INTRODUCTION

One key focus for us in the upcoming year will be on program sustainability. We discussed this topic at our last NCLR training in Albuquerque, New Mexico. One important part of sustainability is bringing attention to the actions and the accomplishments of AmeriCorps members. By selling or marketing your programs, you can attract potential program partners or donors. NCLR would like to help you accomplish your goal of sustaining the AmeriCorps program long-term. To achieve this, we have designed this tutorial to help you better prepare yourselves to attract the attention of the media and maintain strong relationships with reporters and editors in your area.

STEP ONE: CREATE A MEDIA LIST

Your media list is a directory of media contacts in your area, including newspapers, wire services such as the Associated Press and Reuters, regional magazines, and radio and television stations. The list should be comprehensive and include phone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses. Most importantly, the list must be constantly updated. If you’re in a large community or city, you may want to check your library for media directories, such as the Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media or Bacon’s Publicity Checker. Your state commission may also be able to provide you with a good press list.

The best way to ensure that your information is accurate is to go straight to the source; you should contact the media outlet itself and verify that the information you have on each person is up-to-date. Your media list should include the names of the following people from each media outlet: news director/editor, feature editor, reporters, daily calendar editor, editorial page editor, and talk show hosts and producers.

You should address your press release to the news director at each organization. However, you should also send copies to each of the reporters who you think may be interested in your story. In addition, some of the stories you will be publicizing will most likely have a human-interest aspect to them, such as a member who has served with AmeriCorps for 20 years, or a child whose life has changed because of the work of an AmeriCorps member. These types of stories would fall under the title of “Features.”

STEP TWO: DEVELOP YOUR COMMUNICATION PIECES

Once you have established your media list, you need to develop communication pieces to be sent to those people on your list. There are several ways to contact members of the media. The most common ways are press releases, media advisories, and pitch letters. Of those three, press releases are by far the most prevalent and the most effective. Every day, news directors review press releases that came in that morning. For this reason, it is essential to send in your releases as early in the day as possible. News is only effective when it is timely, and most stories have a one-day turnaround time. A press release is a full and succinct account of your story and is written to look like a news article itself. Oftentimes reporters will use facts and sentences from the press release in their stories.
In fact, some small newspapers with limited staff availability will print press releases exactly as they are submitted.

When writing a press release, there are specific guidelines to keep in mind. Always keep your press releases short; one page is ideal, and more than two pages is too long. Try to give your press release a catchy title; you need to grab the attention of the news director or reporter. At the top of the page, include the name and telephone number for the person at your organization whom the members of the media can contact with inquiries about the story. You should also include the time and date for the story’s release, along with the story’s title. Always put the most important information in the first paragraph. This should include the “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” “why,” and “how” of the story. Focus on making this first paragraph interesting, because if the reporter/editor who is reading the release is not drawn in, he or she will certainly not choose to report the story. Also, the reader may not have time to read the entire release, so it is crucial to make the first paragraph interesting and informative.

The second paragraph of your press release should help answer more of the “why” and “how” questions that readers will be left with after reading the first paragraph. When writing the press release, continually ask yourself, “Why should people care about the story I’m telling?” “What makes my story interesting to someone who is not involved in it?” If you can put yourself in the shoes of the reader, you will have more success in writing an effective press release. The second paragraph should also identify the source of the information in the lead paragraph and elaborate on who the important players are in the story.

The remaining paragraphs are called the body of the report. You should include quotes from people involved in the story and elaborate on any points you made in the previous paragraphs. Make sure to include only immediately relevant and interesting information. As mentioned above, the shorter you can make the release while still including the essential information the better. Always type your releases, and consider double-spacing to make them more readable. Also, utilize large margins. Never print on the front and back of a page. In addition, keep in mind that the reader probably knows very little about the topic on which you are writing. For this reason, avoid using vocabulary that a person unfamiliar with your program would not understand. To assist you further we have attached two sample press releases as an addendum to this letter. When you are finished with your press release, keep a copy for your records. Reuse them as a marketing piece or selling tool to send to all potential funders or volunteers.

In addition to press releases, media advisories and pitch letters can be effective tools for communicating with the media. A media advisory is a one-page fact sheet that gives the bare essentials of a story and is usually written to announce an upcoming event, as opposed to telling a story. Media advisories should briefly describe the event, including its time, location, number of participants, and a contact name and phone number. Pitch letters are used when a story is not breaking news. These are the types of stories that would most likely appeal to a publication’s Features department. Pitch letters should also be short, while summarizing the important aspects of your human-interest story. All of
the written press contacts we have suggested should be followed up with a phone call, particularly those that are breaking news.

**STEP THREE: EXPANDING ON YOUR CONTACT WITH THE PRESS**

If your communication piece is effective, an editor or reporter will contact you about your story. Most often, the reporter will want to conduct a formal interview with you, usually over the phone. The National Service Resource Center (NSRC) suggests following a series of steps to prepare for an interview with a member of the media. First, you must establish your objectives. Determine the most important message you want to convey to the media, and try to shorten it to a 15- or 20-second sound bite. The media utilizes short quotes much more effectively than long quotes, so you want to make your message conducive to being broadcast to a wide audience. As with the press release, make sure not to use language that the general public will not understand, such as jargon from your area of employment. In addition, if the reporter is unfamiliar with AmeriCorps in general, your interview is the perfect opportunity to educate him or her. This could help generate more interest in AmeriCorps and in your program. After all, the whole idea of establishing contact with the media is to improve sustainability among AmeriCorps programs.

Next, always keep the interview positive, and try not to get frustrated with the reporter. This will help you the next time you want to get a story in the media. Always stick to the message you are trying to convey. Do not let the reporter pressure you into an answer you are not comfortable giving. When in doubt, refer back to the important message you established at the beginning. For NSRC’s complete list of suggestions, please consult its website or go directly to the article by clicking here.

**SAMPLES**

Lastly, we have included two examples of articles recently published in local newspapers. Those articles are also attached as addendums to this letter, or can be found online. The first is from Green Bay, Wisconsin. On September 8, the *Green Bay Press Gazette* published a story about Senior Corps members who help students improve their reading skills. The article can be found here. The second article is also from Wisconsin, and focuses on AmeriCorps volunteers providing tutoring and mentoring services at local middle and high schools. That article, from the September 13 issue of *The Wisconsin State Journal*, can be found here.

There are other relevant resources available on the websites of the National Service Resource Center, AmeriCorps, and the Council of National Community Service. Remember, getting NCLR’s AmeriCorps affiliates in the news helps our fundraising, participation, and ultimately our effectiveness.