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Increasing Access and Opportunity Through State-Led National Service Programs

**Insights and Recommendations
from the National Service Challenge**

Introduction

Voluntary civilian national service can be a powerful catalyst for the social and economic growth of young adults, the revitalization of American communities, the development of skills to address workforce needs, and the bridging of societal divides.

Since its inception 30 years ago, the federal AmeriCorps program has made profound contributions by providing a way for people to spend a year, or more, serving with participating nonprofit organizations and local government and education agencies. Nearly 1.5 million people have provided billions of hours of their time to address critical needs in local communities, from tutoring students in elementary schools and staffing food banks to supporting communities affected by natural disasters. These contributions, while significant, still are not commensurate with the many challenges communities are facing across the country. Our country needs more people to serve.

States can, and should, be a principal part of the solution. The energy around national service is building at the state level. Since 2020, the Schultz Family Foundation (“the Foundation”) has created opportunities for states to lead in the development of innovative national service initiatives that strengthen benefits for those that serve as well the local communities in which they serve. A vanguard of states has developed innovative service programs to address critical priorities. Importantly, these programs have been shaped locally to expand the number who serve, align the design and focus of service work with state priorities, and lead to career opportunities once service terms are completed. Some states are embracing new funding models that include augmenting federal dollars with state and philanthropic ones, and creating service corps that are entirely state funded. The interest in—and embrace of—national service across the country in both “blue” and “red” states provides a valuable roadmap for the expansion of national service in the 21st century.

Innovation and leadership at the state level is particularly crucial given recent reductions in the overall number of service positions funded annually by the federal AmeriCorps agency; the administrative burden for nonprofits to participate in the federal program; and the challenges that long-standing national service programs are having in recruiting young people to participate. The tight labor market, which has resulted in higher wages in the private sector, also has made it more challenging to recruit individuals to participate in service. And compared with the U.S. military, the federal government makes only a miniscule effort to encourage young people to choose a year of civilian service.

To ensure greater state leadership in service, stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as in the philanthropic and private sectors, need to increase investments, which can enable and encourage states to nimbly innovate in ways that meet the needs of their communities. That begins by recognizing the critical role states are playing and how much more they can do.

This paper summarizes insights gained from the first two years of the National Service Challenge, an initiative created by the Foundation and co-funded by the Ballmer Group that has invested in eight state service commissions to pilot, expand, and scale new approaches to making service accessible and impactful for more young adults. The National Service Challenge has shared its learnings, many of which are detailed here, with the broader national service field to support further innovations in the space. This paper offers recommendations on how states, when assisted by key partners, can better design national service programs to benefit individuals, communities, and entire states.

The National Service Challenge

In the spring of 2021, the Foundation launched the National Service Challenge to invest in state service commissions¹ as laboratories of innovation.

Working closely with state service commissions through the Challenge, the Foundation sought to identify where and how national service can best be tailored to address emerging state-level goals and challenges while also increasing access for individuals to serve in AmeriCorps. Since the launch of the National Service Challenge, the Foundation, along with the Ballmer Group, has invested in eight state service commissions to pilot, expand, and scale new approaches to making AmeriCorps service accessible to more young adults. This work is grounded in the belief that AmeriCorps has value as a career-development pathway, where members are offered the coaching, resources, and certifiable skill development to help them successfully transition after their term of service to a career pathway with upward mobility or an education institution. The eight states that comprise the Challenge are: Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington.

The Foundation's work in national service began in Washington State during the summer of 2020 to address food insecurity and youth unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The WA COVID Response Corps, created in partnership with

Serve Washington, Washington's state service commission, offered young adults the opportunity to participate in AmeriCorps service, earn an increased living allowance tied to the cost of living, gain exposure to the nonprofit sector, and build on-the-ground job skills, and explore career development. Between 2020 and 2022, a total of 225 members participated in the WA COVID Response Corps across 120 Washington nonprofits. In two years, these Corps members served in 17 counties across the state, supported the delivery of 35 million pounds of food and nearly 10 million meals, and served nearly 3 million people; over 75 percent of the members transitioned to a job or further education that built on the experience and skills they acquired during their service.² In 2021, the Foundation co-designed the National Service Challenge to engage and support additional state service commissions in applying new approaches to enhance the impact of national service on members and communities.

