



**Testimony for National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service
March 28, 2019 | College Station, TX**

National Service Hearing: Creating More National Service Opportunities

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Chairman Heck, Vice Chair Gearan, Vice Chair Wada, and distinguished members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on recommendations the Commission on Military, National, and Public Service can make to improve current national service policies and processes and create more national service positions.

My name is Kaira Esgate and I serve as CEO of America's Service Commissions (ASC), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization representing and promoting state service commissions across the United States and territories. As the national association for state service commissions, we envision a future in which all states embrace service as a strategy to build community in solving local challenges.

State service commissions are governor-appointed public agencies or nonprofit organizations made up of more than 1,000 commissioners – private citizen leaders who are leading the nation's philanthropic and service movement. The nation's 52 state service commissions operate at the state and local level administering more than \$300 million from federal national service funds while also matching these federal dollars with more than \$300 million from state, local, and private sources to support citizen service and volunteerism in America. These funds currently support more than 40,000 AmeriCorps members. Currently, state service commissions administer more than 80% of AmeriCorps State and National grant funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

State service commissions work in conjunction with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the federal agency providing oversight over all domestic national service programs, including AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, the Volunteer Generation Fund, and other special initiatives such as the MLK Day of Service. For AmeriCorps State and National, the largest national service program, each state is allocated a set amount of funding for AmeriCorps State programs to operate solely within that state (formula funding), while another pool of funding is awarded to AmeriCorps State or National programs that compete against each other nationally (competitive funding).

State service commissions administer AmeriCorps State programming and lead other volunteer efforts in their state including, but not limited to, roles such as volunteer disaster coordination, volunteer promotion and recognition, and nonprofit capacity building training.

The National Community Service Trust Act of 1993 explicitly created a state-federal government partnership responsible for connecting national service programming with communities tackling critical needs. The partnership was reaffirmed by the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009.

The involvement of governors and their state service commissions are key to the success of national service in the United States. State service commissions play a critical role in developing and supporting programs that address community needs. National service is *national*, and not just located in large urban areas, in large part because of the role state service commissions play in making it accessible to small, rural or underserved communities. The historically decentralized structure of AmeriCorps State and National is in many ways what has led to its success as the largest and most recognized domestic national service program.

Governors and state legislatures can play a significant role in establishing a culture of service in their respective states, including prioritizing civic education and service opportunities for K-12 students, allocating state funding to expand service opportunities that address state priorities, as well as providing further incentives to serve (providing in-state tuition, matching the education award, and ending state taxation on the education award). Further, governors can challenge their administrations to identify ways to incorporate service strategies in meeting the mission of their agencies.

In addition, governors can encourage the development of public-private partnerships to expand service opportunities. Over the past two years, ASC has worked with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to fund state service commission program development activities in expanding national service positions in support of afterschool programming. Also, a number of foundations around the country play an important role in providing the necessary matching funds to operate national service programs. Encouraging and incentivizing such partnerships will be critical in expanding national service opportunities in the future.

As we reflect on the past 25 years of AmeriCorps and state service commissions, a significant impact has been made on both AmeriCorps members and the communities they have served. As we look ahead to the next 25 years, we see the opportunity for this impact to be scaled by strengthening the existing federal and state partnership even further. A strong network of states service commissions will be best positioned to leverage both state and federal resources to create more national service opportunities.

Any recommendations to improve and expand national service should emphasize the important role of states in implementation. Federal resources should be increased; federal policies that create barriers should be removed; and recommendations should improve state and local control of the federal resource. In addition, states should be encouraged to articulate a vision for service in their state and provide state funding to leverage federal and private funds to achieve this vision.

The following provides our ideas and recommendations on ways for the Commission to support and expand national service by creating more opportunities and improving current policies.

Creating More National Service Opportunities

For the past 25 years, state governments, through state service commissions, have played a critical role in developing and expanding service opportunities. From expanding Senior Corps RSVP programming in Iowa to

creating the statewide Reading Corps in Minnesota, state legislatures are continuing to invest financially in national service as a solution to pressing state needs. In Massachusetts, the state-funded Commonwealth Corps provides additional service opportunities beyond those provided by AmeriCorps in the state.

