



State Recovery Now

Policy Playbook

Employing Residents in High-Demand Careers: National Service

A guide to helping communities advance workforce development through community service

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing societal problems, from food insecurity, homelessness, learning loss, unemployment, and wage stagnation to eroding public trust and civic engagement. While a variety of policy interventions are necessary to address each of these distinct challenges, a national community service program has great potential to make a positive impact across the board. In particular, this type of programming is proven to improve long-term employment outcomes for participants while simultaneously meeting urgent community needs.

In addition to state and local recovery aid, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) allocates \$1 billion to national service programming through AmeriCorps and its many programs. National service is designed to address unmet community needs, particularly among marginalized communities. Infusing local nonprofits with motivated, service-minded young people helps organizations build capacity and expand their reach, while building a talent pipeline for the next generation of nonprofit leaders.

By supplementing this national service funding with additional ARP state and local recovery funds, state and local governments can support and expand national service year programming by putting young people to work in community organizations focused on immediate short-term, emergency-response needs. ARP funds can also be used for smaller-scale pilot projects focused on longer-term recovery needs, serving as a catalyst for more widespread programming in the future.

With estimated costs of roughly \$25,000 per service member per year, policymakers can expect a return on investment of \$11.80 for every dollar spent. Through a program designed to prioritize underserved communities, national service year models will advance equity in unmet community needs, employment in well-paying jobs, and build capacity within community organizations to expand their reach.

Policy Overview

In addition to state and local recovery aid, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) allocates \$1 billion to national service programming. State and local governments should consider allocating a portion of their recovery funds to supplement this expanded pot of national service funding, allowing a broad expansion of programming to overcome challenges with workforce development, pandemic-recovery, and rebuilding public trust. Service corps offer opportunities to young people to serve their communities in a full-time, paid capacity. This helps address urgent community needs, foster a sense of civic renewal among corps members, and put members on pathways to higher education or jobs.

National service programming can exist in a range of issue areas, including mentoring and tutoring students, promoting environmental conservation efforts, supporting disaster relief, connecting community members to government services, and addressing public health emergencies through contact tracing, among other program models.

Corps members serve with local community organizations, or through federal, state, or local agency partnerships. Members receive a living stipend, health benefits, and an education award for past or future higher education costs, in exchange for the terms of their service.

Promoting equity through national service requires a two-pronged approach: (1) increasing the diversity of corps members themselves, and (2) increasing the diversity of community organizations hosting service programs. To increase the diversity of corps members, state and local governments must address historically low living stipends, which have long been a barrier to underrepresented communities in their decision to pursue a year of service over other employment opportunities. To increase the diversity of community organizations hosting service programs, jurisdictions should determine where to invest in service programming based on communities most in need of additional resources and wraparound supports,

To implement this policy intervention, jurisdictions can draw upon planning grants, included in ARP legislation, issued by state service commissions for smaller community-based organizations, which may have less capacity and experience with applying to national service funding streams, such as AmeriCorps. These planning grants can help to diversify the pool of organizations receiving funding so that all communities compete on an equal playing field.

Some cities have opted to set up a pass-through organization within city government, which helps shoulder the burden on behalf of smaller nonprofits. New York City, for example, set up Civic Corps as an intermediary body to place service members at smaller nonprofits across the

city, reducing the paperwork required of community-based organizations and allowing them to host as few as one service member. In deciding to leverage national service programming, state and local governments should remain cognizant of how to elevate and include small organizations, to better reach underserved communities.

Outcomes

In the short-term, a successful service corps program would meet the needs identified in a community and would fill service delivery gaps. These outcomes will differ by issue area, whether in terms of improving kindergarten readiness skills, increasing public health outreach to underserved communities, restoring ecosystems, or responding to natural or humanitarian disasters. By centering equity in the program design — both in terms of the corps members themselves and the community organizations hosting programs — these impacts should be more equitably distributed to prioritize underserved

communities, helping to advance equity in outcomes.

