



# Utilizing National Service as a 21st Century Workforce Strategy for Opportunity Youth

By Tracey Ross, Shirley Sagawa, and Melissa Boteach    March 2016

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction and summary

At the height of the Great Depression, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, as part of the New Deal. The CCC provided critically needed jobs to unskilled young men while implementing a natural resource conservation program on public lands across the country.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of nine years, nearly 3 million young men participated in the CCC, earning wages, food, shelter, and skills while planting more than 3 billion trees, combating forest fires, and providing aid in the wake of natural disasters.<sup>2</sup> Today, national service programs—voluntary programs supported through publicly and privately funded stipends and designed to foster leadership through sustained service that meets public needs—have played a critical role in the lives of millions of Americans.

Over the past 50 years, leaders from both sides of the aisle have supported service to meet goals of national significance. As a result, national service has been instrumental in tackling important challenges facing families and communities, such as addressing underperforming schools and rehabilitating housing for low-income families. National service also has helped foster important civic goals by bringing together diverse groups of individuals in a common purpose and building their sense of civic responsibility and community spirit. One of the most significant impacts of national service, however, is on the very people who perform the service.

Currently, there are 5.6 million opportunity youth, or young adults between ages 16 and 24 in the United States who are out of school and not working.<sup>3</sup> By 2020, the United States is projected to experience a shortfall of 5 million workers with education and training beyond a high school education,<sup>4</sup> underscoring the urgency of connecting youth who are currently unemployed or out of school to the jobs of the future. National service can be a powerful strategy to help these young adults reconnect with school and work. According to a recent report by the Corporation for National and Community Service, or CNCS, service is associated with greater employment outcomes.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the report shows that service can increase the likelihood of finding employment by 51 percent among volunteers without a high school diploma.

Given the barriers to employment that millions of youth and adults face, positions that are appropriate to their circumstances often require greater investment than opportunities targeting more educated individuals. National service initiatives, however, remain a good investment: Every \$1 invested in national service returns \$4 to society in terms of higher earnings, increased economic output, meeting public needs, and savings to taxpayers in the form of lower spending on government programs.<sup>6</sup>

Public- and private-sector leaders alike can advance employment for opportunity youth and other hard-to-employ populations by working to align national service programs with the current workforce development system. This requires expanding the current national service infrastructure to address the unique needs of opportunity youth, including enabling them to gain work experience or helping them pursue additional education or training. National service programs also should incorporate wraparound services—such as child care and transportation—that would enable opportunity youth to access career pathways in growing fields. In order to establish national service as a career ladder entry point for opportunity youth, this report outlines two new initiatives that federal leaders should implement:

- **Create a Service Catalyst grant program to build capacity and incentivize states to leverage funding streams in order to expand service programs for opportunity youth and marginalized adults.** CNCS should dedicate funds to provide Service Catalyst matching grants to competitively selected states and local governments. Governments should use these grants to create new service positions that align with workforce development goals, include wraparound services, and offer opportunities to serve and pursue education and training simultaneously. States should engage multiple forms of funding—including private-sector and state funds—in order to bring national service as a workforce development strategy to scale and reduce administrative burdens on nonprofits that host corps members. Congress should appropriate additional funds to take this strategy to scale.
- **Create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards.** Congress should pass legislation to create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards—to be administered through CNCS’ National Service Trust—that can allow opportunity youth to pay for education or training programs that are aligned with their service activity while they work. This would allow opportunity youth to jump-start their careers and earn living wages to support themselves and their families.

All national service programs aiming to serve opportunity youth and marginalized adults should integrate supportive services into existing corps programs. Young people with the greatest challenges often need comprehensive services to succeed—from substance abuse treatment to child care support.

In addition to these two new strategies, this report includes six recommendations to strengthen the existing national service system as a workforce development strategy. These recommendations are geared toward 1) increasing the accessibility of national service opportunities; 2) ensuring that such programs meet the needs of the economy; and 3) supporting workers who experience barriers to securing and sustaining employment.

- **Make it easier for youth to find national service opportunities.** In order to ensure that more opportunity youth have access to service opportunities, governments and organizations administering national service programs should: connect service year opportunities to one-stop career centers that help job seekers connect to a variety of career services; ensure job seekers who have turned to the safety net are connected with information about national service opportunities; and post all AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, and other publicly funded positions on the Service Year Exchange—a new database designed to match potential volunteers with service opportunities.
- **Reform and streamline key AmeriCorps rules to make it easier for grantees to operate programs.** These include removing barriers that discourage individuals with criminal backgrounds from applying and increasing the amount of time that can be spent on training programs.
- **Provide technical assistance to help state and local leaders utilize the opportunities created by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, or WIOA, to support national service.** Local leaders should use WIOA's flexibility to experiment with different employment models that incorporate national service for in-demand fields.
- **Create employment incentives to hire service year graduates.** Starting with federal agencies, noncompetitive hiring authority should be expanded to all service members who complete a certain amount of high-quality and recognized service experience. AmeriCorps VISTA and the Peace Corps already have this authority, as do some youth corps, but for too short a period of time.

