



How Quickly Can National Service Grow?

Service Programs Are Primed and Ready for Growth

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Proposals to expand national service and related programs have prompted questions regarding how quickly these programs could grow while retaining their high quality. Yet these programs have already grown considerably over the past year with funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, and they report that demand for their services is high enough to support even further expansion. The Corporation for National and Community Service, which administers many of these national service programs, similarly reports that, “national service is ready to grow, innovate, and solve tough challenges.” These programs have room to expand, and recent experience shows that they can do so rapidly.

State and national AmeriCorps

The Corporation for National and Community Service provides grants for AmeriCorps programs. These grants are made to state commissions to regrant to state and local organizations and to national nonprofit organizations to support their sites, partners, and affiliates. The Serve America Act authorized AmeriCorps to grow to 88,000 members in 2010 and 115,000 in 2011 across all of AmeriCorps, including the grant programs. This is a significant increase from the 73,000 AmeriCorps members serving in 2009, 67,000 of whom were funded through AmeriCorps state and national grant programs. The FY10 Consolidated Appropriations Act included funding for 85,000 grant positions, an increase of 18,000 above 2009 levels, and the president’s 2011 budget would add an additional 10,000 for a total of 95,000 AmeriCorps grants positions. The Center for American Progress’s proposal, in “[National Service and Youth Unemployment](#),” would add 25,000 supplemental positions for 2010 and accelerate the growth of AmeriCorps grants in 2011 to 140,000 positions.

Today more than two-thirds of AmeriCorps funding goes through states and the rest is distributed directly to over 90 organizations. CAP’s proposed supplemental increase for 2010 would add on average 300 positions per state plus 90 positions on average for national organizations, which would be easily absorbed by the existing grantees.

Many states report that they could use far more than 300 positions, and every state contacted by the Association of Service Commissions reported with enthusiasm that they can utilize new positions through new and existing programs. For example, this informal survey found that Arkansas could add 1,300 positions, Florida 800, Michigan 500, New Mexico 700, and Pennsylvania at least 2,000.

Many national organizations could absorb far more new members and will be limited in their growth without the proposed additional funding. For example, City Year has in place a detailed plan that would add 650 positions in 2010 and another 700 in 2011. The Student Conservation Association has the national infrastructure to grow by 5,000 in 2010 and 10,000 in 2011, placing members on public lands to conduct conservation activities. The National Community HealthCorps and Teach For America report the ability to grow by more than 1,000 members over the next two years. And many new organizations are planning to apply for AmeriCorps, inspired by the passage of the Serve America Act.

The time is right for growth in AmeriCorps. Current AmeriCorps sponsors are reporting record demand with more than three applicants for every slot. Some programs are reporting even higher demand—City Year had 4.5 applicants last year for every slot and is on track to exceed that number dramatically this year. And the passage of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act has inspired new organizations to come forward and apply for AmeriCorps grants, and existing grantees to start planning for growth.

VISTA

VISTA is part of AmeriCorps and supports full-time service to fight poverty. Demand for VISTA positions is at a record high. National organizations seeking hundreds of VISTA slots are being turned away due to lack of federal resources, as are grassroots groups struggling to survive. The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that administers the program, has in hand fundable requests from numerous national organizations looking for hundreds of VISTA slots that cannot be granted due to lack of funding. No campaign has been underway to attract new applicants, but with a modest effort, VISTA could attract large numbers of organizations to host and individuals to serve in the program.

YouthBuild

YouthBuild programs receive competitive grants through the Department of Labor's YouthBuild program as well as other sources, including AmeriCorps, state and local governments, and private funds to support community-based youth and community development programs. These initiatives engage disconnected youth in building or renovating homes in low-income communities—while training them for jobs and advancing their education—to address core issues facing low-income communities such as housing, education, employment, crime prevention, and leadership development.

YouthBuild will support approximately 7,000 participants in 2010 with \$103 million in funding from the Department of Labor. The president proposed to increase YouthBuild funding to \$120 million in 2011 so that the program can expand capacity to 230 locations and enroll 8,000 youth in green construction projects that produce industry-recognized credentials. Participants at the same time earn their GED or high school diplomas at YouthBuild alternative schools. YouthBuild USA, the national nonprofit support center for YouthBuild programs, has been working on a growth plan for the last several years and, as a result, has a realistic sense of potential growth. The organization's goal is to reach 50,000 members scaling up over 8 to 10 years.

Youth Corps

The Corps Network currently represents 143 Service and Conservation Corps serving nearly 30,000 young people annually. Youth Corps enables youth to earn a high school diploma or equivalency while acquiring job skills through full-time service. The program has considered several types of growth scenarios in response to requests from partner organizations and with the support of the Bridgespan Group, and it believes that member corps and new community corps could serve up to 100,000 young people annually by 2015.

The Corporation for National and Community Service

The Corporation for National and Community Service is the federal agency that administers AmeriCorps, including the grants program and VISTA. The corporation faced administrative challenges in the early 2000s, but the agency has systematically addressed these issues with oversight by its board of directors.

The corporation's 2009 Annual Financial Report recently emphasized that it is ready to expand, saying, "the Corporation's commitment to sound financial management has resulted in improvements across the agency." The report also lists significant achievements, including receiving an unqualified positive opinion on its financial statements, expanding AmeriCorps membership by 14,000 in response to funding in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, making key technology improvements, and making strong progress on implementing provisions in the Serve America Act.

A modest pool of funds should be created to accelerate this growth by supporting training and technical assistance, grants to state commissions, salaries and expenses, and a matching fund waiver pool to ensure that the expansion is managed responsibly and with high quality volunteers.

Conclusion

Increasing full-time service would create jobs, address pressing community problems, and reconnect youth who are neither employed nor in school with a pathway to opportunity. Existing federal programs and state and local networks have excess capacity and are well positioned to grow to serve this end if Congress makes the financial resources available.