The National Service Challenge aimed to seed innovations that could improve outcomes for young adult AmeriCorps members proximate to the communities they are serving across three categories:

- 1 Member recruitment:** To expand who can and does serve, with a focus on enrolling members that reflect the race and income of the communities being served.
- 2 Member retention:** To offer wraparound supports and professional development opportunities for members while serving.
- 3 Service-to-career pipeline development:** To expand professional opportunities for members, specifically with career pathways offering upward mobility.

¹ State service commissions are the state partners of the AmeriCorps federal agency and provide AmeriCorps funding to AmeriCorps state programs through annual grant competitions. State service commissions are also charged with encouraging volunteering in their states and administering special volunteer initiatives.

² WA COVID Response Corps: Overview of the Model and Early Learnings. [<https://www.schultzfamilyfoundation.org/post/wa-covid-response-corps-white-paper>] March 2021.

The National Service Challenge has also highlighted the importance of state service commissions to engage with new public, private, and philanthropic partners. Foundation grants provided matching funds with those from local donors, enabling state commissions to bring additional regional funding, expertise, and resources into AmeriCorps programs.

Supported by philanthropic investments, all eight state service commissions in the National Service Challenge participated in the National Service Learning Collaborative, led and facilitated by America's Service Commissions,³ to share insights and effective practices, as well as develop recommendations for how states and AmeriCorps could build service as a pathway to opportunity for young people. Learning Collaborative convenings were held monthly to allow states the forum to share their work, discuss challenges, highlight promising practices, and ideate recommendations for improvements to be shared more broadly.

There is an urgency to leverage national service as an economic opportunity path for more young adults. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of young people enrolled in college has declined precipitously, down more than 1.6 million students compared with the fall of 2019. Survey data suggests this drop is in part due to the concerns of young people, who are questioning the value of a college degree, struggling with the cost of college, and/or seeking opportunities that allow them to earn money while learning. At the same time, there are millions of open positions in social impact sectors such as health care, education, and social assistance as well as pressing local challenges in public health, climate, education, and food insecurity. Service is uniquely positioned for states to address these challenges while also offering an innovative pathway to prepare young people for the future.

These trends indicate that as a nation, we need to rethink our approach as to how young people are being exposed to career opportunities, gaining practical and classroom skills, and experiencing and ultimately connecting to careers – while also building a talent pipeline into social impact sectors. State agencies, nonprofit organizations, and training programs are reevaluating and updating their workforce strategies to boost apprenticeships and expand the availability of short-term credentials and dual-credit opportunities. National service, as demonstrated through the National Service Challenge, has the potential to expand opportunities for young people through states. And, in part, with support from the Foundation, a handful of states are rethinking the role of national service, viewing it as a means of expanding opportunities for young people. These states are positioning service as an economic opportunity pathway that can enable young adults to gain valuable skills and experience while helping their communities.

³ America's Service Commissions (ASC) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization representing and promoting state service commissions across the United States and territories.

Insights and Recommendations

Given the unique opportunity the Foundation and its grant partners have had to capture learnings across states, this paper aggregates those insights in order to share them broadly with the field and proposes a series of recommendations that will assist the federal AmeriCorps agency and state commissions to increase access and opportunity around three key themes: (1) who serves, (2) the value of national service to those serving, and (3) how members' service benefits their communities.

We believe these insights and recommendations are beneficial not just to states innovating with AmeriCorps funding but also in the development of service programs supported by state, philanthropic, and other non-federal funding.