- **Incorporate national service into federal initiatives that target high-poverty communities.** Federal place-based efforts that target high-poverty communities, such as the Choice Neighborhoods or the Promise Neighborhoods programs, should incorporate national service positions as a way to build the capacity of community improvement initiatives, similar to the federal Promise Zones initiative. Having corps members who come from the communities being served provides understanding of the community's local history and the challenges it faces.
- **Incorporate mentoring into service programs.** Programs should provide mentors from the community for opportunity youth engaged in national service. Without these intentional elements, programs may not have as great an impact on the employment outcomes of the youth who are serving. Furthermore, diverse programs can offer social capital benefits, such as programs that place opportunity youth and low-income community members alongside individuals with different social networks.

This report examines how national service improves employment outcomes for workers who face barriers to employment and makes recommendations to expand these opportunities and maximize their benefits for those who serve, their employers, and the U.S. economy as a whole.

# Workers facing barriers to employment

Despite the fact that the unemployment rate has finally reached prerecession levels, such numbers mask the underlying problems in the nation's economy, including a declining workforce participation rate and the reality that many workers have not reaped the benefits of the economic recovery.<sup>7</sup> Even in a healthy economy, however, many workers face barriers to employment—such as criminal records, disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, limited education, and minimal work experience. Furthermore, long-term unemployment makes it increasingly difficult to secure a job and traps workers in joblessness.<sup>8</sup>

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## Opportunity youth

There are currently 5.6 million young people in the United States between ages 16 and 24 who are out of school and not working. According to a 2012 study, young adults who are not in school or working cost taxpayers \$93 billion annually and \$1.6 trillion over their lifetimes in lost revenues and increased social services.<sup>9</sup> At the national level, 21.6 percent of African Americans, 20.3 percent of Native Americans, and 16.4 percent of Latinos are disconnected compared with 11.3 percent of white youth. Given their untapped potential and optimism about their futures despite these challenges, the White House adopted the term “opportunity youth” in a 2012 report to describe the young people currently out of both work and school.<sup>10</sup>

According to research by Opportunity Nation—a bipartisan coalition of cross-sector organizations working to expand economic opportunity—residential segregation by race disproportionately harms black teenagers and young adults.<sup>11</sup> In highly segregated metropolitan areas, black opportunity youth tend to have higher-than-average rates of disconnection, whereas white opportunity youth tend to have lower-than-average rates of disconnection. In nine of the metropolitan areas studied, at least one in four black youth are disconnected. In 10 of the metropolitan areas, at least one in five Latino youth are disconnected.<sup>12</sup>

On any given day, an estimated 57,000 youth are confined in juvenile detention and correctional facilities; hundreds of thousands more are on probation.<sup>13</sup> These young people are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty; three times as likely to have a disability; and, for young women, more than three times as likely to give birth as teens than their connected counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

Young people who have experienced multiple challenges—including dropping out of traditional public schools—often need more than just skills training to resume their education and pursue employment. Service programs such as YouthBuild—a nonprofit primarily supported by the U.S. Department of Labor—and other youth corps programs combine skill-building with educational opportunities and a powerful set of supports, including the chance to belong to a caring and supportive community committed to their success.

Service is often thought of as a well-intentioned individual traveling into a community to provide service. Given that opportunity youth often have other obligations that discourage traveling for service opportunities, a national service strategy should focus on increasing opportunities for these youth to serve locally. This service approach turns the young person's sense of self on its head by giving them the chance to see themselves as valuable contributors to the community who can make a difference—and this causes others to see them in the same light.

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## Adults facing barriers to employment

Today, more than 29 million adults have not completed high school.<sup>15</sup> For these workers, greater economic security depends on their ability to access education and training that puts them on the road to self- and family-sustaining jobs.<sup>16</sup> According to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, someone who did not complete high school will earn about \$630,000 less over their lifetime than someone who has earned at least a GED diploma.<sup>17</sup> Further, high school dropouts are not eligible for 90 percent of jobs in the United States.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, young workers in or near poverty are more educated than their counterparts from a decade ago yet face increased economic insecurity and have difficulty securing employment. In fact, people with a bachelor's degree were the only education level to experience an increase in poverty in 2014, while the poverty rates of other education levels remained constant.<sup>19</sup>

However, these impacts are not felt equally among workers. Black men without a high school diploma are approximately 15 percentage points less likely to have a job compared with white male high school dropouts.<sup>20</sup> In fact, black men with an associate's degree have roughly the same chance of getting a job as white men with only a high school diploma. This is due in part to discrimination during hiring processes but also to the disproportionate prevalence of criminal records among black workers.<sup>21</sup>

A recent study by the National Institute of Justice confirmed that a criminal record is a powerful hiring disincentive.<sup>22</sup> Job seekers currently on probation or parole or who have ever been incarcerated are the most likely group to be refused consideration for a position compared with workers without a criminal record, and a majority of employers surveyed were unwilling to hire applicants who had served prison time. As a result, some 60 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals remain unemployed one year after their release.<sup>23</sup> Men of color are hit especially hard: Studies show that white male and female job seekers with criminal records have better employment chances than black or Hispanic applicants with similar records.<sup>24</sup>

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### Workers facing barriers benefit from comprehensive supportive services