We encourage the Commission to review our 2017 “[Expanding Service Years in States](#)” toolkit produced by ASC and Service Year Alliance for a few of the many examples of how governors and state legislatures have expanded service as part of a state strategy. In addition to the many examples in the past, we see new legislation on the horizon including proposals in California to expand AmeriCorps to 10,000 members and increase the education award, a proposal in New Hampshire to increase funding for AmeriCorps programs serving low-income students, and [a bill in Arizona that would providing a matching scholarship for AmeriCorps members](#). Further, long standing programs such as the [Washington Vet Corps](#), are sponsored by state agencies (Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs) to help them meet their state mandates.

In order to create more national service opportunities, we must recognize the need for funding to strengthen the infrastructure to support additional service opportunities. Although incredibly impactful, national service programs are not easy to operate and **adequate funding is necessary to ensure systems and supports are in place to ensure high-quality service opportunities**. Further, there is a need for **expanded support for state service commissions** to conduct program development efforts in their states. In addition, there is a need to **reduce barriers** for organizations to host and successfully manage national service opportunities.

As stated by the Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service in their white paper *National Service or Urban Service*, there is a need to better support smaller and more rural national service programs and members. “In our current complicated national service environment, development of new programs and projects also requires a significant investment. While national and large state nonprofits have the capacity to respond to these shifting and increasingly burdensome requirements and complex management scenarios, most small and rural nonprofits do not. It is up to state service commissions to ensure that these smaller programs continue to exist. Not only is it important for national service to be available to address the grassroots needs of rural communities, but **on a strategic level we need national service to be accessible everywhere so that Governors, legislators and other constituents see national service working in their own communities, thereby building a network of support for national service in all parts of the country.**”

One example of a locally developed program is the Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative (PAARI) AmeriCorps program. To address the growing opioid epidemic, [PAARI](#) enables 5 full-time AmeriCorps members to serve as program coordinators and 20 half-time AmeriCorps members to serve as recovery coaches in a leveraged scattered site model at PAARI-affiliated police departments across Massachusetts. With AmeriCorps member support, each police department has the ability to directly refer and place 50 or more people into treatment. This program was developed under a one-time opioid program development grant from CNCS to the Massachusetts Service Alliance state commission. This program and many others have been developed in recent years responding to the growing opioid crisis, public safety challenges, and child welfare concerns.

With an emphasis on the critical role of states in expanding service, we encourage the Commission to consider the following to create more national service positions:

Financial Considerations to Create New National Service Opportunities

- **Support continued and increased funding for AmeriCorps State and National**, along with appropriate increases in funding for state service commissions to administer these dollars at the state level. Program dollars alone, will not result in increased national service opportunities. Resources are needed for training, program development, monitoring and staff capacity to develop and provide oversight of the programs in each state.
- **Support funding and implementation of the Serve America Fellows, as authorized in the Serve America Act of 2009.** While already authorized, this initiative requires funding to launch in order to provide non-competitive national service positions allocated to states through state service commissions to address emerging needs. The Serve America Fellows could be deployed by a governor's office through the state service commission to community-based organizations addressing a compelling or emerging need in a timely, efficient manner and could be utilized in the planning and development of a national service program. This initiative could provide a valuable, strategic resource in supporting underserved, rural, remote, and high-need communities.
- **Support expanded funding for the Volunteer Generation Fund**, a CNCS program, to support expanded volunteer infrastructure and nonprofit capacity building throughout the country. Research-backed training such as the **Points of Light Service Enterprise Initiative** can support increased nonprofit effectiveness and capacity to host national service positions in the future.
- **Support continued and increased funding for the 52 governor-supported state service commissions** to increase staff capacity and training to develop new national service programs. Since 2016, Congress has made increased investments to support state service commission training and program development and it is working. As a result of this funding, in the first year alone, 100% of reporting commissions said new outreach and support was provided to underserved communities, 100% of commissions reported the funding improved the accessibility and quality of national service, and 88% stated new program applicants were generated as a result of the funding.
- **Support CNCS in utilizing their ability to waive match requirements for programs in underserved communities** to increase participation from small, less resources and/or rural programs.
- **Provide annual increases to the cost per Member Service Year (MSY) for AmeriCorps programs** to allow programs to develop infrastructure necessary to scale future expansion.
- **Re-establish service-learning funding** to run through state service commissions on a competitive basis. The Volunteer Generation Fund could be utilized as a mechanism for such funding.
 - *Example:* The state service commission for Tennessee, Volunteer Tennessee, provides service-learning training to K-12 schools, community-based agencies, and higher education institutions in their state.
- **Encourage use of Subtitle C funds to offer AmeriCorps Education Award Program (EAP) grants** at 10% of the established annual cost per member. Education Award Programs (EAPs) are typically leveraged by higher education institutions to engage college students in meaningful service opportunities and often connected to Federal Work-Study programs. While not always full-time service, these programs can quickly create a large pipeline of potential full-time national service members.
- **Encourage expansion of the Federal Work-Study program** to engage more college students in AmeriCorps and service learning related opportunities.

