

Program strengthens civic engagement

Written by Ivan Phifer, Staff Writer
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The last Friday in July marked a very special day for the students in the Public Allies program. It was a day of celebration, promise and growth for its graduating class.

Public Allies mission is to advance new leadership to strengthen communities through nonprofits and civic participation. Its goal is to propel African-Americans into more leadership positions within the nonprofit sector. It was created in 1992 by Vanessa Kirsch and Katrina Browne, with its first program launched in Washington, D.C. It was not until 2010 however, that Public Allies would launch in Minneapolis. Public Allies training is supported by the Urban Institute for Service and operated by Pillsbury United Communities, a nonprofit organization working to create choice, change and connection for people from all walks of life.

"Essentially, we are working to change the face of leadership in the nonprofit sector through building pipelines to organizational leadership for those who may not ordinarily have access to opportunities to lead, while simultaneously building capacity of our local nonprofit sector," said Ernest Comer III, program manager, media coordinator and recruiter for Public Allies Twin Cities.

"A year after I graduated, I was contacted about an opportunity to be one of the founding staff. Now we operate the twenty-first of 21 sites of Public Allies nationally," said Comer who said Public Allies has identified three focus areas involving education, economic opportunity and healthy futures. "We select partner organizations that focus in these areas and make a sustainable effort to build on the assets of local communities to make them stronger."

Comer said leadership can be found within all communities.

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"We recognize leading as an action anyone can take rather than focusing on leadership as a position that a select few can hold," said Comer. "(This) belief is at the foundation of the work that we do and it allows us to engage the communities more effectively and work together to identify a promising group of participants each year who are dedicated to having a strong and sustainable impact."

To be selected as a participant of the Public Allies program, the application process is extensive and competitive. All participants go through individual and group interviews facilitated by local staff, as well as participate in a matching fair and interviews with potential partner organizations. Generally the online application process begins at the end January and closes at the beginning of June. Once selected, individuals participate in the program, which runs from October through July the following year.

Public Allies Twin Cities is a 10-month paid apprenticeship program focusing on a variety of topics including asset-based community development, nonprofit basics, history of community and community organizing. Public Allies is an AmeriCorps program and graduates earn a \$5,000 education award that can be used to fund post-secondary education opportunities.

For more information about Public Allies Twin Cities, visit www.PublicAllies.org/TwinCities or call (612) 302-3425.