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Community-Service Group Develops a Guidebook to Manage Growth

By Ben Gose

City Year, the youth service corps that started in Boston, wants to operate in 20 cities by its 20th anniversary, in 2008. But it doesn't go to a new city on a whim.

The charity, which runs programs at 18 U.S. locations (it also has a site in South Africa), has a list of 10 criteria that prospective sites are asked to meet before its board votes on starting an effort there. The checklist is designed to ensure that a new site is "operationally sound and sustainable."

"They're not hard and fast rules," says Michael H. Brown, City Year's chief executive and co-founder. "But the more we can hit them, the more likely we are to start up a site."

Some researchers, however, believe City Year should more thoroughly document the effectiveness of its programs before it expands to new cities.

Founded in 1988, City Year recruits youths ages 17 to 24 to spend a year performing community-service activities. The charity did not begin to expand until 1993, when Congress created AmeriCorps, which provides money to all of the charity's sites in the United States.

In the early years, City Year had no official guidelines about when and how to expand, and it approved some sites based primarily on its ability to find an enthusiastic leader and some start-up funds.

For example, it opened a Columbia, S.C., site in 1994, after a Harvard Law School graduate there got excited about the program. The Columbia site remains small, with just 25 corps members, and over the years it has struggled to find enough wealthy donors in the city to support it. It nearly shut down in 2003, amid cuts in AmeriCorps support, but local donors rallied to save the program.

"We've learned a lot, and we've developed the guideposts from experience," says Alan Khazei, a co-founder of City Year, who left the charity last fall to work on a book about national service.

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Topping the checklist is making sure that a program has a local champion and a challenge grant of \$1-million to \$2-million (the amount depends on the size of the city). The challenge grant, which is often put forth by the local champion, is designed to help the charity raise enough private money to cover much of the cost of operating at least a 50-person corps for four years.

Ben Goldhirsh, founder of *Good* magazine, which bills itself as being "for people who give a damn," became City Year's champion in Los Angeles, when he promised last year to provide \$2-million to match donations from other sources.

Mr. Brown had been eager to open a site there, since Los Angeles is one of the country's biggest and most-diverse cities. In July, City Year announced that the Hauptman Family Foundation would match the gift with a second \$2-million donation. The Los Angeles site will open in September with 75 corps members.

Other items on the charity's checklist include the establishment of a local board, the election of a chairman for that board, letters of support from a city's mayor and school-district superintendent, a commitment of money from the commission that oversees AmeriCorps financing in the state, and 25 letters of support from corporate leaders and government officials.

Still, City Year officials aren't wedded to such painstaking evaluation when they feel the need to move quickly. In 2005, it had no plans to open any new sites. But after Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana, roughly 100 City Year alumni responded to the charity's plea for help in starting a Baton Rouge site. The site was operating three months after the hurricane struck.

David A. Reingold, an associate professor of public affairs and public policy at Indiana University and the former head of research at the Corporation for National and Community Service, the organization that oversees AmeriCorps, says he believes City Year should put greater emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of its programs before expanding to new sites.

He notes that City Year canceled a study started in 2002 that examined the "social capital" created by bringing together the charity's volunteers with corporate sponsors and schools. He also questions why City Year declined to accept a recent invitation by the Corporation for National and Community

Service to participate in a random-assignment study, which would use a lottery-like approach to put some people interested in volunteering with City Year and others in a control group.

Random assignment is considered the gold standard among many researchers.

"If you want to grow something and you're seeking substantial resources to grow it, shouldn't we have a pretty good idea that it's worth growing, as opposed to going on just faith and rhetoric?" Mr. Reingold says.

Mr. Brown says City Year canceled what it calls the "partnership study" in order to focus on two other studies started around the same time. One looks at the impact City Year has on its alumni, and the other examines a middle-school program called Young Heroes.

Those two studies have yielded more useful data than the partnership study because they focus on the direct beneficiaries of City Year, Mr. Brown says. He says the charity declined to participate in the random-assignment study because doing so would have duplicated some of the work being done in the alumni study, on which City Year has spent \$2-million, and would have forced the organization to recruit students for whom it has no space in order to establish a control group.

The alumni study, conducted by Policy Studies Associates, a research firm in Washington, found that the City Year experience led to higher levels of civic engagement later in life.

"We have a very strong commitment to research and evaluation," Mr. Brown says.