

# CA SPECIAL DISTRICT

Publication of the California Special Districts Association

Volume 12, Issue 6, Nov - Dec 2017



**FEATURE**  
Doing More With Less:  
A Unique Partnership  
Opportunity for  
Special Districts



**WHAT'S SO SPECIAL**  
What's All the  
Buzz About



## Doing More with Less: A Unique Partnership Opportunity for Special Districts

*By Kif Scheuer, Climate Change Program Director, Local Government Commission*



Special districts, especially smaller districts, often face the challenge of having limited resources, which can limit their ability to focus on emerging issues such as climate change. This is where the CivicSpark program comes in. CivicSpark places AmeriCorps Fellows with local agencies around the state to assist the agency in getting out in front of climate change and water management issues

by conducting research, planning, and implementation activities over an extended period of time. For special districts who do not have the means to devote to these actions, this type of assistance can make a huge difference. CivicSpark Fellows are that extra set of ears, eyes, and hands to take the agency even further.

Launched in 2014, CivicSpark is a Governor's Initiative AmeriCorps program that assists local governments in California to build their climate response and water management capacity. The program recruits 70 Fellows each year to work directly with local staff and community members on targeted projects.

## What is CivicSpark?

Launched in 2014, CivicSpark is a Governor's Initiative AmeriCorps program that assists local governments in California to build their climate response and water management capacity. The program recruits 70 Fellows each year to work directly with local staff and community members on targeted projects. The program is managed by the Local Government Commission (LGC) in partnership with the Governor's Office of Planning and Research.

CivicSpark delivers capacity building support to agencies through four core activities:

- 1. Gap Assessments** – Fellows interview staff and review key documents to determine current needs. In turn, they use this information to finalize project goals and scope.
- 2. Service Projects** – Fellows implement specific research, planning, or implementation project(s) that meet the defined needs.
- 3. Volunteer Engagement** – Fellows support increased community volunteerism in conjunction with their project(s).
- 4. Transitioning Expertise** – Fellows sustain progress by sharing results with key stakeholders through trainings and reports.

LGC manages all aspects of the program – from recruiting and training to ensuring that performance goals are met – in order to make local government participation easy and straightforward.



## CivicSpark Impacts

Over the past three years, CivicSpark Fellows provided over 230,000 hours of service to over 150 public agencies throughout California. Project outcomes include 14 climate or energy actions plans; over 200 assessment or inventory reports; 70 climate action policies; and over 100 community workshops. In the course of this work, Fellows have connected with over 15,000 community members through events and meetings, and recruited over 5,000 volunteers who have contributed thousands of hours of additional support to communities across California.

More specifically, Fellows in Los Angeles developed a Water-Conservation Cost-Benefit Tool that helped identify and prioritize potential water saving opportunities at county facilities. By utilizing this tool, Fellows identified annual savings of 195-200 gallons of water and \$1.7 million in avoided costs for the County. Also in Southern California, CivicSpark Fellows developed the Energy Assessment Screening for Your Home (EASY) program, which helps residents identify ways to make their homes more energy efficient. Fellows completed 70 of these assessments in 17 cities, organized 25 formal trainings, and reached a total of 1,700 customers.

Shelley Jiang, Climate Change Coordinator for the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District (SMAQMD) highlights the impact of participating in the CivicSpark program: “SMAQMD has been delighted to support the CivicSpark program over its four years. We love providing these talented young people with an introduction to careers in local government, sustainability, and climate change, and in return they provide us valuable capacity to explore new initiatives and complete



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## Doing More with Less [continued]



important projects. Now more than ever, California needs young people to work in climate change and sustainability, and CivicSpark is instrumental in helping to achieve that goal. Emma and Skylar brought so much dedication, passion, and enthusiasm to their projects to help market a low-income home energy efficiency program, research model Climate Action Plan strategies for small and rural cities, and expand food waste diversion in local schools and businesses. Over the year, they have made a tangible difference as they helped to improve the safety and comfort of elderly and low-income families, educate children on food waste, air pollution, and sustainability, and assist small businesses in learning more about the importance of diverting food waste. We couldn't have done this without them, and were excited to see they could both leverage their CivicSpark experience into rewarding and fulfilling jobs."

These sentiments were echoed by Vince Kirkhuff, Air Quality Specialist for the San Luis Obispo Air Pollution Control District (SLOAPCD). "As an Air Pollution Control District, strictly speaking, we do not have any climate action implementation projects of our own; rather, our role is one of facilitating collaboration between our local jurisdictions and assisting them in climate planning on the local and regional level. To that end, CivicSpark has been an essential partner in our office and in our county, providing fellows

who are highly capable, intelligent, serious, and committed to their projects. The quality of work we have received from the CivicSpark Fellows has been consistently outstanding – on par with most of our full-time employees. More than once we have heard from our local jurisdictions that if CivicSpark was not there to facilitate CAP implementation, it would simply not get done. By adding capacity to implement local climate action plans with a minimal investment of local funds, CivicSpark has been a tremendous benefit to our local governments and the community at large."