Who Serves in AmeriCorps

With more than 70,000 members gaining skills and experiences each year through their service, AmeriCorps has the potential to become a more significant and impactful engine of human capital development, particularly for racially diverse and low-income Americans. Recent research suggests that over the course of its 30-year history, AmeriCorps has become a program that offers the most benefit to those with the most privilege—e.g., those with college degrees or who are from families with higher incomes.⁴

State commissions participating in the National Service Challenge are committed to expanding who serves, and recognizing that to achieve this, it must be more feasible for those without deep financial and social capital resources to join. Participating states have undertaken efforts to design and adopt recruitment strategies that engage young men of color (South Carolina), refugees (Iowa), and young adults representative of the communities being served (Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington). These states have adopted a range of strategies, including providing an increased living allowance, harnessing statewide recruitment resources, and working in partnership with community-based organizations to diversify their recruitment strategies.

Through this work, states have learned that expanding who serves requires more than increasing the marketing budget. Attracting young people earlier in their educational and career journey, many of whom need the most support in navigating career options, gaining career exposure, and acquiring basic work skills, will require a new way of thinking about AmeriCorps. The program must be centered on its potential value to the AmeriCorps member as well as its value to the community.

Expanding access requires reshaping who applies to join AmeriCorps.

While national service can be a life-changing experience, participating nonprofits often market service opportunities to those who will bring skills and experience to their organization rather than to those who seek to gain skills and experience through their service. To expand awareness and visibility of AmeriCorps as an opportunity for youth and young adults seeking a valuable postsecondary experience, state commissions need to work with their grantee partners to rethink recruitment strategies, including messaging, materials, and outreach, all with this new paradigm in mind. The federal agency also has a role to play in developing broad awareness of AmeriCorps service, creating marketing content and templates that local partners may adopt, and considering updated national policies that signal and expedite a culture of inclusivity. This could include reforming the process of applicant criminal history background checks and enabling DACA recipients to be eligible to serve in AmeriCorps State and National programs.

⁴ Hudson-Flege, Matthew D., "Getting Things Done for Life: Long-term Impact of AmeriCorps Service for Diverse Groups of Members" (2018).

To shift the paradigm of who should serve in AmeriCorps, our state commission partners in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, and Washington have articulated an expanded vision of AmeriCorps members for their nonprofit partners, who are largely responsible for the selection and enrollment of members. Through this reframing exercise, these states are ensuring their on-the-ground partners are committed to recruiting and selecting members based on their potential to succeed as opposed to those already armed with college degrees, internships, and workforce experience.

In Washington, for example, over a two-year period, the portion of Corps members without a four-year degree increased by 16 percentage points, with the greatest increase among those with only a high school diploma or equivalent level of education. To achieve this shift in recruitment and selection practices, Serve Washington has had to encourage its grantees to think differently about the strategies they use to spread the word about service opportunities, including building partnerships with tribal communities, local high schools, and community-based organizations that serve diverse youth and young adults. This shift has also entailed rethinking the education and skill requirements they use to describe the type of person they are seeking to serve as an AmeriCorps member. Equally important, these grantee partners have committed to guiding and developing members throughout their terms of service.

Increasing member living allowances is important but not sufficient.

Several states, including Iowa, Minnesota, South Carolina, and Washington, have worked to reduce the financial barriers that restrict many from serving. For some, this has meant tapping into philanthropic or federal funds to increase the AmeriCorps living allowance, while others have adopted cash assistance programs to relieve financial stress from unexpected hardships.

An analysis of members in Washington and Minnesota who had received cash assistance found that more than 96 percent of applicants who received funds indicated that receiving the funds reduced their basic needs challenges; more than 30 percent cited obstacles with housing and transportation while serving. Because living allowances are unlikely to rise to the level of a living wage in many regions, cash and navigation are important interim steps. States and philanthropy must work together to scale the adoption of emergency funds and augment current living allowances. While these strategies have begun to show promise in creating a more supportive and inclusive environment, increasing living allowances or access to emergency cash alone will not expand enrollment or retention of members whose composition more closely reflects the communities they serve (often referred to as being “proximate”). Wraparound supports should be considered to address other challenges to AmeriCorps service, such as affordable housing options, more part-time service opportunities, and connection to community resources to address basic needs. Federal, state, or philanthropic entities can set aside additional resources to underwrite the cost of expanding existing wraparound services and/or invest in navigation tools to streamline access to other public benefits for which members may be eligible.

