

NEWS

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Bergen LEADS Program Enhances Knowledge of Bergen County and Civic Engagement

BERGEN COUNTY – The Volunteer Center of Bergen County’s Bergen LEADS program announced results of a recent evaluation of Bergen LEADS, an innovative learning and leadership programs for adults who live or work in Bergen County. The program has been in existence since 2009, and graduates about 30 individuals each June. The results of the evaluation show tremendous gains in participants’ knowledge about Bergen County, their own leadership styles and ethical leadership, which will help prepare them for future leadership roles in the community.

A system called retrospective self-assessment was used through which participants self-reported their knowledge of key concepts at the start of Bergen LEADS, then reassessed their knowledge at the end of the 10-month program. In every area, participants reported knowing a great deal more because of Bergen LEADS. For example, prior to the start of Bergen LEADS, 79% of participants reported that they knew “little or nothing” about Bergen County History and Development; later 79% reported that they knew “something or a lot.” Bergen LEADS participants report similar gains in all of the key program areas covered by the pilot study: County Population, Diversity and Demographic Trends; Structure of County and Municipal Governments; Scope and Role of Nonprofits; Healthcare Delivery in Bergen County; Education in Bergen County.

As one participant in the Bergen LEADS Class of 2015 said, “I read the local section of *The Bergen Record* completely differently. I am much more engaged in the articles.” James Brown, Class of 2010 says, “My biggest takeaway was that I didn’t know how much I didn’t know. I learned so much about an area where I have lived for over 30 years.”

In addition to studying Bergen County, Bergen LEADS uses the **Positive Leadership**[™] Curriculum as its foundation for key concepts in civic and community leadership. Bergen LEADS participants report significant gains in their knowledge about key concepts, such as Authenticity, Purpose, Advocacy, Resilience and Collaboration.

At the end of the evaluation, 38% felt they knew “a lot” about maximizing their own leadership style at the end of the study, up from just 8% at the beginning. And 33% of participants rated themselves as knowing “a lot” about an ethical framework in civic leadership, up from 13% at the beginning.

Bergen LEADS is also conducting a longitudinal study of civic engagement among participants in the program. Each participant takes a civic engagement survey before they start Bergen LEADS. We then administer the civic engagement survey to alumni one year after graduation and each spring thereafter. The latest results from the Classes of 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, with more than 70% responding, show impressive results.

As Dave Dubin, Bergen LEADS Class of 2009 reports, "In the span of twelve months, I won my election bid for Council (Haworth), learned a ton about New Jersey, had a kidney tumor removed, and started my own non-profit for genetic colon cancer, AliveAndKickn".

Working with members of the community to solve a community problem increased to 75% from 54%. Volunteering for a candidate or a political campaign rose to 42% from 18%, and trying to convince people to vote for or against a candidate rose to 65% from 40%.

Gwen Keeble, Bergen LEADS Class of 2011, was inspired by her class project on education to run for the Allendale School Board. "After the program was finished, I felt there was more I should be doing, so I ran for (and won!) a seat on the Allendale Board of Education! I never dreamed of taking an elected position," she said. Other Bergen LEADS alumni who have recently sought elected office are: Carolyn Smith '11, Councilwoman in Rutherford, Daniele Cervino '10, Councilwoman in Bogota, and Rick DeHeer '12, Maywood School Board.

Other forms of civic engagement have also increased because of Bergen LEADS participation. Visiting or contacting a public official increased to 75% from 49%. Similarly, contacting a newspaper or magazine to express an opinion increased to 64% from 40%.

Sheryl Silver, Bergen LEADS Class of 2011 tells the following story. "Because of my personal experiences with my parents and my connections through Bergen LEADS, I decided to attend a Public Hearing on the Needs of Senior Citizens in Bergen County, sponsored by the Division of Senior Services. At the conclusion of the hearing, I went up to one of the panelists – Assemblywoman Connie Wagner of District 38. Upon discovering that Assemblywoman Wagner was proposing the formation of a Senior Advisory Panel in District 38, 'I blurted out "I want to be involved in any way you think I can be of service.'" The next day, the chief of staff from her office was in touch with me to say they were looking forward to me taking a leading role in forming the Advisory Panel. "

Finally, Bergen LEADS participants report that they are more active in the community. Their rate of volunteering in the past year increased to 95% from 82% and their rate of group membership (contributing time and money) rose to 83% from 62%. Actively raising funds for a charitable group jumped to 78% from 47%.

Roberta Sonenfeld, Bergen LEADS Class of 2010, Ridgewood Village Manager, reports "Bergen LEADS literally changed my life. After 30 years in the financial arena, I changed my focus to giving back and trying to make a difference in the community." She has served on a number of non-profit boards since Bergen LEADS and last year was appointed Village Manager, her first public sector job.

Bergen LEADS is an innovative, 10-month learning and leadership program for adults who live or work in Bergen County and is now accepting applications for the Class of 2016. Bergen LEADS is a program of the Volunteer Center of Bergen County.

Under the guidance of former Bergen County Executive William “Pat” Schuber, the LEADS Seminar Director, participants are immersed in a stimulating curriculum that introduces them to issues of local importance and encourages them to explore their leadership style, enhance their leadership capacity and become meaningfully engaged in helping to solve some of the challenges facing Bergen County.

Bergen LEADS is an innovative, 10-month learning and leadership program for adults who live or work in Bergen County. The online application form for the Class of 2016, which begins in September 2015, can be accessed at www.bergenleads.org and is due by April 11, 2015.

Bergen LEADS is a program of The Volunteer Center of Bergen County. The Volunteer Center strengthens the community by connecting people through service and developing civic leaders.

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