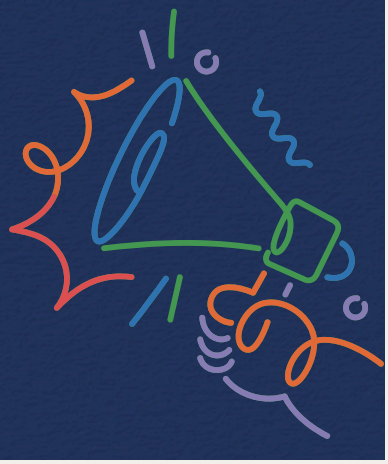
RICE UNIVERSITY
Center for
Civic Leadership

Alternative Spring Break 2026

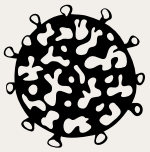
Break for a cause
this Spring.



2025-2026 PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

Program A- Breaking Barriers: Confronting HIV Disparities in the South
Site Leaders: Jordan Altman jra15@rice.edu & Emlyn Joniec ej20@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Public Health



Since the onset of the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Deep South has shouldered a disproportionate burden of the virus. Despite this, current policy in many southern states serves to hinder progress surrounding both HIV prevention and care. Strict criminalization laws, gaps in healthcare provider education, and abstinence-based sex education are a few of the most prominent structural barriers faced today. Our program engages participants in exploring the historical and persistent causes of this epidemic through the intersectional lens of race, educational policy, religion, incarceration, and religious institutions. Our trip focuses on three primary epicenters of the disease, beginning our trip in Houston, and traveling to Baton Rouge and New Orleans in Louisiana shortly after. Through engaging with various community partners that either directly influence the lives of people living with HIV, or provide relief to victims of burdens often associated with the disease (e.g. return to society following imprisonment), we aim to contextualize the lived realities of the afflicted. Ultimately, the program challenges participants to move beyond stigma and assumptions, equipping them with the skills and perspectives to advocate for equitable health outcomes and to carry lessons of solidarity, humility, and justice into their future civic involvements.

Mental Health

Program B - Mind the Gap
Site Leaders: Srilalitha Jyosyula sj125@rice.edu & Abby Perez ap215@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Systemic health inequalities that are faced by marginalized communities negatively impact their mental health outcomes. These inequalities are caused by systemic barriers preventing marginalized communities from accessing healthcare and mental health support, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and poor health outcomes. Addressing these disparities requires a critical examination of charity-based models, early intervention and outreach, and policy interventions to create sustainable change. Our program partners with diverse community organizations such as community-based health clinics offering early and culturally accessible interventions, as well as advocacy nonprofits focused on introducing legislation to improve access in the long term. Through civic engagement such as direct service learning, organizational shadowing, and participatory observation, volunteers will learn to critically analyze current gaps in healthcare access as a result of historical policies and institutions, while also providing meaningful operational support to our community partners. Keeping in mind ethical and community-informed volunteering, we plan to learn from community partners' expertise while exploring how mutual aid models and systemic reforms can address the systemic barriers that cause health inequalities for marginalized communities.

Program C- Hands for Healing
Site Leaders: Paul Morrison pm76@rice.edu & Parwana Karimi pk70@rice.edu
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Public Health

Gun violence has widely been regarded as a legislative issue, from debates over the 2nd Amendment to widespread activism over the National Rifle Association's political presence. In 2024, former Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared gun violence a public health crisis, transforming the political issue into a healthcare one. That same year, 125 people were killed and 200 people were wounded every day as a result of firearm violence. Gun violence also creates a ripple effect negatively impacting the social fabric, mental health, and safety of affected communities. Furthermore, many structural inequalities in the criminal justice, medical, educational, and legislative systems cause minority, low-income populations to be disproportionately exposed to firearm violence. In our ASB, participants will be introduced to a wide range of policy-based, community-based, and healthcare-based initiatives in both Houston and New Orleans. By interacting with community partners at these sites, participants will gain a nuanced understanding of how gun violence plays into both homicide and suicide cases. Our program will also examine the question: How do we support community violence programs in states that do not support nor fund them? By integrating community and expert perspectives, participants will gain an intersectional understanding of how hospital and community based intervention programs, advocates, and community leaders tackle the root causes of firearm violence. We hope that, by the end of our program, students will feel informed, inspired, and empowered to take part in future initiatives and advocacy efforts to mitigate the impacts of gun violence in their communities.