Additional supports are often necessary to put individuals who face multiple barriers to employment on a pathway to securing quality jobs. Comprehensive programs that enable individuals to access employment, training, and support services—such as child care, transportation, and financial supports—are among the most promising for opportunity youth and adults facing multiple barriers to employment.<sup>25</sup>

For example, as discussed above, affordable and high-quality child care allows parents the flexibility and support to attend work and school. But for too many families, the lack of access to child care presents a serious barrier to training and employment. National service programs have been particularly helpful in addressing this need. AmeriCorps programs provide a child care allowance to any corps members with an eligible dependent as a means of making service year opportunities available to a broader spectrum of individuals with family responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> In addition, AmeriCorps members receive health care and education awards that can be used to pay back student loans or pay for higher education or training. Since the creation of AmeriCorps in 1994, more than 800,000 AmeriCorps members have earned more than \$2.4 billion in education awards.<sup>27</sup>

Other wraparound services may be as straightforward as transportation allowances or English language courses. Some participants also may benefit from job and computer training, educational resources, financial counseling, or services to address substance abuse or mental health barriers. In addition, people with criminal records may be in need of legal services in order to expunge their records or secure pardons. Given the wide range of needs, the leaders of national service programs that integrate supportive services need to collaborate with workforce development agencies, human services agencies, educational institutions, and employment services agencies in order to develop successful strategies.<sup>28</sup>

# Benefits of national service to disadvantaged workers

According to a recent report by the Corporation for National and Community Service, volunteering can increase social and human capital, which is associated with greater employment outcomes.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, the report found that out-of-work volunteers increase their odds of finding a job by 27 percent compared with nonvolunteers, and the impact is greatest for those most in need of social or human capital increases. For those without a high school diploma, volunteering was associated with a 51 percent increase in the likelihood of finding employment; among those living in rural areas, volunteers were 55 percent more likely to find employment.<sup>30</sup> While this research was based on correlation and focused specifically on volunteering, the results suggest that an even stronger connection may exist between more intensive, longer-term service experiences and employment prospects.

According to a survey of AmeriCorps alumni, participants in an AmeriCorps program are more engaged with their communities and committed to public service than those who did not serve. This is particularly true for people of color and people from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>31</sup> Further, AmeriCorps alumni reported being more satisfied with their lives eight years after participating in the program than those who did not serve.<sup>32</sup> And according to a recent report on AmeriCorps alumni outcomes, “a vast majority stated that they felt they made a contribution to the community (92 percent), gained an understanding of the community they served (93 percent), and were exposed to new ideas and ways of seeing the world (87 percent).”<sup>33</sup> In addition to the specific skills learned through service programs, these experiences also allow individuals to build 21st century work skills—such as communication, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, self-direction, and teamwork—as well as cultural knowledge to guide appropriate workplace behavior.

At a recent Center for American Progress event, Jonathan Lavine, managing director, managing partner, and chief investment officer of Sankaty Advisors and its related funds, explained how national service provides important leadership development and fosters intangible skills. “There’s a lot of tactical skills you can teach a lot of people, and there’s a lot of ways to do it. It’s very hard to teach people ‘going 110 percent.’ It’s very hard to teach people to lead,” he stated.<sup>34</sup>

Businesses are increasingly taking note of the benefits of national service. Lavine also discussed the importance of companies such as Comcast and CSX, two of more than 300 “Employers of National Service” that have created processes to hire people who have completed a year of service.<sup>35</sup> Lavine noted that both of these companies are expanding their service programs because of the quality of employees they have been able to attract.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, specialized programs may have particular benefits for opportunity youth. For example, the White House Council for Community Solutions found that a “structured, long-term service program is a viable path for opportunity youth to connect to postsecondary education and the workforce.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, a survey of opportunity youth found that nearly 7 in 10, or 69 percent, want to make a difference in the lives of others, while only 3 percent report that they are performing community service, “suggesting their disconnection from school and work is impeding their desire to give back.”<sup>38</sup> National service programs can build important skills such as attendance, punctuality, teamwork, and conflict resolution skills that can help corps members succeed in subsequent jobs. During their service experience, corps members also may learn about careers they may not have been exposed to previously and may, in fact, choose specific programs so that they can try out different occupations in fields such as conservation, education, and health.<sup>39</sup>

According to a rigorous study conducted by Abt Associates Inc.—which evaluates the impact of various youth corps programs—corps members experience increased income after their service relative to a control group.<sup>40</sup> Nearly two-thirds of program participants said that their participation in a corps helped them secure a job, and three out of four said the youth corps experience gave them a job-hunting advantage.<sup>41</sup> Program participants reported extraordinarily high satisfaction rates, with nearly 90 percent claiming to be “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with the youth corps experience.<sup>42</sup>

# The existing foundation for national service

The federal government currently provides funding for national service in a variety of ways, creating a strong foundation upon which to expand opportunity.