In the long-term, a successful program would result in service corps alumni employed at high rates in well-paying fields. This should be particularly impactful on young people in underserved communities, who already had higher levels of unemployment prior to the pandemic. A service corps program would also build capacity within nonprofits, expanding their reach, resources, and building a talent pipeline for the next generation of nonprofit leaders.

Associated Costs

National service corps members are funded through a combination of federal funding and local contributions, at a cost of roughly \$25,000 per member service year. Typically, the federal government grant offers an annual living stipend, raised to \$16,000 through ARP legislation, in addition to a roughly \$6,000 education award (the exact amount is pegged to the Pell Grant). Local matching funds from the sponsoring community organization are also required to supplement these stipends, typically in the range of \$3,000 to \$7,000. As state and local governments consider options for investing new funding into existing service programming, they are encouraged to raise these stipends to meet local standards for a living wage.

In addition to stipend costs, state and local governments can invest ARP funds to supplement programming costs, including staffing, outreach and recruitment, payroll, administrative costs,

and more.

Assessing the Return on Investment

For every federal tax dollar and matching dollar invested in AmeriCorps and Senior Corps programs, which covers most domestic national service programming, **the [return on investment](#) to the government, corps members, and society is \$11.80**. For federal tax dollars alone, each dollar spent yields a return of \$17.30 directly to the government. The total benefits to society, program members, and the government for the most recent program year is just over \$17.5 billion.

This return factors in both the living stipend and education award service corps members receive during their service term, plus their averaged increased educational attainment and employment outcomes post-service, as compared to the national average. It also incorporates the range of benefits to communities receiving service year programs, which could range from improved mental, emotional, and physical health for people in post-disaster situations, cost savings due to reduced spending on substance abuse programs, and improved high school graduation rates, among others.

All of these estimates of community benefits were based on previous results of rigorous evaluations of different types of service year programs. Government benefits generally factor in both cost savings of avoided public assistance, social insurance, and corrections, as well as increased income tax revenues due to increased educational and employment outcomes of corps members.

Evidence of Action

Many national service programs have been rigorously evaluated using randomized control trials to test their effectiveness. Education-oriented programs in particular have noted significant results in terms of improving students' literacy rates, kindergarten readiness, attendance, and

college enrollment.

The Minnesota Reading Corps, for example, is a service program focused on K-3 literacy proficiency. A [2014 impact evaluation](#) done by NORC at the University of Chicago found significant impacts on literacy assessment scores for participating students, including

across multiple racial groups and despite important risk factors. A [2015 evaluation](#) of the Reading Partners program in East Menlo Park, California, which uses community volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring to struggling readers in under-resourced elementary schools, found a positive and statistically significant impact on three different measures of student reading proficiency.

It is more challenging to conduct randomized control trials on other types of service programs, such as disaster relief. That said, the quantifiable impact of corps

members and testimony from local leaders in recovery citations are irrefutable. For example, a [2020 study](#) quantifying the impact of AmeriCorps and SeniorCorps found a return on investment of \$11.80 for every dollar of federal and matching funds spent on the programs. This study found a return of \$3.50 directly to the federal government from tax revenue gains and savings. Overall, these service programs were found to have a positive, quantifiable impact on society, program members, and the government.

How is this a compelling use of one-time funding that can drive long term-impact and avoid unsustainable funding?

National service programming is well-suited for ARP funds because it can put young people to work on immediate short-term needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, tailored specifically to meet state or local priorities.

For example, service corps members addressing pandemic-related learning loss through intensive tutoring models can help students get back on track academically, while simultaneously putting young people to work and on the pathway to careers in the education sector. Corps members serving as public health contact tracers and vaccination outreach officers can help jurisdictions get a better handle on tracking COVID-19 spread and reduce infection rates, without committing to hiring permanent, full-time positions.

National service is typically 10 months in duration, also making it well-suited for emergency response, short-term projects. For longer-term recovery needs, state and local governments can use ARP funds to implement smaller-scale pilot projects testing the impact of service corps programming on local priorities and getting programs off the ground and running.

