Name of Action  PowerCorps-Camden

In a few short sentences, please describe the action and identify your partners.
Through the leadership of the Camden County Municipal Utility Authority (CCMUA) and the Camden SMART initiative (a working group of the Camden Collaborative Initiative focused on sewer and stormwater management), green infrastructure measures such as rain gardens and porous pavement have taken on an increasingly important role in managing Camden City’s stormwater runoff. As Camden City moves toward compliance with recently issued NJ DEP permits affecting Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) and aims to reduce flooding in all neighborhoods, green stormwater infrastructure (GSI) will only continue to expand. In order for these new green infrastructure projects to function as intended, they will require critical, long-term landscaping and maintenance. To that end, the PowerCorps Camden program – a collaboration led by Camden City, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority (CCMUA), and the Center for Family Services (CFS) – was launched in December 2015 to prepare Camden City residents for employment in the wave of green jobs, particularly those associated with GSI, coming to the city. PowerCorps Camden members are 18 to 26 year old Camden residents who have graduated high school and are generally part of the “at-risk” population (e.g. exiting the foster care system, serving probation, or are otherwise distressed).

PowerCorps is not a typical job; rather, members serve the community as paid AmeriCorps volunteers. Serving in 6-month cohorts, members receive both classroom-style and in-the-field trainings (beginning with an intensive two week pre-service orientation) from partner organizations specializing in conservation, landscaping, water resources, and community greening. In addition to the training they need to provide high-quality green infrastructure maintenance, members also receive trainings in professionalism, team building, leadership, conflict resolution, and a host of other skills that will make them competitive applicants in other fields. At the end of their terms of service, members receive an additional 6 months of support, designed to ensure that members leave the position with either higher education or job in sight. As graduating AmeriCorps members, participants also receive a $2,800 education award to aid members pursuing a higher degree.

Even if the action was performed by volunteers, or you got in-kind donations, please estimate your costs and the time commitment required to complete the action.
Combined annual funding of the program on behalf of Camden City and the CCMUA is $350,000. Average work hours per week by program staff alone, including volunteer AmeriCorps VISTA members, is 250 hours per week. If the paid service hours of the individual PowerCorps Camden members are included, then the total time weekly time commitment is approximately 1,450 (the 250 staff hours, plus 40 hours per week for 30 PowerCorps members).

Assess what worked and what could be done if this action is tried again in the community.
PowerCorps Camden continues to operate throughout Camden City in its first year, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future (funding from the CNCS is secured in three-year periods). Since members began their service in the field in December 2015, the program has improved over 200 acres of city land, collecting 42.5 tons of waste and debris in the process; it
has planted more than 3600 trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants and cleaned several hundred stormwater inlets (thereby helping to reduce the harmful ecological and human health effects of Camden City’s flooding). This is invaluable work that would have gone uncompleted if not for members’ community service. Much of this service has been conducted without the full set of basic tools needed to complete routine landscape maintenance - the importance of these tools cannot be understated, and now that PowerCorps Camden has finally acquired critical tools like pruning shears, weed whackers, and lawn mowers, it can more effectively care for the city’s GSI.

Key to the program’s success has been the generous support of a multitude of diverse partners. From community- and neighborhood-organized groups, to collaborative non-profit organizations, to large businesses like NJ American Water, PowerCorps Camden’s partners have exposed its members to a wide variety of GSI opportunities. Excitingly, several of these partners have been impressed enough with PowerCorps’ performance that they have offered members employment in their organizations.

What are the next steps for this action?

The major components of PowerCorps Camden are in place, but several next steps will lead to continued improvement; for example, purchasing a few new tools, including a trailer to haul waste and lawn care equipment, will help increase efficiency in the short term. This improved efficiency will be critical as Camden SMART continues to add green infrastructure projects around the city. In the next year alone, Camden SMART expects to add 20 new GSI projects to its portfolio. PowerCorps Camden looks to continue to grow so that it can provide maintenance to existing and new properties alike, and enable GSI in the city to continue to offer its myriad benefits to the people of Camden.