CSO Mission Statement
Our mission is to support student engagement in meaningful community service work and leadership training that enhances the educational experience, meets community-identified needs, provides opportunities for reflection, models the development of effective, collaborative community partnerships with local nonprofit organizations and encourages a lifelong commitment to community engagement.

Long-Term Projects in this Issue:
VINS
Decisional Training
Northampton Survival Center
Interfaith Cot Shelter
Big Brothers/Big Sisters

Meet The Spring CSO Board

A Powerful Partnership: a message from a community partner
Anne Schreleth: Volunteers in Northampton Schools (VINS)

Collaborating with community organizations is integral to Volunteers in Northampton Schools. Having a partnership with Smith College CSO helps VINS connect with committed volunteers who are looking for meaningful opportunities in the community; we are fortunate when Smith students commit their time and talent to the Northampton Public Schools. The myriad of
contributions from Smith students - tutoring, classroom and library assistance, and support in math and science enrichment initiatives - are vital efforts put forth each week to the local schools. This year in particular, through the America Reads/America Counts program, VINS placed Smith volunteers in tutoring roles to help K-5 students in early literacy and math instruction. Many of these students returned second semester after having successful placements in the fall-early winter term. We have received reports from these volunteers that they enjoy the engagement in classrooms, receive ongoing guidance from teachers, and meaningful interactions with young students they tutor or assist in other school areas. We are grateful for the time and dedication from Smith College volunteers. The level of commitment and skills shared in the classroom from Smith students is invaluable.

Decisional Training:
Breaking Cycles of Incarceration through Decision-Making Training
Elaine Kuoch ('15, Decisional Training)

This September I participated in Decisional Training, a 10-week program that teaches decision-making and problem solving skills to incarcerated men at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Corrections in Northampton. This program and its volunteer training is fairly intensive due to the level of maturity and seriousness required in interacting with an incarcerated individual. The program consists of two parts, a group session and a one-on-one session with a program volunteer. Through my volunteer position, I met once a week with my partner at the jail where we talked about the program course materials and worked together to better my partner's decision-making skills. The material breaks down problem solving skills into a multi-step process through which one can learn to set goals, assess their possible actions, and to more thoughtfully make choices. Read more.

Note from the editor:
Since writing this piece, Elaine spoke with the Decisional Training program coordinator about her desire to incorporate a larger context into the volunteer training. The result was this fact sheet on the disproportionate numbers of incarcerated men of color in the Pioneer Valley.

Homelessness and Hunger in Northampton: opening our eyes and minds

From Northampton Survival Center:
Elizabeth McCormack ('16)

Anyone walking through downtown Northampton can quickly see there's a need to serve lower-income, unemployed and homeless individuals. While I have seen this before becoming a volunteer, interacting with our residents has given me an entirely different perspective. I met the volunteer coordinator of the Northampton Survival Center (NSC) at the fall CSO fair and was immediately attracted to it because of how simple it was to get involved. They ask volunteers to commit to 2 hours per week, a very feasible requirement even for busy college students. I attended a brief volunteer orientation and then became a member of the thriving volunteer community at the NSC. The variety of people that come to NSC is astounding. There are families who have never been to a food pantry before but are recently out of work, immigrants trying to find their way in a completely new environment, and those who have faced hardships for much of their lives such as medical issues, injuries, deaths in the family, and other difficult circumstances. Working at the NSC has shown me that these needs don't apply to just one class of people but that everyone is susceptible to hard times. I see the world in a much more circular way, how connected we are to one another. The volunteers I work with and clients I meet are some of the most wonderful people I know in Northampton, I'm very grateful for the opportunity to get to know people beyond the Smith bubble.
Volunteering at Mass Audubon’s Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary in Easthampton, MA
A great time despite the weather!

CSO Board member dressed as a blood drop for the CSO Blood Drive. Can you guess who it is?

Giving life at the blood drive!

More info on NSC

From Friends of Hampshire County Homeless Interfaith Cot Shelter:
Megan Baker (‘16)

When I first saw a CSO posting in the Smith E-Digest for Interfaith Cot Shelter, two thoughts went through my mind: the first was "yes, a chance to volunteer!" and the second was "oh goodness, homeless people?" Homelessness is very stigmatized where I grew up, and I worried for my safety because of these preconceived notions. I decided that Smith would not be advertising for something too risky, and because I really missed volunteering, I signed up. I was nervous when my first shift rolled around, but over time I relaxed and came to appreciate the struggles of the people at the shelter and the necessity of the services the shelter provides. The guests are down on their luck and often battling highly complex issues and systems. I have come to understand that homelessness can happen to anyone, and the wide range of back-stories of the people I have met can attest to that. Every week after I volunteer, I leave the shelter with a renewed appreciation for what I have and the opportunities afforded to me, and a renewed anger for the structuring of our society that allows people to fall through the cracks until they are left with nothing. The Interfaith Shelter is incredibly important as it provides a crucial service to people who would otherwise be left on the streets in the freezing temperatures of the New England winters. Not only do they provide two meals a day and a safe, warm shelter with laundry facilities and showers, there are also a number of resources available such as referrals to resources for financial planning and support with healthcare costs. I am grateful for the opportunity to volunteer at the shelter, and am glad to have a renewed perspective on homelessness.

More info on Interfaith Cot Shelter (part of Servicenet)
A lot of interest at the CSO Fair this past February

Remember First Link? Smith volunteers at Garden the Community.

From the Classroom to the Community
Anna McLane ('17, Big Brothers/Big Sisters)

My community work with my Little Sister is really important to me and I think it pairs nicely with my coursework. Mostly, I just really enjoy spending time with her. I don't think of hanging out with her as work, because it's fun. She's very intelligent and she enjoys many of the same activities I do. Spending time with her is a nice break from my work because I know that for as long as she is here, I can just focus on building a relationship with her. I'm currently taking several anthropology and sociology classes and we're learning a lot about socialization and what defines and enforces a society or a culture. These courses prompt me to look at how I interact with my little sister from a different perspective. It makes me wary of the kinds of things I tell her, knowing that she looks up to me and I am helping to form who she will be. This awareness I have for how I speak to her allows me to bring the theoretical framework of my courses to real life experiences. I notice that the way I act around her enforces or changes her behavior. If she is embarrassed by something her parents have done, but I laugh and tell her that it actually sounds really funny, I can change the way she sees that experience or memory. It really is these little interactions that enforce and perpetuate cultural and societal norms. She can also make me think differently by what she says. Her life is different than mine and often how she speaks about her family and her home sparks new thoughts for me.

More info on Big Brothers/Big Sisters