

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
March 28, 2019 | College Station, Texas****National Service Hearing: Improving Current National Service Policies and Processes****Chris Bugbee, Chief Operating Officer of OneStar Foundation and OneStar National Service
Commission**

INTRODUCTION

OneStar Foundation serves as the state service commission in Texas, responsible for overseeing all AmeriCorps State funding in Texas; we are one of 52 state service commissions across the country. All commissions are charged with identifying local needs, setting policies and program priorities, and overseeing the AmeriCorps competitive grant process for their state. As the state service commission, we administer an \$18.2 million portfolio of 29 AmeriCorps programs, with over 3,200 AmeriCorps members, that address the needs of Texas in the areas of Disaster Services, Economic Opportunity, Education, Environmental Stewardship, and Healthy Futures. In addition, OneStar's staff of 18, operates a statewide AmeriCorps VISTA Intermediary Project, the Rebuild Texas Fund, and fills key roles in disaster services throughout the State of Texas, including administration of the VolunteerTX.org statewide volunteer portal.

As the Chief Operating Officer for OneStar Foundation, I serve in an executive leadership role with oversight over OneStar's financial, budget and human resource functions. I also serve as a senior advisor to the CEO providing strategic counsel on administration of the \$18.2 million AmeriCorps Texas grant program and implementation of the Texas Faith-Based and Community Initiative, including statewide efforts to strengthen the nonprofit sector in Texas.

Before joining OneStar in 2006, I was appointed to serve in Washington as Deputy Director of the Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. I also served at the White House as Associate Director in the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and as a Senior Intergovernmental Officer for the U.S. Secretary of Labor.

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide the following written testimony to the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service ("the Commission") in response to the public hearings on national service. This written testimony accompanies verbal testimony provided at the National Service Hearing on March 28, 2019. The Interim Report published by the Commission notes that national service is America's Best Kept Secret. At OneStar we have seen the substantial impact of national service on communities and AmeriCorps members and believe in the power of service to transform lives. We also agree that there are significant barriers in realizing the full potential of national service in this country and hope the work of the Commission can help bring about helpful policy changes to remedy this.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND CONSIDERATIONS

We have had the opportunity to review the Staff Memorandum on National Service from the Commission, as well as the Interim Report published by the Commission in January 2019. OneStar is in strong support of a national marketing campaign and more resources for raising the awareness of national service opportunities, increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance, development of targeted service learning opportunities to create a culture of service from a young age, and reforms to the education award including exemption from federal income tax. Included below are some barriers OneStar has identified in the course of developing a thriving national service network in Texas, as well as specific suggestions for policy changes to alleviate those challenges.

SIMPLIFICATION OF AMERICORPS GRANT ADMINISTRATION

AmeriCorps grants are one of the most complex federal grants to administer. This is a message we hear at OneStar frequently, especially from organizations that have experience with multiple types of federal grants. There are many causes for the complex nature of the grants; however, the primary cause is that these grants are effectively an award of human capital to an organization to serve the community, and as such there are additional layers of regulations and requirements specific to the management of participants serving in the programs. AmeriCorps has a triple bottom line by supporting service beneficiaries, individuals that serve in AmeriCorps, and the community at large. This triple bottom line is what makes AmeriCorps such an impactful federal program, but also creates significant challenges in developing grants that are manageable to administer.

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the federal agency that oversees AmeriCorps, has made strides over the last 18 months to streamline the grant process and reduce barriers to administering AmeriCorps grants; however, the complexity inherent to the process remains a major challenge in growing national service in Texas. Because of the high administrative burden of these grants, coupled with the requirement for significant local match to support the program, the majority of organizations in OneStar's portfolio of 29 AmeriCorps programs are larger entities – universities and colleges, school districts, local governments – or, well-resourced national nonprofits. It has become nearly impossible for smaller nonprofits and organizations to competitively apply for and be awarded an AmeriCorps grant. This is especially true for rural and small faith-based organizations, that struggle with matching requirements as well as administrative hurdles, effectively driving national service resources to urban centers and leaving large swaths of Texas underserved by this valuable resource.

CNCS is currently in the midst of implementing a Transformation and Sustainability Plan to modernize some of the systems of the federal agency, improve compliance, and make it easier for organizations and individuals to participate in national service programs. OneStar is hopeful that the changes proposed in the Plan will help alleviate some of the burdens currently felt in the field. To maximize the potential of success for this Plan, OneStar strongly recommends that CNCS continues to engage with State Service Commissions, which are responsible for administering 80% of AmeriCorps State and National funding and are partners in grantmaking and administration of national service programs.

