



# Leaders for Every Sector

*National Service as a Strategy for  
Leadership and Workforce Development*

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Center for American Progress, City Year, Hudson Institute,  
Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University

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## Introduction

As the baby boomer generation begins to retire, the United States will face serious worker shortages in nonprofit organizations, health care, and education. National service programs such as Teach For America, the National Community Health Corps, and AmeriCorps have a proven track record for not only encouraging individuals to enter these key fields, but cultivating civic leaders in these areas and helping bring disadvantaged youth into public service through further education and workforce training.

“Leaders for Every Sector: National Service as a Strategy for Leadership and Workforce Development,” an event sponsored by the Center for American Progress together with Voices for National Service, the Hudson Institute, and the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, explored the ways in which national service addresses workforce needs.

Through panel discussions with national service alumni and executives from a variety of sectors, event participants examined how national service programs help cultivate the skills needed for success in the 21st century, such as the abilities to lead, problem solve, and communicate effectively. Three accomplishments of national service were repeated throughout the discussions: its ability to give volunteers necessary skills for workforce development, help disadvantaged youth continue their education and learn job skills, and inspire our next generation of leaders in civic service.

This report shares anecdotes and discussions from the event and other data to further the discussion about how national service can help prepare individuals to fill jobs in areas likely to experience worker shortages.

## The Labor Force Is Changing

**T**he baby boomer generation—people born between 1946 and 1964<sup>1</sup>—will soon begin to retire, creating significant employment vacancies, particularly within the fields of healthcare, education, and social services. Baby boomers made up 13 percent of the labor force in 2000, and this percentage is expected to rise as high as 20 percent by 2030.<sup>2</sup> When they retire, they will leave a serious void and create a new demand for services.<sup>3</sup>

The Bureau of Labor Statistics expects that the growth rate of the labor force will decrease from 1.5 percent per year between 1950 and 2000 to only .8 percent per year between 2000 and 2050. This slowdown is a result of the retirement of the baby boomer generation and a slowing of the population growth rate overall.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, employment in the United States is projected to increase by 18.9 million jobs between 2004 and 2014.<sup>5</sup>

Social service, health care, and education will account for many of these openings. Health care practitioners and technical occupations are projected to add nearly 1.8 million jobs between 2004 and 2014. Education, training, and library occupations should add another 1.7 million jobs, with demand for primary, secondary, and special education teachers growing to support the increasing school-age population. And community and social services occupations will add almost 500,000 jobs as a result of a rapidly increasing elderly population; three-fifths of these new positions will be in the health care and social assistance sectors.

The nonprofit sector also provides a large portion of American jobs, and could benefit from a strategy to expand AmeriCorps. According to Paul Schmitz, president and CEO of Public Allies, “The nonprofit sector employs about 14 million people, about 11 percent of the U.S. work force. That’s more than construction and utilities combined, just as an example. ... And it’s about the size of the finance and insurance industry.” About seven million of those workers work in nonprofit human services in the fields where AmeriCorps members serve.

Nonprofit organizations will be particularly hard hit by worker shortages in occupations such as technology and administration where they compete with the for-profit sector. As Paul Schmitz noted, the nonprofit sector “is a place that has great jobs. It is a place that doesn’t just need social workers and people in service—it needs accountants and IT people and HR people and all sorts of professional backgrounds.”

Nonprofit organizations will also need senior managers in the coming decades. According to a study by the Bridgespan Group, organizations will need to attract and develop some 640,000 new senior managers between 2007 and 2016 as a result of an increase in the number of nonprofit organizations and a decrease in leaders as baby boomers retire.<sup>6</sup> Public Allies is one national service program working to address this potential shortage by recruiting and training potential leaders from diverse backgrounds.

Nonprofit organizations and virtually all the fields that face worker shortages could benefit from stronger connections to national service. Individual programs

such as Teach For America, the National Community Health Corps, and LISC AmeriCorps have successfully used national service as a strategy to encourage individuals to enter professional fields by teaching skills that are in high demand in both the private and public sectors.