Expanding who serves requires increasing the diversity of nonprofit grantee partners, many of whom require greater support in administering AmeriCorps grants and supporting AmeriCorps members.

At its best, AmeriCorps builds the human capital capacity of organizations on the front lines of America’s communities most in need. These nonprofits benefit from an infusion of member creativity, enthusiasm, and skills while they offer members an opportunity to grow as individuals. Commissions found that increasing living allowances and expanding the financial safety net, while important, did not lead to increased participation of proximate members unless their nonprofit partners had also adopted more inclusive recruitment, selection, and retention processes and policies.

The Value of Serving in AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps was originally designed to support the communities being served as well as the members serving. At the federal level, however, the assessment of AmeriCorps programs has evolved to only measure the impact on communities.⁵ This has contributed to a perception that AmeriCorps is prioritizing charity in its mission and design, with individuals who have resources giving to communities in need of those resources. By defining the mission primarily through the impact of service on communities, it has constrained how its stakeholders view and utilize AmeriCorps.

Given the training and education that members have access to during and after their service term, AmeriCorps has an opportunity to play a powerful role in catalyzing youth development and addressing pressing state workforce needs. States such as Colorado, Minnesota, Texas, and Washington have embarked on an effort to create more intentional service-to-career pathways for their members, strengthening the personal value of a year of service and creating a talent pipeline to address labor shortages in the public and nonprofit sectors.

Creating effective workforce pathways requires state service commissions to design grant programs that are intentional about member training and career development.

The AmeriCorps experience can offer powerful work-based learning pathways in states and communities. By embedding intentional skill development and well-designed career pathway opportunities into a service term, local AmeriCorps programs can provide participants with training, mentorship, and employer participation.

STATES LEADING THE WAY: IOWA

Building the Capacity of Community-Based Organizations

Over the past 40 years, Volunteer Iowa has received strong support and backing from its state governors. That support—and an overarching mission to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement—has guided Volunteer Iowa to harness national service to maximize opportunities for growth and responsiveness to the evolving needs of members, host sites, and the state.

Iowa has a long-standing commitment to greater racial, ethnic, and income representation of both the members who serve and the programs they support, with a belief that increasing the types of organizations that can host AmeriCorps members will help to increase diversity overall in AmeriCorps. In July 2022, Volunteer Iowa announced its inaugural cohort of National Service Fellows—six leaders from rural and racially diverse-led organizations that target populations currently underserved or under-engaged in national service. The fellowship program will support these leaders in building their knowledge and their organizations' capacity to host AmeriCorps members or become an AmeriCorps program.

⁵ AmeriCorps requires those participating in the program to closely track the effectiveness of their grantees, largely based on the impact of the work its members do to make a difference in the communities in which they serve. Performance measures are dependent on the type of service given and include outcomes such as: number of individuals served, acres of parkland improved, number of affordable housing units made available, number of students with improved academic performance, etc.

Strengthening the value of an AmeriCorps service year for its members will require states, state commissions, and the federal agency to approach their work in a more innovative way, centered on a tri-sector partnership with each partner taking a role:

- 1** The nonprofit and public sectors can identify workforce shortages
- 2** State agencies and others can co-develop workforce pathways into those nonprofit and public sectors
- 3** The members can gain valuable and marketable skills and credentials while serving their communities

State commissions and state leaders must work together to identify priority sectors and to collaborate with higher education, training providers, and local community partners to develop and design relevant pathways.