- **Support legislation that would allow any federal source of funds to be used as match for national service programming** to make it easier to launch and sustain new AmeriCorps and other national service programs (currently, this is restricted to very few federal agencies).
- **Incentivize state investment** by prioritizing access to national service positions for governors/state legislatures that allocate state resources for new service positions.

Policy Considerations to Create New National Service Opportunities

- **Support CNCS reducing administrative burden on programs including, but not limited to fully implementing fixed amount grants**, as authorized in the Serve America Act. Expanding access to fixed-amount grants, will increase the number of organizations that can participate in the management of an otherwise complicated federal program. A fixed-grant reduces the fiscal administrative burden, while maintaining the programmatic requirements.
- **Support changes in legislation to allow state service commission to administer programs** in order to support reducing programmatic burdens on small, rural and underserved communities.
- **Encourage CNCS to allow state service commissions to apply and receive their formula grants before selecting all of their subgrantees.** This could be available within a certain timeframe and for a percentage of funds to allow states flexibility in responding to new and emerging issues.
- **Encourage CNCS to allow state service commission to use a percentage of their current AmeriCorps program dollars for planning grants, without it impacting their portfolio cost/MSY** up to a percentage of funds (i.e., 20%). This would immediately support the development of new programs and national service opportunities.
- **Encourage CNCS to work with state service commissions and all national service programs to reduce the reporting and tracking burdens** on national service programs, state service commissions, and partners.

Improving Current National Service Policies and Processes

Improve Awareness:

One of the biggest issues facing national service programs including AmeriCorps is a lack of general awareness or understanding of where to find opportunities. Currently, there is not one fully functioning national website to search for all available national service positions in the country. Therefore, ASC encourages the commission to consider the following as it relates to increasing awareness:

- **Invest in a singular “one stop shop” website and brand to advertise all national service opportunities in the United States** – military, national and public service careers.
 - Repurpose www.serve.gov to be a combined site that links to military, public, and national service opportunities for anyone considering a path to service.
 - Develop a singular tagline/logo/website/marketing campaign to talk about military, national, and public service to all Americans – an “umbrella brand” that can encapsulate all the streams of national service just as the military does through its branding.

- **Provide funding for dedicated service marketing campaign** including a multi-pronged strategy with billboards, annual TV/radio PSA, digital advertising on social media, etc.
- **Develop a formal partnership for the military to promote national service opportunities** for those unable to serve in the military.
 - *Best Practice:* The UServeUtah state commission has had local success partnering with local military recruiter offices to promote AmeriCorps as an alternative for those not eligible or ready for military service. This could be scaled up nationally and more formally.
- **Provide and mandate support to high school guidance counselors and college advisors on how to effectively educate students on national service opportunities.** The Department of Education should require high school counselors to educate students in grades 9-12 on service opportunities (not just military but all national service). Language could be put in place to forge partnerships at the state level between state education agencies, school districts, and the state service commission of that state to provide training and materials to all high school counselors. Further, higher education legislation should require similar training for college advisors.
 - *Best Practice:* The Arizona state service commission has a long-time practice of attending and presenting at the Arizona State Board of Education conference to build awareness of service opportunities in the state. We believe this practice could and should be scaled up nationally and more formally with State Boards of Education so that all educators are trained and encouraged to give every young person in America the opportunity to learn about national service as a pathway.
- **Invest heavily in youth service programming and initiatives** – provide grants or otherwise create opportunities for Americans to start service at a young age with their parents, friends, teachers, and communities. Partner with cities/mayors and school districts/superintendents/principals to incentivize and encourage city- or school-wide “days of service” at the local community level.
 - *Best Practice:* Through the Volunteer Generation Fund (VGF), a CNCS-funded program, state service commissions in states such as Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio and Tennessee are actively working to engage more youth volunteers in service in states. Learn more about VGF here: <https://www.statecommissions.org/volunteer-generation-fund>.