Although current national service programs are providing needed human capital to a variety of shortage fields, they are too small to meet the growing need. Targeted efforts to expand successful programs, create innovative new strategies, and build pathways for national service alumni to enter these careers could multiply these efforts many fold.

## Volunteers Acquire Skills for Workforce Development

National service program participants gain both “hard” and “soft” skills through their service and training. Skill development occurs through specific and targeted training opportunities and also through the service experience itself.

In addition to specific training related to service assignments, organizations also train participants on public speaking, project management, teamwork, and financial literacy. The combination of experiential learning and specific skills training provides participants with the opportunity to learn new skill sets and practice them in the course of their service. Kellie Bentz, an alumna of Hands on Atlanta’s school based AmeriCorps program explains:

We had training sessions every Friday—we were a very team-based, school-based AmeriCorps program. And I felt like the training was almost a channel or a vessel for us to learn from, but I felt like the overall experience was really our training. It was the hands-on, every-single-day, out-in-the-schools learning, not only from the community and the students but also from each other.

National service participants are also offered leadership opportunities, and they get them earlier in their career than those who have followed more traditional paths. For many, this is the first opportunity they have to lead others toward a common goal. Kaya Henderson, now Deputy Chancellor of the D.C. Public Schools, was tapped to join the Teach For America recruiting team after her two years of service:

I became a recruiter for Teach For America, and I spent a year running across college campuses all over the country telling people that they needed to do this, that they needed to serve. And then I was promoted to director of admissions at Teach For America, and at the age of 25 I was managing a team of 25 people. I hadn’t managed my way out of a paper bag. But I say that to say that I got leadership opportunities at Teach For America that I would not have gotten had I gone a more traditional path.

National service program participants bring to their work a combination of idealism and a willingness to try new things that opens new and surprising pathways for progress in service assignments that are often located in very low-income communities with longstanding challenges. Participants often must develop a sense of resiliency to achieve success—“a critical emotional tool for future success,” according to Cheryl Dorsey, the

president of the Echoing Green foundation, which supports emerging social entrepreneurs. This may be why national service programs have been a significant source of social entrepreneurs, and why many entrepreneurial nonprofits utilize AmeriCorps members to run their programs. Kellie Bentz shared her experience with Hands on Atlanta:

[National service] taught me how to be resourceful. It taught me how to stick through things when times were really tough, to make really tough decisions for a team that might not agree with your decisions because they might not understand it, but you knew that was the best thing for the team or for the group. ... A lot of what national service teaches you [is] being able to roll with the punches, being extremely flexible and resourceful, adapting to changes, and really learning how to deal with people and work with people in a way that otherwise you wouldn't know how to.

Private sector employers also see the appeal of hiring national service alumni. Employers in a variety of industries view national service alumni as prospective employees with a variety of attractive skills and attributes. Comcast began recruiting City Year alumni after getting to know them as corps members through a partnership in Philadelphia. Comcast Corporation's Senior Vice President and General Counsel Art Block explains:

As [Comcast] became involved with City Year in particular, [we realized] that there were qualities that we were seeing in the graduates of the programs that started

to look to us to be the very qualities that we were looking for in potential new employees ... One is—and this was a surprise to me in particular—a characteristic that I'm going to call the 'business-like approach.' ... What we have found is that the people we have started to hire from City Year ... into entry-level positions are more focused and more efficient.

Block also referred to the attributes that Comcast found in the City Year alums they hired, including a sense of perseverance, a motivation to succeed, creative approaches to problem solving, and ability to work with and lead people:

The folks who do [City Year] are motivated, and that's a tremendous resource in a private company. One of the hardest things to do, in my experience, is to find workers who really care about what they are doing and are motivated to do it well. [City Year alums] also understand that it takes hard work—probably better than anybody. If you're in the nonprofit world, if you're in the public sector, you understand that you've got limited resources and you've got to make the most of them. ... We have trouble retaining people who maybe have kind of been coddled along the way, or who don't understand yet what the work environment requires. We think that the folks who we hire from City Year do.