OneStar would like to take this opportunity to propose some recommendations that might ease the burden of grant management and increase access to AmeriCorps grants for a wider variety of organizations:

1. Modernize IT systems to make grant application and reporting more functional and allow State Service Commissions and programs access to more data and reports that are entered into the systems.
2. Develop streamlined and simplified processes for applying for and administering AmeriCorps grant projects, such as improving processes to conduct National Service Criminal History Checks (NSCHCs) which are currently the primary compliance challenge for our grantees due to the rigorous and complex nature of the requirements.
3. Continue to expand access to Fixed Amount Grant Awards, which allow for reduced administrative burden in managing the financial requirements of AmeriCorps grants.
4. Provide more resources, including funding, to support programs in building their evidence levels.
5. Provide more flexible and streamlined grant applications and grant requirements for State Service Commissions, as well as more flexibility with using unexpended AmeriCorps grant funds. This includes developing a single application for multiple State Service Commission grants available through CNCS, as well as increased flexibility in using CNCS grants to support all streams of national service. Currently, OneStar administers an AmeriCorps VISTA Intermediary Project in addition to managing our portfolio of AmeriCorps State programs. Grants available to support the organizational capacity of OneStar through our role in managing our portfolio or AmeriCorps State programs are not allowed to be used to support the VISTA Intermediary Project. By increasing the flexibility of allowable activities across these grants, OneStar would be better positioned to more effectively leverage various types of national service resources for communities throughout Texas.

INCREASING THE AMERICORPS LIVING ALLOWANCE

OneStar agrees with the preliminary findings of the Commission that increasing the AmeriCorps living allowance would be an effective policy change to help make national service a viable option for more Americans. Currently, the required minimum annual living allowance amount for an AmeriCorps State and National member serving a full-time term of service is \$13,732. The low stipend, which is just above the 2019 Federal Poverty Level for a household of one (\$12,940), makes it extremely challenging for individuals to even consider a year of service.

Without a financial safety net through friends and family, any sort of financial hardship that arises during a term of service – a car repair, an unexpected medical bill, a denied student loan deferment – often causes members to drop out of service to find a higher paying job. The result of this financial barrier is that service in AmeriCorps has become increasingly out of reach for those of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Increasing the living allowance would help alleviate this barrier and create more access and equity to national service opportunities for all.

In addition to increasing the living allowance, OneStar also recommends increasing the allowable federal share of the grant award. Raising the living allowance without a corresponding increase to the grant award would place the full burden of the increase on grantees who would need to raise additional cash in matching funds in order to meet the new

minimum living allowance requirements. This additional financial burden would make it extremely challenging for organizations to maintain their AmeriCorps grant.

SUPPORT FOR LESS-THAN-FULL-TIME SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

Part-time service opportunities are an effective way to engage a more diverse cohort of AmeriCorps members. In OneStar's portfolio just under half of all AmeriCorps members (46%) are serving in a less-than-full-time position. These types of opportunities most typically are shorter terms of service over the summer or part time service opportunities during a semester for college students or high school seniors. Part-time service allows an entry point into national service for those that otherwise would not have the capacity to start a full-time term of service. Many of our programs that have a combination of part-time and full-time service opportunities have found that their most successful full-time AmeriCorps members are those that had previously completed a part-time service term with the program.

OneStar believes that part-time service opportunities are an integral part of developing a pipeline of quality AmeriCorps members that are likely to serve multiple terms. One of the challenges with part-time service opportunities, is that current policies allow for AmeriCorps State and National members to serve a maximum of four terms of service, regardless of whether that service is part-time or full-time. Terms of service range from full-time service with a required commitment of 1700 hours, to minimum-time with a required commitment of 300 hours. With a limit of four terms regardless of the term of service, members can easily reach their maximum allowable terms while still enrolled as college students and lose their eligibility to serve in a full-time position upon graduation. For comparison, AmeriCorps VISTA has a term limit of five terms; however, AmeriCorps VISTA positions are almost exclusively full-time positions.

To alleviate some of the challenges of part-time service opportunities, OneStar recommends removing the term limits for AmeriCorps State and National members of four terms or modifying the policy to set a limit of the equivalent of four full-time terms. By amending the term limits for AmeriCorps State and National programs it would allow those that have been exposed to service through part-time positions the full opportunity to continue service in any capacity.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony to the Commission on ways we can improve current policies and procedures for national service. We are grateful for the work the Commission has done in understanding the successes and challenges in implementing national service programming. We believe the Commission has done a thorough job in researching the landscape of national service and are pleased that the findings and items under consideration in the Staff Memorandum and Interim Report match what we are seeing through our work as the state service commission for Texas. We hope this testimony helps the Commission by providing further context for some of these items and by presenting new policies and procedures for consideration. Our team at OneStar remains available to serve as a resource for the Commission throughout your important work.