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## AmeriCorps

Founded in 1994, AmeriCorps—the largest federally supported national service program—provides grants to organizations to run programs, as well as education awards to those who complete a term of service, or 1,700 hours within 12 months for full-time service.<sup>43</sup> AmeriCorps engages more than 75,000 people in service opportunities each year at nonprofits, schools, government agencies, and faith-based groups, where they acquire work skills and earn money for education while also helping communities.<sup>44</sup>

AmeriCorps also operates a residential program, the National Civilian Community Corps—a full-time, team-based, residential program for young people from ages 18 to 24 that strengthens communities and develops leaders through community service. Founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965, AmeriCorps incorporated the VISTA national service program into its network of programs in 1993. AmeriCorps VISTA members serve with nonprofits and public agencies in order to create and expand programs that bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty. There is no age limit to participate, though VISTA members must be at least 18.<sup>45</sup>

Nearly 1 million Americans have served in AmeriCorps over the past two decades, and up to 250,000 individuals could serve annually based on existing law if funding were available.<sup>46</sup> AmeriCorps has become a proven career pathway and source of funding for postsecondary education, demonstrating the potential of service year opportunities to expand career and education options.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, AmeriCorps members have provided needed human capital to support important public services.<sup>48</sup>

In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, a bipartisan piece of legislation that set out to increase national service opportunities from 75,000 positions to 250,000 positions in 10 years.<sup>49</sup> The act set out to increase positions to meet needs in several areas, including educational outcomes, energy conservation, public health, and economic opportunity. These programs have been able to leverage their federal dollars to attract support from private donors, school districts, and other funding sources to attain a scale that could not have been achieved in the absence of federal support.

Despite the high demand from individuals wanting to serve and organizations wanting to engage them, authorizing growth in the national service sector does not guarantee that Congress will make the necessary funding available. Even worse, inconsistent federal funding has created situations where organizations host AmeriCorps members one year and not the next—or where they only receive partial funding for corps members. Congress should increase AmeriCorps’ funding to its fully authorized level of 250,000 positions, and the Corporation for National and Community Service should ensure that this increase includes education awards for all YouthBuild and youth corps members, as well as grant funding for these programs.

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## YouthBuild

The U.S. Department of Labor’s YouthBuild program provides funding for a specific program model that targets opportunity youth and combines service with education, job training, leadership development, and a wide range of additional supports. YouthBuild USA, the national support center for the YouthBuild network, has created a network of 260 urban and rural YouthBuild programs in 46 states. YouthBuild teaches low-income young adults construction skills through building community assets, such as affordable housing, schools, playgrounds, and community centers for low-income communities. Participants also may earn industry-recognized certifications in health care, information technology, customer service, logistics management, and other career tracks. While YouthBuild has a dedicated funding stream, the programs also blend funding from several other agencies in order to provide services offered to participants.<sup>50</sup>

For more than 30 years, YouthBuild programs have given more than 140,000 low-income youth the chance to become leaders in their communities, build their skills, and advance their education while building a total of 30,000 units of housing.<sup>51</sup> Last year, 77 percent of enrollees obtained their high school diploma, GED diploma, or an industry-recognized credential through the program;<sup>52</sup> about 61 percent went on to postsecondary education or jobs;<sup>53</sup> and the recidivism rate of court-involved youth was half the rate of comparable youth not involved in the courts.<sup>54</sup>

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## Youth corps

Youth corps programs, such as members of The Corps Network—an organization that provides leadership in the corps movement and to more than 100 corps programs throughout the country—engage thousands of youth each year.<sup>55</sup> These programs are authorized to work directly with CNCS and the U.S. Department of the Interior, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of Transportation on service projects such as disaster recovery and improving public lands and infrastructure.<sup>56</sup> These corps also engage youth who are economically, physically, or educationally disadvantaged, as well as veterans.

In July 2014, President Obama signed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act into law—the first update to the nation’s core workforce training system in 16 years.<sup>57</sup> Youth corps and other service year programs that offer education and training are well-positioned to be part of the new WIOA system, which provides significant flexibility to governors to support innovative, results-oriented programming; allows for employment-based approaches to workforce development; and targets low-income adults and youth who have limited skills, lack work experience, and face other barriers to economic success.

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## Federal agency corps

Some federal agencies have developed their own national service programs, often in partnership with CNCS. A prominent example is the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, Corps, which deploys AmeriCorps members to assist survivors of disasters in the United States and is projected to save taxpayers \$60 million annually when fully implemented.<sup>58</sup> Another example is the School

Turnaround AmeriCorps program, which places AmeriCorps members into the nation's lowest-performing schools in order to create additional small-scale service initiatives. Alternatively, federal agencies have provided fee-for-service contracts or cooperative agreements to youth corps service programs that provide their participants with job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and additional support services such as mental health services.

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## Pilot programs and new initiatives

On July 15, 2013, President Obama created the Task Force on Expanding National Service. The task force was charged with developing strategies to expand national service to meet national needs through collaboration with other federal agencies and the private sector. Building on the success of FEMA Corps and the School Turnaround AmeriCorps program, the task force established new corps programs, such as the Youth Opportunity AmeriCorps in 2014, through which CNCS and the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention are investing up to \$10 million over the course of three years. These funds are dedicated to enrolling disconnected and court-involved youth in national service programs that also involve peer mentoring, such as through the youth corps of The Corps Network, which also has run a Civic Justice Corps Initiative.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to this important legislation, recent innovations in both the public and private sectors offer particular promise. Numerous federal agencies have begun pilot programs to create national service positions or have allowed youth corps sites to use existing federal funds more creatively. CNCS has developed initiatives that allow governors and mayors to partner to create new AmeriCorps initiatives. These partnerships encourage the use of multiple AmeriCorps funding streams that tackle specific local challenges. CNCS also has joined other agencies to support the Performance Partnership Pilots for Disadvantaged Youth, which enable pilot sites to combine funding with flexibility to better serve opportunity youth.