Program D- The Legacy of Southwestern Migration: Understanding Policy and Sociopolitical Implication of Immigration
Site Leaders: Madison Rojas, mr151@rice.edu & Arali Garcia ag307@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Immigration & Policy

This Alternative Spring Break Program addresses the profound social issue of migration and its intergenerational legacies — how forced movement, immigration policy, and community resilience shape identity, belonging, and social justice today. Migration is not only about crossing borders; it intersects with race, citizenship, labor, language, and memory, making this work urgent for empathetic leadership and equitable communities. As we center the issue of immigration policy, this ASB program will also work to highlight the various intersections that exist at the level of immigrant experiences, specifically, the issues of gendered violence, health care, labor, and housing. Participants of this program will primarily work alongside immigrant-rights organizations, cultural heritage centers, community activists and organizers, and storytelling/digital-archives projects in Houston, San Antonio, and Austin. Through civic engagement practices, students will contribute to a co-creative process with community members, emphasizing local strengths and narratives rather than deficits. In this immersive week, participants will deepen their critical understanding of migration's legacies, build authentic relationships with community partners, and develop sustainable approaches to solidarity. By the end, students should carry forward not just stories, but commitments; awareness and tools to act ethically in support of equitable immigrant communities.

Program E- Herencia Viva: The Future of Bilingual Education
Site Leaders: Jenna Brown jb256@rice.edu & Rocio Vides rv53@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Immigration & Policy

Herencia Viva: The Future of Bilingual Education, is a program in which we will focus on the linguistic, historical, cultural, and legal aspects of dual language programs in the United States. Our specific goals include broadening knowledge and understanding of bilingual education, the benefits of multilingualism, the preservation of heritage languages, and related policies. Our trip destination is the Rio Grande River Valley (while there is still a possibility of going to Albuquerque, New Mexico), where we will gain first-hand experience in an extremely cross-cultural and linguistically diverse environment, with a majority of residents being bilingual and often utilizing "Spanglish" in their communications. We will partner with community organizations in different categories, including advocacy and academia; advocacy-revolving organizations include PUEDE RGV and RGV-TABE; UTRGV (The University of Texas Rio Grande River Valley) offers a Master of Education in Bilingual Education, and also an extremely valuable linguistic research team; and for a hands-on, real-life classroom experience, we will visit dual language schools such as PSJA Dual Language Enrichment Program.

Mental Health

Program F- Beyond the Bars: The Public Health Crisis in Our Justice System
Site Leaders: Tin Vu tgv2@rice.edu & Lacole Yang ly58@rice.edu
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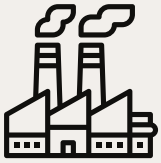
The criminalization of substance use and mental illness presents a multifaceted public health challenge, trapping individuals in a vicious cycle of incarceration and poor health outcomes. Instead of prioritizing rehabilitation, today's punitive justice system has led to mass incarceration and a severe lack of treatment resources within jails and prisons. For individuals with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders (CODs), this breakdown in the continuum of care creates a cycle of recidivism with significant human costs. Our ASB aims to examine this issue through a public health lens, exploring the intersection of substance use, justice, and community reentry. By engaging with clinicians, public health experts, reentry specialists, and policymakers in Houston and Austin, we will examine the structural determinants of health that lead to substance misuse and incarceration. Through this trip, we hope to gain a more profound, human-centered understanding of this public health crisis and empower participants to advocate for a just system that prioritizes health equity, healing, and rehabilitation for all.