Block also pointed to the leadership that City Year alumni bring as an asset to private sector employers, noting that "if people in the work place see that you

can solve a problem, they're going to come to you with their next problem." He also observed that the people skills City Year alums possess are of particular value for Comcast, which is in a highly competitive business where customer service makes a significant difference. "We have to have people who can relate to other people," he said. "It's not just intellect; it's not just experience; it's that human ability to interact, that emotion quotient." The City Year experience, he concluded, builds that ability to connect at the human level.

National service programs are successful at producing alumni who have the experiences and skills necessary to excel in private sector work. Many of these individuals are uniquely qualified because they possess both hard and soft skills that most people their age have not yet acquired; they have often already been exposed to challenges in the workplace; and they have developed successful strategies for prevailing in different situations. These advantages are distinct results of the unique opportunities provided by national service organizations.



## Disadvantaged Youth Continue Their Education and Learn Job Skills

National service helps to prepare youth who have dropped out of school for productive careers. In 2003, 3.5 million youth ages 16 to 25 were not enrolled in school and did not have a high school diploma.<sup>7</sup> According to a study done by Civic Enterprises, these young people will on average earn \$9,200 less per year than those who graduate and be twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty.<sup>8</sup>

Four out of 10 youth aged 16 to 24 who lacked a high school diploma received some sort of government assistance in 2001. And a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person who has at least a high school diploma.<sup>9</sup> Experts believe that if just one-third of dropouts were to earn a high school diploma, savings on federal programs would amount to \$10.8 billion—more than enough to cover the cost of investing in these young people's education.<sup>10</sup>

Dropouts often became uninterested in school, but lack options to build a positive future. According to the Civic Enterprises study, four out of five dropouts interviewed said “if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning (internships, service learning projects, and other opportunities), it would have improved the students’ chances of graduating from high school.”<sup>11</sup>

Youth corps can offer the kind of alternative learning environment that can help these young people turn their lives around. Jason Phillips, a Forum panelist and alumnus of YouthBuild, explains how he was able to change his life by entering a national service program:

Initially, when I first heard about the program, I was incarcerated in upstate Pennsylvania. ... As I sat there, I was looking for a way out of the system, a way to land my feet on solid ground and make something positive happen. I received a brochure about AmeriCorps, about the charter school—what it is about, What AmeriCorps is about, what it can provide and how it can provide you with housing and opportunities and education. And I said, this is my ticket.

Phillips eventually obtained his diploma through YouthBuild and began working toward a college degree. He became a case manager at Crispus Attucks YouthBuild AmeriCorps Charter School, where he had been a student. He believes that the personal support provided by his program makes a difference:

Throughout our AmeriCorps service, we were always taught that behind every individual there's a circumstance. Find out to the core—speaking from a charter school perspective, if the student has an issue, is not in school, or is acting out, there's a reason. Find out what it is to keep that student involved in the program and doing their service.

A random assignment evaluation by Abt Associates confirms youth corps creates substantial earnings and employment gains for participants, reductions in risk behaviors, and improved life skills. The programs reduced arrest rates by nearly one-third, and youth corps alumni contributed an average of \$7,800 worth of service to society and local communities.<sup>12</sup>

More than 21,000 young adults are serving in youth corps today that, like Youth-Build, offer educational opportunities

combined with service that teaches job skills. Sally Prouty, executive director of The Corps Network, explains that:

Young people end up in a better place if they have the Youth Corps experience combining service and work force development best practices, and concentrating on young people assuming responsibility for working out their own problems, handling their own issues, developing their own life plan, and moving from being destructive in the community to leadership roles as evidenced by a number of people here.

National service programs like Youth-Build provide disadvantaged youth with the opportunity to continue their educational development and gain life skills in a learning environment that can keep them engaged and help them turn their lives around.

## Civic Leaders Are Inspired in Every Field

A term of service often exposes young people to parts of society that they would otherwise not encounter, and helps them see that they have the power to make positive change in their own communities. For many, their service experience opens up new paths for community engagement and civic leadership, whether through their career path choices or in a volunteer capacity. Tondalaya Shepard-Turner shared her perspective on how a year of service in City Year affected her fellow corps members' choices:

It was the people who were dedicated to going off to law school saying, 'I'm going to do a career in public policy,' or 'I'm going to be a civil rights attorney.' Or 'I'm going to do corporate law with a human perspective. Or people who were dedicated to going off to medical school saying 'I'm going to get some high-paid medical job, but I'm also going to be dedicated to low-income neighborhoods.'