In the private sector, a new Service Year Exchange—an online marketplace designed to connect people with service opportunities—will make national service a more accessible, dynamic experience. The platform will bring stakeholders together in a number of ways: young people in search of service opportunities; organizations seeking to bring on corps members; and funders interested in supporting these efforts.<sup>60</sup> The Corps Network is developing a system to accredit

youth corps and collaborating with the Service Year Exchange to develop opportunities for corps members to earn college credit as well as microcredentials—also known as badges—to demonstrate to prospective employers that they have developed specific 21st century skills.

These developments offer a strong platform to increase the number of service year positions and tie them to national economic and anti-poverty goals, as discussed below.

# Why now is the time to grow national service as a workforce development strategy

With a looming shortfall of skilled workers coupled with high numbers of youth and unemployed adults seeking new pathways to opportunity, the time is right to reconsider and reposition national service as a workforce development strategy. Importantly, much of this work could be done without new authorizing legislation, as the foundational pieces have already been laid.

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## Growing industries

The recession that began in 2007 had a major impact on employment, which in many ways has only recently rebounded.<sup>61</sup> While many sectors were forced to lay off workers, some sectors, such as health care, actually grew. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the health care and social assistance sector will account for almost one-third of the projected job growth from 2012 to 2022.<sup>62</sup>

Specifically, the health care industry is projected to add more than 4 million jobs—more than any other industry due to the growth in the U.S. population, aging Baby Boomers, chronic conditions, medical advances, and health insurance reform.<sup>63</sup> Health care jobs include work in hospitals, offices of health practitioners, nursing and residential care facilities, and home health care services, as well as outpatient, laboratory, and other ambulatory care services.<sup>64</sup> By 2022, additional industries—such as transportation and construction—will be growing and expanding as millions of workers leave the workforce. Aligning national service programs with these growing industries can help alleviate the pending labor shortage while also providing opportunities to individuals who face barriers to employment.

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## The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The bipartisan WIOA is designed to address the modern barriers that low-skilled and low-income workers face within the U.S. workforce development system,<sup>65</sup> help states create stronger partnerships with employers, and develop career pathways into family-sustaining jobs.<sup>66</sup> Specifically, WIOA strengthens existing workforce development and adult education programs in four ways that will benefit adults and youth facing barriers to economic success:<sup>67</sup>

- Increasing the focus on serving the most vulnerable workers: low-income adults and opportunity youth who have limited skills, lack work experience, and face other barriers to economic success
- Expanding education and training options to help participants access good jobs and advance in their careers
- Helping adults and youth “earn while they learn” through support services and employment-based activities<sup>68</sup>
- Aligning planning and accountability policies across core programs for a more unified approach to serve adults and youth

Governors may reserve up to 15 percent of their WIOA youth allotment for statewide employment and training activities.<sup>69</sup> This creates an important level of flexibility to experiment with employment models that incorporate national service. In addition, local WIOA funds can be used to support transitional jobs in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors for individuals who face barriers to employment, which also can incorporate national service.<sup>70</sup> These changes present an opportunity for states and local communities to become more active in fully supporting opportunity youth and adults who face barriers to employment.<sup>71</sup>

By March 3, 2016, states must submit plans to the Department of Labor that outline how they will take full advantage of the strategies promoted by WIOA.<sup>72</sup> Developing these plans requires engaging a number of stakeholders, which can be a time-consuming process. Moving forward, it is imperative that states engage their national service stakeholders to ensure that the resources provided through WIOA include national service as a key strategy for reimagining the workforce development system.<sup>73</sup> Recently, the Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration worked with The Corps Network and the National Association of Workforce Boards to highlight the ways that Workforce Development Boards and youth corps can work more closely together to utilize some of the new flexibility in WIOA. These include providing information on how to leverage funding, co-enroll participants in multiple programs, and make useful services available in a one-stop shop, rather than dispersing them throughout the city.<sup>74</sup>

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## Increased public needs

In addition to meeting the needs of a changing economy, national service can play an important role in meeting the nation's public needs. According to analysis by *The Washington Post*, in 2000, approximately 94,000 people 60 years old and older worked for the federal government. In 2012, that number was 262,000—meaning that a large number of federal employees are now approaching retirement.<sup>75</sup> As Baby Boomers continue to age and leave their government jobs, this will open doors to a wave of younger workers. FEMA Corps, for example, serves a critical role by bringing in workers to assist communities following natural disasters. The program saves taxpayers millions of dollars while creating a pipeline of disaster recovery experts who could become full-time employees at either the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—where the program is housed—or at other branches of the federal government.