The state service commission Serve Colorado has been integral to the governor's strategies to address shortages in key sectors of Colorado's workforce (see box). In Minnesota, which is seeking to address a teacher shortage, members without a college degree can serve in AmeriCorps while attending a higher education program in teaching, starting at the community college level. Members in this program receive a \$2,500 scholarship for tuition and book costs, can attend classes in the evening, and have some of their course work count toward service hours. Some of their course field work also overlaps with their service experience, which helps in completing academic requirements. Minnesota's efforts to create an educator pathway through service has led to the formation of two more pathways, one leading to a peer recovery specialist certification and another to a home energy building analyst certification. Meanwhile, the state is exploring additional pathways in other sectors such as public health.

State commissions must build the capacity of nonprofit organizations to support member development.

Unique to the AmeriCorps member experience is the opportunity to learn and gain skills through direct placement at a host nonprofit organization. Ideally, a member's placement will bolster their enthusiasm, strengthen their sense of purpose, and provide opportunities for broadening their social and professional networks. Oftentimes, however, nonprofit organizations, especially smaller organizations, do not have the internal capacity or resources necessary to prioritize member development. As part of the National Service Challenge, states such as Iowa, Michigan,

STATES LEADING THE WAY: COLORADO

Leveraging AmeriCorps to Address Critical Workforce Needs

Colorado has tapped into AmeriCorps as a powerful platform to address critical workforce needs in the state. For Colorado state leaders, COVID reinforced the need for a sustained, diverse, highly skilled, community-based workforce in fields such as public health, direct care, and education.

Beginning in the fall of 2022, Serve Colorado launched the first in what is expected to be a series of U.S. Department of Labor–certified apprenticeships that offer AmeriCorps members a living allowance, career-specific training, career counseling, and a clear pathway into public health roles in the state. Recruiting members whose race and income reflect the composition of the communities being served will continue to be a key component of the program, building pathways of opportunity for individuals while improving health services. Portable certifications as well as braided funding from state, philanthropic, and federal partners will allow for increased member benefits, creating opportunity for a more diverse group of members to serve.

Minnesota, Texas, and Washington launched initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity of these small nonprofit organizations to support and develop their AmeriCorps members.

Over the past several years, Serve Washington has steadily increased the percentage of diverse-led organizations in its AmeriCorps network. The commission saw firsthand that many of these organizations do not have the internal capacity to supervise and fully support members. To address this, Serve Washington launched the BIPOC-Led and Small Nonprofit Equity Fund to increase the capacity of nonprofits to support member development while continuing to stay true to their core mission to provide services and assistance to their communities. In its first year, the Fund will impact 17 organizations and more than 50 AmeriCorps members. Through the Fund and other initiatives, Serve Washington is building a set of values and competencies within its AmeriCorps ecosystem that balances community impact with member development and expects to scale this work with funds recently awarded by the Washington State Legislature.

How Service Benefits Communities

In the wake of the pandemic, state service commissions identified community-led initiatives designed to address emerging issues in their communities, such as learning loss among elementary students, an increase in hard-to-fill positions in specific state agencies, overwhelming demand on community food banks, and increased need for substance use disorder and mental health services. These initiatives underscore the role state service commissions can and should play in supporting community-driven, community-specific solutions to address our nation's most pressing problems. Although AmeriCorps can adapt to address crises, its complex administrative processes can pose challenges for commissions, state partners, and nonprofit host organizations. For states to scale and deepen work on emerging issues, stakeholders at the federal, state, and community levels, as well as in the philanthropic and private sectors, need to create an ecosystem that allows for states to nimbly innovate and meet the needs of individual localities.

States can and should align statewide service priorities to address the challenges facing local communities.

Communities from state to state across the nation are facing many of the same challenges, from workforce shortages to health care accessibility and housing insecurity. But geographic, demographic, and historical contexts heavily influence how each community experiences these challenges. It is crucial that programs to help solve these problems are designed locally, which can take into consideration preferred language, trusted community-based organizations, and culturally relevant initiatives. Experts and organizations at the state level have a bird's-eye view of what is happening in their local communities and national service offers states the ability to combine this expertise with the ability to design issue-specific funding opportunities that are flexible enough to address the nuances of each region or area in their state.

