Americorps: they keep local members busy with projects in Bush, Alaska

by David Totten
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Tammy Shellikoff, of False Pass in the Aleutian Islands, is a leader in her village, even though she is only 20 years old – and the village is cleaner as well.

Shellikoff is one of 15 young people from across Alaska who have spent the last two years cleaning up the state as part of the RuralCAP/Alaska EPA AmeriCorps program.

The AmeriCorps program was started by Presidetn Clinton in 1994. The program started in Alaska in 1995 with RuralCAP becoming involved this year.

The AmeriCorps members receive an educational award of $4,725 after one year of service that they can apply the award to tuition, student loans, or other forms of education.

Volunteer David Johnson, 41, from Nondalton, plans to use his award to pursue what he learned in the program. Johnson learned how clean up oil spills and is trying to set up a "hazwoper," or toxic waste cleaning, crew in Nondalton to increase reaction times and decrease costs on industrial spills. A pair of oil spills in Nondalton inspired Johnson to try to clean up the environment.

The volunteers are encouraged to find their own projects in their own communities. They start small, and put in for grants later. Johnson started by educating the town about the new landfill incinerator. He said people were worried about the pollution, but less concerned about litter.

Many of the volunteers work at stopping litter. Johnson hired five children for 25 hours to pick up trash around the village.

"The adults, they didn't want nothing to do (with it,)" Johnson said. "But it was reverse peer pressure. They saw the kids doing it."

Program Coordinator Cathy Clements said the program was focussed on rural Alaskans serving the communities where they live. One person per village is chosen to serve for one year.

Most of the projects involve solid waste management and sanitation, but education is the main priority.

Shellikoff has spent the last 10 months teaching people how to deal with hazardous wastes around the house, like bleach and cleansers.

"They were never taught that this is harmful," she said.

Shellikoff goes door-to-door, teaching the residents one person at a time. She talks to children at schools, to show them that "one person can make a difference." The children then tell their parents, but the program was more difficult than she anticipated.

"After the first training, we went home with high expectations," she said. "We thought a year was a long period of time. But a year is not long enough."

In her next project, Shellikoff arranged for two shipping companies to transport alluminum cans out of False Pass for free after her group boxes up the cans. She says children in Dutch Harbor sent out 1 million pounds of recycleable trash this year.

Douglas Kernak, 23, from Tuntutuliak, is volunteering for his second year. His first year was served in his home village and he is in Eek for his second term. He also started with a recycling drive, but focussed on the re-use of plastic grocery bags.

"They blow everywhere and the environment so unsightly," he said.

The volunteers not only learn about the environment, but they also learn about themselves.

"It changed me drastically, I tell you," Kernak said. "Before, I used to take advantage of the environment, throw pop cans and trash."

Now, the Tuntutuliak Community Service Association uses him as a recource. He recently conducted a household servey to find out how the people of Tuntutuliak would feel about a sewage project.

Shelikoff said since she has been working on the environmental projects, people have more respect for her.

"It put my place in the community," she said. "It's given me confidence and respect to be recognized as an adult."

Shellikoff is working toward an associates degree by audio conference and hopes to get her bachelors degree next and Kernak hopes to go to college next year.

If you would like more information on the AmeriCorps program, contact Cathy Clements, the program coordinator at (907) 279-2511.