The Obama administration is working to replicate the success of FEMA Corps in other federal agencies. For example, the federal government recently launched a Resilience AmeriCorps pilot program in partnership with Cities of Service—an organization that supports local governments in launching volunteer initiatives—to recruit, train, and embed AmeriCorps VISTA members in up to 27 communities across the country to increase resilience to extreme weather events in low-income areas.<sup>76</sup>

The government also has dedicated national service resources to its Promise Zones initiative, which is designed to strengthen the federal government's relationship with local leaders and increase access to the resources and expertise necessary to improve high-poverty communities.<sup>77</sup> Communities designated as Promise Zones receive priority access to federal funding, as well as up to five AmeriCorps VISTA members, in order to build the organizational, administrative, and financial capacity of organizations that serve low-income communities. While various federal agencies have developed programs that support national service as a strategy to advance their missions, the administration could require federal agencies to identify sustainable sources of support—whether through procurement processes, grants, incentives, or other forms of support.

Another important federal corps program is the Department of the Interior's 21st Century Conservation Service Corps, or 21CSC, which is designed to provide work experience for youth and veterans while developing the future stewards of conservation, recreation, and public resources. Participants gain work experience while protecting national parks, wildlife refuges, and other public lands and waters, along with areas in need of disaster recovery and wildfire mitigation.<sup>78</sup>

The program is operated by nonprofit organizations in coordination with numerous federal departments, while local governments recruit youth and veterans to participate.<sup>79</sup> Federal, state, tribal, local, and nonprofit land and water managers engage with 21CSC programs to complete projects and contribute to the cost of the programs through regular maintenance and operational funds.<sup>80</sup>

Recently, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) and Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) introduced legislation—the 21st Century Conservation Service Corps Act—that would expand the number of federal agencies that can partner with Service and Conservation Corps programs and use existing funding mechanisms to protect America’s public lands.<sup>81</sup> The passage of this legislation would enable more federal agencies to support youth and veterans through existing resources while meeting public needs. Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) and Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM) have introduced a similar bill in the House of Representatives—the Public Lands Service Corps Act.<sup>82</sup> This legislation would expand youth corps’ ability to partner with federal agencies and serve veterans, improve the capacity of agencies to work with youth corps and hire corps member graduates, and establish a new Indian Youth Service Corps.

Service programs also are increasingly used as models for workforce development at the local level. PowerCorpsPHL, launched in September 2013, is an AmeriCorps program designed to support former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter’s (D) environmental initiatives, as well as the city of Philadelphia’s youth violence prevention and workforce development priorities. Partnering with local nonprofits EducationWorks and the Philadelphia Youth Network, PowerCorpsPHL annually enrolls 100 young adults from ages 18 to 26 for a six-month, full-time AmeriCorps service program with city departments, followed by three months of intensive job placement support.<sup>83</sup> Over the next three years, PowerCorpsPHL plans to plant 3,000 trees; revitalize 3,000 acres of public land; educate 18,000 residents on watershed preservation; and connect 300 young adults to employment, postsecondary enrollment, or continued service.<sup>84</sup>

# Recommendations

Given the persistence of barriers to employment and the rising need for a more educated workforce, leaders across the country must expand nontraditional pathways into the workforce development system. A recent CAP report, “A Subsidized Jobs Program for the 21st Century,” proposed establishing a subsidized jobs program that would “alleviate hardship in the short term by generating immediate work-based income, while also providing valuable work experience to improve workers’ employment credentials and help them escape poverty.”<sup>85</sup> Such an effort would help employers by temporarily reducing labor costs and, in many cases, allow employers to create jobs that would not have existed otherwise.<sup>86</sup> Policymakers should view national service as a complementary pathway to employment that would focus on different employment opportunities that serve the public, target new segments of the economy, utilize different funding streams, and may be well-suited to specific subsets of the population.

National service is a proven method for training and employing workers facing barriers to employment while also creating pathways to opportunity and strengthening national prosperity. In order to take full advantage of the opportunities national service creates for disadvantaged workers and employers alike, federal leaders must make a national commitment to expand access to national service. This commitment would entail integrating service into the U.S. workforce development system to meet economic needs and ensuring that corps members receive the additional supports they need to take full advantage of service opportunities—including the opportunity to blend education and training with their service experience and the opportunity to access wraparound services—to maximize their likelihood of success.

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## New national service initiatives to support opportunity youth

The following recommendations will help federal, state, and local leaders strengthen the role that national service plays in workforce development.

## Create a new Service Catalyst Grant program and incentives for states to leverage multiple funding streams to expand service year opportunities and wraparound supports

Pairing national service with wraparound services is critical to the success of opportunity youth, but few programs are currently structured this way. The Corporation for National and Community Service should dedicate funds to provide Service Catalyst matching grants to competitively selected states and local governments. Governments should use this funding to create new service positions that are aligned with workforce development goals, include wrap-around services, and offer opportunities to serve and pursue education and training simultaneously. Corps also could be co-applicants in order to improve coordination throughout the process, utilize their expertise on program operation, and leverage multiple funding sources. While CNCS could establish Service Catalyst matching grants on a small scale without authorizing legislation by redirecting existing dollars, Congress should appropriate additional funds to expand the reach of these matching grants.

