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**Fighting the “War on Poverty”:
The Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and the UJA-Federation of New York
Sponsor Americorps*VISTA Program**

**By: Esther Larson
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After graduating from college, most graduates are thinking about paying student loans, finding an apartment, and carving a niche in the highly competitive “real world”. Few are thinking about the homeless or the needy: that’s what makes Americorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members Stefanie Greenberg, Sarah Hersh, and Tabor Banquer unique. Dedicating one year of service to the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty (Met Council), these three devote their full-time energy to fulfill Met Council’s mission of “Acts of Charity and Deeds of Kindness”.

What is the Americorps*VISTA program?

In 2003, the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and the UJA-Federation of New York co-sponsored a ten agency Americorps*VISTA consortium to fulfill one primary mission: help individuals and communities out of poverty. The federal Americorps*VISTA program places VISTA members in non-profit organizations for a one year term to provide expertise and support to the agency’s programs. Through the VISTA program, service programs have been expanded that have alleviated poverty in New York.

Who are the Met Council Americorps*VISTA members?

When Stefanie Greenberg was a Senior at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, majoring in finance, she participated in an alternative spring break program to help hurricane victims with the rebuilding efforts. That experience taught Stefanie Greenberg that *tikkun olum* needn’t be limited only to Spring break and she made a year-long commitment to the Americorps*VISTA program. Greenberg, who grew up in Massachusetts, brings her passion for serving others to New York’s Jewish community by serving full time as Met Council’s volunteer coordinator. It’s a job she highly values. “There are so many opportunities here that I would never get to experience right out of school. I get to decide what projects I want to create and who I want to work with. I decide the process of how to find, place, and thank volunteers. There is so much freedom and decision making that a person right out of college would never be allowed to have”.

While studying music at Carlton University in Minnesota, Sarah Hersh heard about Met Council's Americorps*VISTA program. After volunteering during college she felt that a natural next step after graduation would be to give back to the community. Now serving as Met Council's VISTA grant writer, Hersh, a Long Island native, looks to the next six months of her term. "I would like people in the community to understand that Jewish poverty is a real thing that does exist. One in every five Jews in NYC lives in poverty...until working for Met Council I had no idea that was the case and I want to help the community better understand this issue and how they can help."

Tabor Banquer, Met Council's Jewish Community Council Contracts Specialist, also felt his college education and opportunities made giving a year of service a necessary next step after graduation. Combining his degree in English from Louisiana State University (LSU) with his natural attention to detail, Banquer is working to streamline Met Council's communication and contract management system with Met Council's 25 local Jewish Community Councils.

A native of Baton Rouge, Banquer was familiar with the plight of the poor when he arrived at Met Council. When Hurricane Katrina forced the LSU campus to absorb a massive influx of evacuees, medical personnel and volunteers worked together tirelessly, Banquer was among them.

"I volunteered in the non-critical field hospital. Among other things, I think Katrina really drove home for many people how vulnerable our nation's poor are, and forced us to consider what we are doing as individuals and as communities to circumvent that kind of devastation."

It's a lesson Banquer brought with him to New York.

What do Met Council's VISTA members do?

As part of the VISTA members' daily activities which include community outreach, network building, and mobilizing local resources, Met Council's VISTA volunteers have successfully created and launched a Jewish Poverty Curriculum which teaches students the prevalence of Jewish poverty, the importance of *tzedakah*, and the vital role they can play in helping to strengthen their own communities.

Designed for use at day schools, yeshivot and congregational schools and targeted to Bar/Bat Mitzvah aged students, the curriculum introduces poverty and emphasizes the unique nature of Jewish poverty by assessing the costs associated specifically with living a Jewish lifestyle, including the costs of keeping Kosher, providing a Jewish education to children, and paying synagogue dues. Thanks to the VISTA program, this curriculum educates students about poverty and encourages them to engage in hands-on activities, primarily *chesed* projects.

Who is Met Council and what is their role?

As New York City's voice of the Jewish poor and near poor, the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty (Met Council) is a community-based organization that has been serving the poor, elderly and recent immigrants in the New York City area for 34 years and serves over 100,000 clients per year. As an affiliate of the UJA-Federation of New York, Met Council provides a comprehensive continuum of poverty alleviation and social services, programs, and advocacy for the poor, working poor, elderly, recent immigrants, and under-represented neighborhoods in the New York City area, and seeks to alleviate poverty, economic, housing and related social problems. Services include: crisis intervention, entitlements advocacy, career services, domestic violence programming (etc). Met Council serves all five boroughs through a 25 local community council network which serves the unique and specific needs of the local communities. The Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty (Met Council), partnering with the UJA-Federation of New York and ten UJA-Federation affiliated agencies, coordinates the AmeriCorps*VISTA program.

If you are interested in hearing more about how to help the Jewish poor in our community, please contact the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty: 212-453-9500.

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