizations. In this area of limited resources, the MPH Corps, CIA, and their collaborative effects have had tangible and lasting impact on community health.

Appendix 1.

AmeriCorps programs currently or previously active in eastern Montana and others referenced in discussion by a community partner.

AmeriCorps Programs in Montana	Primary Role
Big Sky Watershed Corps	Improve and protect at-risk watershed ecosystems.
Montana Public Health Corps	Add capacity for rural, frontier, and tribal health departments.
Montana Campus Compact	Connect first generation and low-income Montanans to postsecondary educational opportunities.
Justice for Montanans Project	Empower low to moderate income residents to advocate for themselves.
Montana State Parks AmeriCorps	Improve capacity, education, and outreach in state parks.
Billings Metro VISTA Project	Support residents in poverty in Billings Metro Area.
Montana Campus Compact VISTA	Connect campus resources with critical community needs.
Montana Community VISTA Partnership	Prevent unintended and unhealthy pregnancies, child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, and crime and violence.
Rural Dynamics, Inc	Bring financial security to all Montanans.
Montana Conservation Corps	Improve trails and habitat in wildlands.
Habitat for Humanity AmeriCorps	Build and renovate houses, strengthen communities, and develop construction and leadership skills.
Volunteers in Action MT/RSVP	Improve health outcomes locally and regionally.
Jesuit Volunteer Corps Northwest	Boost education and support domestic violence resources, mental health clinics, and other local resources.
AmeriCorps NCCC Pacific Region	Strengthen communities and foster leadership.