National service programming generally braids together federal grant funding with a required

match from the host organization, blending federal and locally-raised philanthropic dollars. In this instance, there are opportunities to blend the supplemental ARP funding with AmeriCorps funding to make programs whole.

Authority for ARP Spending: This policy falls under several acceptable uses of ARP funding — most directly, it meets the approved use of addressing negative economic impacts caused by the COVID-19 public health emergency, including economic harms to workers, households, small businesses, impacted industries, and the public sector.

Implementation

To ensure effective implementation, state and local governments should assess readiness and engage relevant partners early on.

Assessing Readiness

State and local governments already have experience managing grants for service programs. Policymakers at all levels, however, are encouraged to reflect on whether they have the capacity necessary to implement this program successfully, and how to best ensure that community needs are met equitably through implementation.

Policymakers should consider that organizations serving as host sites for national service programs require sufficient enabling infrastructure in the form of funding, materials, physical space, and human resource systems in order to effectively execute the programs. Depending on the intervention, organizations might need to work within state or local partner agencies, or within school systems, to secure space for corps members to work. For example, education-focused service programs often require schools to set aside a designated classroom for the tutoring or mentoring intervention, whereas public health service programs might embed corps members directly in the county health department.

State and local leaders will also want to think critically about how they can work in tandem with host organizations to support successful recruitment efforts to onboard new corps members, whether through public awareness campaigns, media outreach, or engagement with youth-facing services and educational institutions.

Essential partners for successful implementation

In addition to core leadership commitment, jurisdictions should explore partnering with relevant agencies, organizations, community partners, and state or local government counterparts for successful program implementation. For service programming, this includes 4 critical stakeholders:

- **State service commissions** can help governors, city officials, county executives, and other state and local leaders understand existing service year programming and opportunities to scale them. They can play a key role in outreach to possible host organizations, as well as providing technical assistance in grant applications and distributing grant funding to local organizations.
- **State and local leaders** are instrumental in publicizing service opportunities. They can help drive recruitment by issuing a call to service and highlighting the good work that corps members are doing.
- **Community nonprofits** serve as implementing partners of national service, hosting corps members offering professional development, planning, assigning corps members service responsibilities, and monitoring their progress toward fulfilling community needs.
- **High school and college career services and counselors** can also support recruitment and make service opportunities more visible to graduating students.

Engaging Stakeholders and Beneficiaries

Narrowing the scope of which specific community needs will be addressed via a national service model will help state and local governments determine which organizations to involve. For example, if the goal is to address pandemic-related learning loss, governments will want to involve local education agencies, community-based organizations in the tutoring and mentoring space, local community colleges, or public library systems. If the goal is mitigating the impact of climate change and supporting fragile ecosystems, programming might involve the state's department of environment and natural resources, local departments of public works, local housing authorities, local community organizations involved in environmental restoration, conservation corps, and the National Park Service and related federal agencies.

State and local leaders should be sure to consult with civil society leaders, particularly those who work in underserved regions or who represent disadvantaged communities. This may look different across program issue areas, but could include tribal leaders, leaders of small community-based organizations, faith-based leaders, and leaders based in rural spaces. It could also extend to grassroots organizing spaces that are already doing work on the ground to

identify community needs. State service commissions can support convening work to bring these community voices to the table.

The Detroit Urban Safety Corps is a great example of how state and local partners can work together in common purpose. This program, spearheaded by the governor of Michigan and mayor of Detroit and hosted by Detroit-based Wayne State University, engages corps members in public safety and crime reduction. Corps members work with community partners to identify crime hot spots, stand up neighborhood patrols, organize safe routes to school for local students, provide wraparound services to victims of domestic violence, and board up abandoned homes, among other activities. In neighborhoods where AmeriCorps members serve in this program, crime has declined by close to 30 percent, saving hundreds of millions of dollars in local law enforcement resources.