Often national service alumni who become civic leaders will tap their peers to support their cause. One example shared by Kaya Henderson is the leadership of the DC Public Schools, which includes a large number of individuals who have worked at Teach For America or other national service organizations. According to Henderson, they "have that can-do spirit, that sense of urgency" that DC Public Schools need.

Tufts University hopes that students' service experiences affect the way they approach their career paths and give them a larger vision for the common good at the center of whatever field they choose. Rob Hollister, Dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College for Citizenship and Public Service, explained their goal:

Our vision is to generate future practical visionaries. We want to be graduating first-rate pediatricians who also are advocating for the expansion of health insurance for kids. We want to be developing first-rate businesswomen who are also effective leaders in education reform. We're committed to our future alumni in mechanical engineering also being effective warriors for environmental justice."

National service has the potential to develop a new generation of citizens who are devoted to the common good and can bring their skill sets and idealism to bear on some of the country's most pressing problems. Some will become social entrepreneurs. Others will provide the person-power for nonprofit and other helping professions. Still oth-

ers will run for office or otherwise pursue civic leadership positions. Regardless of their eventual career paths, national service alums are community assets that can be engaged to lead community problem-solving efforts.

As Paul Schmitz, President and CEO of Public Allies, notes, “The next generation

of leaders in communities needs to look like America will look, be able to work across social boundaries, facilitate collaborative action, commit to self-development, and be accountable to each other and the people they serve.” National service programs foster these qualities and can be an important source of these future leaders.

## Conclusion

Discussion by both panels at the “Leaders for Every Sector: National Service as a Strategy for Leadership and Workforce Development” event highlighted the fact that while service programs have been extremely successful to date, continued success will depend on further implementation and expansion. As YouthBuild alumnus Jason Phillips explained, national service depends on government investment to go to scale. Without this investment, national service’s potential to transform the country will remain undeveloped.

National service should be tagged to play a larger role in training and building our future workforce, supporting the spread of technology to nonprofit organizations and underserved communities, promoting environmental sustainability, and encouraging social entrepreneurship.

Echoing Green foundation President Cheryl Dorsey suggests that national service could be an even greater resource for social entrepreneurship if programs educated AmeriCorps members about the definitions, principles, and practices of social entrepreneurship, and leveraged the “powerful, inspiring stories of the myriad of social entrepreneurs” as a way to “unfetter those emerging social entrepreneurs who are engaged in national service to really go forward, to take risks, to innovate, to experiment to shift paradigms.” She recommends that AmeriCorps education awards, currently just below \$5,000 for a full-time year of service, should be increased to further encourage the next generation of social entrepreneurs to take that step.

Participants also recommended that institutes of higher education should promote careers in public service to the same degree that they promote other professions. Tufts University has taken this step, as Rob Hollister observed, and as a result is “attracting students in part because we put a stake in the ground and said, this is a serious, university-wide commitment.” He noted that “it has served our institutional self-interest as well, [by helping] the university garner more recognition and also to raise funds at a level that we would not have otherwise seen.”

Private sector companies and nonprofit organizations must also recognize national service alumni’s skills and leadership abilities and can become serious stakeholders in the continued development of national service. Comcast Senior Vice President Art Block, for example, called for every company to include a check box on their job listing Web site that AmeriCorps alumni can check and be guaranteed an interview.

National service is an underutilized tool for workforce development in both the private and public sectors. National service programs consistently shape individuals who have the motivation, dedication, and training to be strong employees in

any field. As the nation looks at potential shortages of workers in many fields, with 21st century skills, and higher education, national service offers a powerful strategy to meet these needs.

## Endnotes

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**Center for American Progress  
1333 H Street, NW, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202.682.1611 • Fax: 202.682.1867  
[www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org)**