Program G- Bridging Borders: Exploring Health Equity in Immigrant Communities
Site Leaders: Abbie Ha ah227@rice.edu and Jason Wu jw225@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Immigration & Policy

Foreign-born migrants in the United States encounter numerous systemic barriers to quality healthcare, including a lack of insurance, legal status, language obstacles, and fear of discrimination, deepened by an increasingly hostile political climate. Although Texas is home to over five million immigrants, it enforces some of the most restrictive anti-immigrant policies in the nation. Our Alternative Spring Break (ASB) program, Bridging Borders, aims to explore these challenges through an asset-based lens, highlighting the resilience of immigrant communities and the organizations working alongside them to advance equity. ASB participants will engage with communities that have significant immigrant populations and strong networks of organizations dedicated to advancing health equity. Through partnerships with community clinics, nonprofits, and advocacy groups, students will learn how healthcare providers expand access to care, address barriers such as insurance and language, and counter harmful misconceptions about immigrant communities. The program will also highlight how organizations integrate related issues, such as food security and health literacy, into their support services, and how policy-focused groups and educators work to shape legislation and advocacy efforts that impact immigrant healthcare access. By combining direct service opportunities with conversations with practitioners, advocates, and community leaders, participants will gain both a ground-level and systems-level understanding of the intersection between immigration and healthcare. As a part of Bridging Borders, we hope to investigate the systemic barriers that hinder healthcare access for foreign-born individuals, identify critical gaps in current policies, and propose solutions that advance equitable, culturally competent care for immigrant communities.



Program H — Smoking the Pulse: Air Pollution and Health Disparities in Marginalized Neighborhoods
Site Leaders: Sadhana Chari sc271@rice.edu & Njwi Achoh nba5@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Environmental Justice

Air quality is rapidly deteriorating: from 2023 to 2024, the American Lung Association (ALA) reported an 11.7 million increase in Americans exposed to unhealthy air environments, leading to millions of premature deaths.The crossroads of policy and health are undeniable in the U.S, where healthcare is widely inaccessible. Within the U.S., the ALA cites that people of color and low-income populations are most at risk for air pollutant exposure. Increases in air pollution-related health conditions are inextricably linked to sociopolitics, with historical and ongoing ties to industrialization. Our program explores these intersectional effects of air pollution on healthcare across Houston, TX and Memphis, TN. We will engage in community-based learning on air quality measurement systems and healthcare practices, alongside ongoing policy regulatory efforts. Working with grassroots organizations and healthcare organizations, we will begin our trip in Houston examining air quality disparities over several neighborhoods, in context of its shipping industry. Then, in Memphis, we will understand the effects of the xAI data center, Colossus, on local communities. Before our trip, we discuss ethical frameworks and perform critical reflections through experiments, field trips, and collaborative workshops (including writing an Op-Ed). Through this experience, we hope participants develop civic professionalism and tangible experience to work long-term with communities and instill meaningful impact.

Program I- Inhale, Exhale: Mental Health Resilience in the Face of Environmental Injustice
Site Leaders: Andy Liu al168@rice.edu & Eon Lim ekl3@rice.edu
⭐Link to Website for more information

Environmental Justice

Texas sits atop some of the nation's largest shale formations, and the rapid spread of fracking has reshaped everyday life in many rural communities. Fracking can trigger earthquakes through wastewater injection into the ground, which is also contaminated with carcinogenic chemicals that leak into the water table and ultimately the water supply. Thousands of abandoned "zombie wells" strewn across Texas continually leak hazardous pollutants into soil, aquifers, and the air. Beyond physical exposure, the mental-health toll is substantial. Rural residents already contend with stigma around seeking help, long travel to scarce providers, and social isolation that makes confidential care difficult. On top of this baseline, fracking-related stressors intensify anxiety and depression, disrupt sleep, and compound trauma. In combination, under-resourced care systems and environmental pressures create a reinforcing cycle that exacerbates the physical and mental health of rural communities. Our ASB program examines how environmental injustice translates into anxiety, stress, and diminished well-being. We will explore the structural drivers of these disparities and learn from grassroots leaders who are resisting harm and reclaiming agency by partnering with rural clinics/mental-health providers, environmental advocacy groups, and community organizations across Dallas, West Texas, and Houston. Through site visits to drilling and disposal corridors, stakeholder meetings, direct service, and critical reflection, we will pair resident narratives with their environmental contexts to illuminate the structural drivers of harm and community strategies for resilience. We aim to equip students with the skills to ethically engage with diverse communities and become informed advocates for rural communities affected by environmental injustice