To effectively design and implement service initiatives that align to different community needs throughout the state, state commissions must collaborate with other state leaders, including governors and state legislators, and co-create strategies that braid and blend AmeriCorps resources with other federal, state, and local initiatives to shape community-driven responses to key challenges, including education, youth development, food insecurity, and public health. One prime example of harnessing interagency collaboration to address emerging local needs was the partnership between Serve Washington and the state's Department of Agriculture, which, when faced with a food insecurity crisis during the pandemic, created a highly responsive model. The collaboration allowed Serve Washington to leverage the existing AmeriCorps infrastructure to provide much-needed human capital and culturally-relevant resources to regional and local food banks and nonprofit organizations while supplementing additional dollars from other integral state agencies and philanthropy to provide financial supports plus career exploration and development resources to members.

AmeriCorps must embrace innovation and operationalize innovation to support it in states.

AmeriCorps is a complex program for all its stakeholders – philanthropies, state service commissions, nonprofit partners, and members alike. Like any federal agency, it acts as a steward of public dollars. As such, the application and reporting processes, timelines, and eligibility requirements serve as safeguards to ensure that federal dollars are spent where and how they have been appropriated to meet the appropriator’s vision through a blend of compliance and innovation. A handful of states inside and outside of the National Service Challenge have demonstrated what is possible if leaders augment their roles as grantors and regulators by working in innovative ways. States such as California, Colorado, Minnesota, Texas, Utah, and Washington have begun to show what is possible.

States cannot do this alone, though. The federal agency should establish a cross-departmental innovation team as an accelerator to identify and implement federal policy changes and incentivize pilot efforts and flexibility that will advance commission and program innovation efforts. Such an approach may also draw philanthropic partners that, through risk capital, can catalyze many of these programs; this can give state service commission leaders the funding they need to pilot new ideas, bring in new partners, and seed learnings across states. The federal agency can also support interagency partnership development at the federal level, whether it is to work with the Department of Labor to align apprenticeship requirements with AmeriCorps’ terms of service or create career pathways, as the agency has done with Public Health AmeriCorps and FEMA Corps.

STATES LEADING THE WAY: WASHINGTON STATE

A Response to COVID Drives Innovations

Serve Washington’s WA COVID Response Corps, launched in 2020 in partnership with the Schultz Family Foundation, combined federal and state resources with an investment from private philanthropy to meet community needs associated with the pandemic and create service opportunities for young people who reflect the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity of the communities they serve. The program also piloted meaningful innovations designed to help AmeriCorps become an even more powerful partner in offering members who serve opportunities to grow and excel on a professional path while effectively addressing emerging community needs. Innovations included bringing on 82 new community-based organizations with AmeriCorps; increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance to better reflect the cost of living; providing cash assistance to members facing critical emergencies; and providing members with skills training aligned to their personal career goals and high-demand living wage jobs in the state.

Through access to expanded state and philanthropic resources, Serve Washington expects to continue these innovations with all of its young adult members and to provide host site subsidies and capacity building to increase AmeriCorps access for community-based organizations.

Conclusion

The National Service Challenge has enabled a group of states to embrace their role in expanding and strengthening national service while simultaneously addressing state priorities.

Based on the early results of this work, it is clear there is real value, for both communities and those who volunteer to serve, when states elevate national service and take a proactive role in recruiting more diverse service corps, designing programs to meet critical state priorities, and creating member experiences that directly support post-service education and career outcomes. Stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as in the philanthropic and private sectors, need to enable and encourage more states to nimbly innovate in a way that meets the needs of their communities. As states

participating in the National Service Challenge have demonstrated, the impact of adopting national service is threefold: Young adults who serve have a new, dynamic pathway to economic mobility; state agencies have access to human capital to address shortfalls; and communities can achieve positive outcomes on social issues that most concern them, including access to food, public health, and student learning. Further, the impact of this work puts state service leaders in a strong position to advocate for greater state funding to scale more promising innovations to aid an ever-larger number of individuals, communities, and organizations.

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