Pilot programs that are based on measurable criteria and which CNCS deems successful should receive three-year grants to expand these programs and develop a path to sustainability. State and local governments should outline how corps programs that are better aligned with workforce development would work. Proposals for such programs should include information about how their pilot would reach the target population, potential industries it would focus on, the type of training and skills that participants could develop, and what credentials or career pathways are possible in fields that are likely to lead to family-sustaining wage employment. Proposals also should outline a plan for service and part-time education—when most appropriate for corps members—and take into account a community’s service project needs. In addition, nonprofit entities interested in hosting corps members should outline a streamlined way for participants to access wraparound supports that could improve the comprehensiveness and quality of their experience. They also should identify skills that participants will develop and provide mentors for youth involved in national service to ensure that the program has a greater impact on employment outcomes.

## Create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards

Currently, the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award provides funding to help corps members pay for education after their service year has ended. Given the barriers that opportunity youth face, however, many are looking toward gaining vocational skills and often need access to work immediately. A program tailored to their specific needs would allow opportunity youth to gain work experience, pursue educational opportunities, and receive wraparound services all at the same time, enabling them to enter career pathways in growing fields sooner. Federal leaders should create Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards that would allow opportunity youth to pay for education or training programs aligned with their service activity. This would allow these young people to work and go to school simultaneously in order to jump-start their careers and provide added financial security during their time of service.

In addition, many opportunity youth may ultimately access service year opportunities that are not financed through AmeriCorps. Because the Segal Award is only available through AmeriCorps service programs, including a new Service Catalyst grant program on the Service Year Exchange would help opportunity youth access education opportunities, whether their national service position is an AmeriCorps program or not.

The combination of Service Catalyst grants and Opportunity Youth Service-Learning Awards would replicate the success of the Department of Labor's YouthBuild program and similar efforts. YouthBuild provides funding for a program model that targets opportunity youth and combines service with education, job training, and leadership development. The current demand for YouthBuild programs—both from opportunity youth wanting to serve and nonprofits wanting to host programs—far exceeds the number of available positions.

The successful YouthBuild model should not only be expanded but also extended into growing sectors beyond construction—such as health care and caregiving. For example, an opportunity youth whose service activity is home care for disabled or elderly individuals could go to school to become a nurse or gain another health care certification, similar to accelerated learning programs or articulated courses.

Within the workforce development system, the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training, or I-BEST, program in Washington state—one of the country's premier models for states and localities to train workers and develop adult basic skills—has proven successful, allowing simultaneous training and education.

While schools often require students to complete a year or two of basic skills training before advancing their education, I-BEST students earn college or vocational credits immediately, which allows them to earn a living wage sooner to support themselves and their families.<sup>87</sup> I-BEST's students boast higher rates of success on multiple measures compared with students enrolled in other basic-skills training courses. For example, I-BEST's students are three times more likely to earn college credits and nine times more likely to earn a workforce credential, are employed at double the number of hours per week, and earn an average of \$2,310 more per year.<sup>88</sup> Enabling opportunity youth to access a similar workforce development model through national service would allow them not only to overcome barriers to a first job but also to access a job connected to a career ladder.

The federal government should provide technical assistance to help states, localities, and nonprofits capitalize on the two new opportunities available. This assistance would build the capacity of organizations to help opportunity youth corps members identify and navigate options for education and assist them with additional financial aid opportunities, career counseling, and placement upon completion of their service year.

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## Strengthening the existing national service system

While creating new initiatives modeled on past successes would expand the national service infrastructure that specifically helps opportunity youth, there are also a number of ways that the current national service system can be strengthened to better support workers facing barriers: Invest in their communities and offer opportunities for education, mentoring, and wraparound services to increase employment opportunities.

### Make it easier for youth to find opportunities

All AmeriCorps and YouthBuild programs should participate in the Service Year Exchange to make it easier for individuals to locate positions in their communities that fit their skills and interests. A common application for corps programs would further streamline individuals' ability to apply for positions. In addition, state and local leaders should connect service opportunities to one-stop shops, which are designed to provide a full range of assistance to job seekers in one location. Established under the Workforce Investment Act—the predecessor to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act—these centers offer training referrals, career counseling, job listings, and similar employment-related services.

In addition, federal officials should provide guidance on how states can ensure that safety net programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF; unemployment insurance; and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, can serve as entry points for connecting young disadvantaged workers to service opportunities. For example, the Western Colorado Conservation Corps—a corps program for youth from ages 16 to 25 that focuses on local conservation projects and provides education programs and career training—receives TANF funding through the Mesa County Department of Human Services. The funds cover the costs associated with training corps members, helping them with GED preparation, and day-to-day expenses, such as food or household supplies.<sup>89</sup>

### Reform key AmeriCorps rules

AmeriCorps, while effective, would greatly benefit from streamlining and improving systems to make it easier for grantees to operate programs. In addition, several reforms could improve its ability to advance workforce opportunities for highly disadvantaged populations. For example, there is currently a 20 percent cap on the amount of time that corps members can spend on personal and professional development. Waiving the “80/20 rule” for youth corps and programs that provide workforce certifications could enable members serving in selected programs to devote more time to professional development,<sup>90</sup> which is especially important for opportunity youth.