Modernize Benefits and Eligibility Criteria:

Besides lack of awareness, another driving factor for many Americans is whether they can *afford* to serve. Currently, AmeriCorps has a range of benefits, but they have not kept up with the rising cost of living and related housing expenses. We recommend the Commission consider the following ways to improve the current AmeriCorps State/National benefits:

- **Increase the minimum AmeriCorps living allowance, eliminate the maximum living allowance, and provide an annual cost of living adjustment**, which should coincide with an increase in the cost per member service year for AmeriCorps grants.
- **Work with CNCS and Congress to change current eligibility criteria to expand national service opportunities to more people.** Currently, to apply for AmeriCorps State and National and AmeriCorps NCCC you must be a U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or legal permanent resident alien of the United States. However, the AmeriCorps VISTA program has already expanded its eligibility criteria to also allow people to serve as long as they are *legally residing in a state* and have the following legal residency classifications: refugee, asylum or asylee, temporary protected status or deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) status. The VISTA service criteria should be expanded to all streams of

national service as quickly as possible to eliminate barriers to engaging Americans in service, particularly those who may be awaiting permanent residency and have the time and inclination to serve their communities as they wait for future employment opportunities to open up.

- **Provide housing benefits to all national service members by pursuing innovative partnerships, such as potentially partnering with HUD to amend [Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program](#)** to allow national service members in good standing to automatically qualify for reduced rent and/or develop a new housing benefit/voucher to assist AmeriCorps members with the continually increased cost of housing and lack of affordable housing in both urban and rural communities.
- **Change the education award benefit to align with the current cost of higher education.**
 - *For example:* Ensure that the AmeriCorps education award benefit can pay for the equivalent of two years of tuition at a public university for one full-time year of service. This aligns with the [ACTION for National Service Act](#) previously proposed by Senators Reed, Coons, and Blumenthal.
- **Universal transferability of the AmeriCorps education award** – currently, the education award is only transferable for AmeriCorps members who are 55 and older before serving, and it can only be transferred to children, step-children, foster children or grandchildren. This policy should be fixed to maximize this benefit fully to attract more people to service. We support allowing members *of any age* to transfer the award *to any person(s) of their choosing*. This would make service much more attractive for those who don't need their education award and want to transfer their education award to someone in need.
- **Remove federal and state taxes on the AmeriCorps education award** – the federal tax on the education award is a burden for members after their service and was an unintended consequence.
 - *Best Practice:* Currently, a few states such as Minnesota and Iowa do not levy state tax the AmeriCorps education award and the Nebraska state legislature is considering enacting similar legislation in 2019.
- **Institute hiring preferences for government employment opportunities (federal, state, local) for all national service alumni.** AmeriCorps VISTA currently already has federal non-competitive eligibility in place for alumni, but this can and should be extended to all national service alumni (Peace Corps, AmeriCorps State/National, AmeriCorps NCCC, etc.). In addition, encourage states to adopt policies that allow national service alumni to purchase credits in their public retirement systems for each year of full-time service (national service and/or Peace Corps).
- **Continue to expand the Employers of National Service initiative** created by CNCS to encourage private industry employers to implement voluntary hiring preferences for national service alumni.

In conclusion, we are deeply supportive of the work of the Commission to explore new opportunities to expand the number of national service opportunities and to improve the current policies and processes. As the Commission moves forward in its work, we urge you to strongly consider the role state government currently plays and can continue to play in managing federal resources to create effective and efficient opportunities for Americans to serve. Please consider America's Service Commissions and its network of 52 governor-led state service commissions a resource to you as you work on developing your final report for Congress.

Thank you for your work and this opportunity to provide input.

Works Cited

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