### Who are the Fellows?

CivicSpark AmeriCorps Fellows are selected through a highly competitive national application process. Fellows have, at minimum, a college degree in a relevant field, and typically have workplace and community service experience. During their 11-month service term, they implement a wide range of water resource management and climate change mitigation and adaptation projects throughout the state. Fellows gain valuable work experience, build professional skills, and develop a strong network while having a lasting impact in local communities. By opening the door to talented young professionals, CivicSpark is creating a pipeline of capable and motivated individuals who understand and appreciate public agencies.



**Skylar Johnson**, a 2016-17 Fellow, stated "I was drawn to CivicSpark because of the program's opportunity to make real,

long-lasting change and engage with local government policies and processes. I believe that climate change is one of the biggest threats to humans and our planet. CivicSpark gave me the opportunities to better the planet, but also develop my own personal and professional skills." Over the 11-month course, Johnson collaborated with SMAQMD on four projects, including the expansion of food waste recycling across Sacramento County businesses. "I engaged with local government, business, and community members in meaningful ways that will help Sacramento mitigate and become more resilient to the effects of climate change. I participated in government decision making processes and began to understand how policies lead to actions."

Emma Bennett worked alongside Johnson at SMAQMD. "Coming from another state, I did not know that there were local agencies with jurisdiction over air quality in California, but I had also never seen smog. With the wildfire smoke and high temperatures this Summer, I better understand how important the SMAQMD's work is. I learned specifically that air quality is not something many people consider, but that it's very important, especially for those with asthma or other lung sensitivities, to check air quality forecasts before exercising outdoors," stated Bennett.



**Ryan Silber**, another 2016-17 Fellow, was placed with SLOAPCD and worked on a "Net Zero Homes Greenhouse Gas Protocol and

## Ryan did a tremendous job in delivering white papers, as well as a new draft RFP for developing a protocol that assists future projects in applying for and obtaining GHG credits.

– Rubi Rajbanshi - Manager, Planning and Outreach, SLOAPCD

Countywide Climate Adaptation Planning” project. Ryan stated, “As an individual with aspirations to work on environmental policy and climate action, CivicSpark provided an unrivaled experience to break out in those fields. I was provided continuous education of cutting edge practices addressing climate change while being allotted responsibility to shape my own projects and work with interagency groups. Working at the SLOAPCD gave me a first-hand experience shaping environmental policy on a regional level and insights to the

inner-workings of local government. I feel excellently positioned to continue my career in the environmental sector.”

### How Can Special Districts Get Involved?

While CivicSpark is full for the 2017-18 service year, the program will begin recruiting new partners for the 2018-19 service year in early 2018. Interested partners can get in touch with LGC staff (see below for contact information) or sign up on the program website, [CivicSpark.LGC.org](http://CivicSpark.LGC.org), for notices. Special districts that want to partner with LGC will start the process by submitting an application online, then contract directly with LGC for Fellow support in the Climate track or the Water track.

Participating public agencies need to demonstrate a “capacity need,” in order to be eligible for support.

The Climate track measures “capacity need” by the absence of one or more of the following criteria:

- A full-time dedicated sustainability staff.
- A formally adopted Climate Action Plan.
- Robust mechanisms to track climate change action progress.

The Water track measures “capacity need,” by the absence of one or more of the following criteria:

- Dedicated staff responsible solely for cross-sector and inter-jurisdictional collaboration, or coordinating water and land use.
- Actively participating as a member of an Integrated Regional Water Management Plan (IRWMP).
- Actively participating in Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) formation or Groundwater Sustainability Plan (GSP) formation.
- Currently equipped to meet all data, research, planning, engagement, and coordination needs. ■



### Fellows from 2016-17 service year who worked with CSDA Members:

ANNA GARCIA  
Eastern Municipal Water District  
*Water Efficient Landscape*

STEVEN KERNS  
Inland Empire Utilities Agency  
*Integrated Water Resources Plan*

ABBEY PIZEL  
Eastern Municipal Water District  
*Water Academy*

ANA PATRICIA LOPEZ  
Inland Empire Utilities Agency  
*Integrated Water Resources Plan*

EMMA BENNETT  
Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District  
*Organic Waste to Fuel and Home Energy Conservation Program*

RYAN SILBER  
San Luis Obispo Air Pollution Control District  
*Net Zero Homes GHG Protocol and Countywide Climate Adaptation Planning*

SKYLAR JOHNSON  
Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District  
*Organic Waste to Fuel and Home Energy Conservation Program*

CAMERON TATTLE  
Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority  
*RecycleSmart Initiatives*



*For more information on the CivicSpark program, visit [civicspark.lgc.org](http://civicspark.lgc.org) or contact Kristen Wraith at [kwraith@lgc.org](mailto:kwraith@lgc.org).*