Similarly, AmeriCorps’ required criminal record checks should be changed so that background checks occur only after the initial application process to avoid prematurely ruling out candidates who are a good fit.<sup>91</sup> This step would be consistent with “ban the box” initiatives, such as President Obama’s executive action that directs federal agencies to not ask for information on criminal records during the initial hiring stages.<sup>92</sup>

### Support state and local leaders in using WIOA resources to support national service

Given the projected shortfall of skilled workers, coupled with the high numbers of youth and unemployed adults seeking employment, national service can be used to meet the growing needs of the nation’s economy.

CNCS and the Department of Labor should jointly support technical assistance to help governors and local leaders utilize WIOA for national service positions. Governors can reserve up to 15 percent of their state’s WIOA youth allotment for statewide employment and training activities.<sup>93</sup> In addition, WIOA provides funding for a variety of youth leadership development activities, including community service and activities that encourage civic responsibility. WIOA funds also can be used to support transitional jobs in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors, creating an important level of flexibility to experiment with different employment models.

As a result, state and local leaders should ensure that the goals of any new corps programs are aligned with their broader workforce and economic development goals established through WIOA. Further, local leaders should use WIOA funding to support service positions tied to in-demand occupations by engaging employers and industry sectors to define needed skills.<sup>94</sup> Local leaders also can help integrate national service and workforce development by creating an initial onboarding process to ensure that participants in these WIOA-funded service positions acquire baseline soft skills—such as time management and conflict resolution—that will enhance the effectiveness of their placement. WIOA funds also should support services that encourage career pathways, including opportunities to gain a high school diploma or equivalent, as well as counseling to transition to postsecondary education or permanent employment.

### Create employment incentives to hire service year graduates

As mentioned earlier, the Employers of National Service initiative has created specific programs to hire people who have completed a year of service. Launched in 2014 by President Obama, the public-private partnership aims to “build a talent pipeline that connects AmeriCorps and Peace Corps alumni with leading employers” across sectors.<sup>95</sup> The initiative has allowed employers to increase access to mission-driven employees who have a proven track record of dedication and have acquired crucial job skills.

Given these benefits, as well as the federal government’s investment in this talent pool, the federal government should give preference to national service alumni during the hiring process. Applicants would continue to apply through the regular channels, but they would receive extra points during the application process to recognize the commitment to public service that they have already demonstrated, as well as the hard and soft skills they have acquired through the program.

## Incorporate national service in federal initiatives that target high-poverty communities

Existing policy can better serve opportunity youth by engaging them in service in their own neighborhoods and by offering them mentorship. Given that disconnected youth of color—particularly black teenagers and young adults—are disproportionately affected by residential segregation, federal place-based efforts should incorporate national service positions as a way to build the capacity of initiatives that aim to improve communities. Currently, this strategy is employed with the Promise Zones initiative. One of the benefits of becoming a Promise Zone is that communities receive five full-time AmeriCorps VISTA members who can help build capacity for the initiative, support the community’s goals, and recruit and manage volunteers.

Other place-based efforts, such as Choice Neighborhoods or Promise Neighborhoods, could benefit from corps members to assist in their ongoing efforts. In addition to bringing in service members who have important skills to offer the community, corps members who come from the communities being served—both disconnected residents and residents who have gained valuable work experience—provide a unique understanding of the local history and have a deeper understanding of the challenges the community faces. This also helps foster leadership from long-term residents who may be more likely to reside in the community and contribute to its long-term success beyond their term of national service.<sup>96</sup>

## Incorporate mentoring in service programs

Employment alone may not be sufficient for opportunity youth; individuals who face multiple employment barriers often need additional support systems to access quality jobs. Comprehensive national service programs that enable individuals to gain work experience and supportive services—such as child care, transportation, substance abuse treatment, expungement or record-sealing, and financial support—are among the most promising for employment.<sup>97</sup>

National service programs should identify the skills that participants will develop and provide mentors from the community for the youth who are serving. Without these intentional elements, programs may not have as great of an impact on employment outcomes for participants. Service programs must target high-need populations and promote diverse groups of individuals serving together.

Placing opportunity youth and low-income community members alongside older adults or individuals with different social networks can increase their social capital and expose them to people who can open doors to employment.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, peer mentoring can be another strategy to provide opportunity youth with positive role models in their own age range.

# Conclusion

The United States has a long history of using national service to address the challenges that many communities across the country face, while also preparing a new generation of leaders to enter the workforce. With a looming shortfall of skilled workers, high numbers of youth who are not in school or are unemployed, and a changing economic landscape, national service can once again be a transformative force to meet the country's challenges and the needs of its workers.

The current national service infrastructure, however, is not well-positioned to help workers who face multiple barriers, such as opportunity youth—the workers with the greatest potential to support the nation's economy and help meet workforce needs in growing sectors. In order to meet the specific needs of opportunity youth, federal leaders must expand the current national service infrastructure to ensure that these workers gain valuable first jobs, are positioned to pursue additional education or training that capitalizes on their service year, and receive wraparound services that would enable them to access career pathways in growing fields. Now is the time to ensure that national service keeps pace with the changing tides of the country and continues to produce benefits for individuals and communities alike.

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The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