Risk Mitigation

What could go wrong?

- Community organizations might face trouble recruiting young people to participate in service programs, particularly among typically-underrepresented groups.
- Community organizations may lack the capacity necessary to train, deploy, and manage service members.
- Particularly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, community organizations and state or local agencies hosting service members may face challenges regarding the spread of the virus. Many national service programs require corps members to do direct, in-person service work, which might be difficult if service locations such as schools or state parks are closed.

How can we mitigate the biggest risks?

- To overcome challenges around recruitment, policymakers should prioritize partnerships with local institutions of higher education, high schools, career services, and state and local education agencies to build awareness of national service among the target age demographic.
- To mitigate challenges around organizational capacity, policymakers should assess readiness prior to selecting organizations and determine whether some might need

additional support from the state or local government to implement the program successfully.

- Community organizations and state and local agencies may want to think through risk mitigation strategies for preventing the spread of the virus among corps members and opportunities to pivot to virtual service, should the need arise. State service commissions can support host organizations in thinking through how program design might shift with ongoing public health concerns to meet the needs of communities, while still providing valuable service opportunities to young people.
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Data and Learning Strategy

Measuring Progress: How can progress toward the desired outcomes be measured — both to assess progress and inform improvement along the way?

To measure progress of the overall service program, state and local governments can track performance metrics across three categories:

1. Whether identified community needs are fulfilled;
2. Whether service corps members have a stronger sense of community and civic engagement; and
3. Whether service corps members have successfully attained workforce development skills.

Fulfilling identified community needs

To determine whether community needs are fulfilled, policymakers should use rigorous program evaluation to measure performance indicators that flow directly from the specific needs they seek to address. National service programs span a wide range of interventions, requiring distinct evaluation strategies; programming metrics for a K-12 education-oriented program will look vastly different from metrics for a disaster service program. Community organizations or state and local agencies hosting service members can help identify which metrics to use by mapping service year programming onto a logic model.

For example, if service members are serving in schools to improve students' literacy or math outcomes, organizations will want to measure the proficiency level at which students matriculate, assess students mid-year to determine their progress, and assess students again at the end of the school year to determine if they narrowed their personal achievement gap with grade-level

standards. Other types of interventions' metrics will look vastly different, depending on each program's logic model.

Community organizations that run national service programming will generally track this information internally, while state leaders work with those organizations to receive regular reports of progress monitoring. Where feasible, host organizations should track comparison group outcomes, so as to measure the progress of program beneficiaries versus a control group outside the intervention.

Building in funding for rigorous program evaluation and selecting national service models with an existing evidence base will help state and local leaders to drive funding toward interventions that are known to be effective.

Policymakers will also want to ensure that organizations of all sizes have the same opportunity to host service year programs. State service commissions can help track how funding is distributed to analyze the geographic and organizational diversity of funding recipients.

Service corps members' community and civic engagement

Measuring civic engagement and renewal among corps members can be done via standardized surveys. State service commissions might consider working in partnership with grantees so that survey questions and methodology look identical across different community organizations. Surveys could be administered to service corps members at the end of each service year, generating annual data that could be disaggregated by a variety of demographic factors.

Service corps members' workforce development skills

Monitoring workforce development goals could pose a challenge, given that some national service programs are pathways to highly specific career trajectories in construction, health care, or disaster relief, while others might prepare corps members for a range of possible careers across multiple industries. Where pre-apprenticeship metrics are feasible, states and community organizations can work with workforce development boards, industry leaders, and local institutions of higher education to allow corps members to work toward industry-recognized certification or credentials by the conclusion of their service term, while tracking those attainment rates. State and local leaders could also require organizations to track the employment outcomes of their recent program alumni.

Additional Resources

[Expanding Service Years in State and Local Communities](#) - AmeriCorps, Service Year Alliance, and America's Service Commissions, July 2021

[Transforming Communities through Service: A Collection of 52 Most Innovative AmeriCorps Programs](#) - America's Service Commissions, June 2010

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