

AmeriCorps: Getting Good Things Done in Northern California

This study demonstrates that AmeriCorps Members serving in Northern California are getting things done – good things done. They are helping individuals and communities achieve goals, they are developing personal skills and values that will benefit them throughout their lives, and they are learning what it means to be effective contributing members of society. Despite challenges, what comes through from this examination of AmeriCorps is that the ethic of service is alive and well in Northern California.

BACKGROUND

The passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1993 resulted in a new call to service throughout the country with the establishment of AmeriCorps, a domestic Peace Corps program operated in local communities. In 1994, the Northern California Grantmakers (NCG), a regional association of philanthropy, established a National Service Task Force to engage Northern California philanthropy in national service and to organize them as regional investors in local AmeriCorps programs. Over the past five years, the National Service Task Force has provided close to \$1.8 million in AmeriCorps matching funds to 24 programs in Northern California with over 950 full- and part-time Members. In 1998, NCG's National Service Task Force undertook a comprehensive assessment of the AmeriCorps programs it has supported. This summary draws on the results of that study, *"Getting Good Things Done in Northern California,"* as well as information gathered in 1999 to update the original report.

THE PROGRAMS

"Getting Good Things Done in Northern California" profiled 19 AmeriCorps programs that received matching grants from NCG's National Service Task Force during the last two years. Of these 19 programs, 58% are funded through the California Commission on Improving Life Through Service and 42% are funded directly by the Corporation for National Service. Almost half of the AmeriCorps programs (47%) were developed by nonprofits that existed before AmeriCorps was launched. The programs enroll between 10 and 166 Members and provide services from tutoring and mentoring, to health education, environmental service projects, and community development assistance. The program budgets range from \$120,000 to \$3,250,000.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT SERVICE AS A LOCAL OR NATIONAL STRATEGY

There is a tension between allowing programs to respond to local community needs and exploiting the opportunity provided by a national initiative to harness the nation's focus and energy around a limited number of concerns. When allowed to respond to local community needs,

NATIONAL SERVICE TASK FORCE AMERICORPS PROGRAM GRANT RECIPIENTS

- ACCORD for Youth AmeriCorps
- Action for Children Today
- Bay Area Youth Agency Consortium
- City Year San Jose/Silicon Valley
- California CASA AmeriCorps Project*
- Eastlake YMCA – PRYDE AmeriCorps Consortium
- Family Cooperative Project of Placer and Sacramento Counties
- HAWK AmeriCorps*
- National Farmworker Environmental Education Program
- National Multiple Sclerosis Society*
- Oakland Community Service Collaborative – East Bay Conservation Corps
- Partners in School Innovation
- Presidio AmeriCorps Restoration Program
- YMCA of San Francisco – PRYDE AmeriCorps Consortium
- Public Allies – Silicon Valley
- Real Alternative Program*
- Rural AmeriCorps Partnership
- San Francisco Bay Area LISC AmeriCorps Program
- San Francisco Community HealthCorps
- San Francisco Urban Service Project
- San Francisco WritersCorps*
- Summerbridge AmeriCorps Teaching Program
- Teach For America • Bay Area
- The Sonoma Project*

** Past grantees; no longer AmeriCorps programs*

AmeriCorps Members are deployed across communities providing a broad range of services and supports that are specifically responsive to local interests. Recently, however, President Clinton highlighted literacy as a key focus for AmeriCorps Members, and local programs have been responding to this national vision. The number of programs providing tutoring and mentoring, in particular, has grown each year, with several programs significantly revamping the scope of their operations to work with young people in this capacity. This response to the nation's interest and focus on liter-

acy demonstrates the power of national leadership and consensus. That leadership provides communities with a common vision of the nation's problems and some direction as to solutions.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT SUCCESSFUL STRUCTURES

Healthy AmeriCorps programs have a well-defined program structure with “buy-in” and active participation from all participants and stakeholders. At the same time, AmeriCorps is not a one-size-fits-all program model. The flourishing Northern California AmeriCorps programs include stand-alone models; programs that are located within an existing nonprofit agency, augmenting their capacity to serve the community; and programs that are structured as collaboratives involving multiple agencies.

SERVICE PERFORMED BY AMERICORPS PROGRAMS PROFILED IN “GETTING GOOD THINGS DONE”	
Type of Service	% of Programs
Tutoring and Mentoring	47%
Volunteer Recruitment & Support.....	26%
Service-Learning and School Reform	21%
Health Education	21%
Prevention Education	21%
Environmental Service Projects	16%
Classroom Instruction	5%
Literacy Arts Education	5%
Child Abuse Prevention.....	5%
Child Care	5%
Community Development.....	5%
Homeless Services.....	5%

Programs report that Members’ experiences are enhanced when Members are teamed up with at least one other AmeriCorps Member. Most AmeriCorps Members in Northern California serve at one placement site for the duration of their service experience (in addition to periodic program-wide meetings and activities). This provides consistency both for the Members and the organizations with which the Members work. A few programs operate using a team approach, which provides a level of consistency even when specific sites may vary. While there are examples of successful programs that place Members individually at service sites, these placements require greater staff supervision and involvement as well as older, more experienced Members.

The lack of staff continuity presents a serious challenge to effective programming. Staff are typically young and in many cases former AmeriCorps Members themselves. While this provides a basis for understanding between staff and program Members, it means that the staff are

often inexperienced. AmeriCorps program staff often leave their posts after a year or two to pursue further education or advance their careers elsewhere. Programs need help in maintaining good staff from one program year to the next in order to strengthen the programs and facilitate a more meaningful service experience.

Healthy AmeriCorps programs capable of providing a meaningful experience to Members and effective services to communities require significant time and dedication over several years. Without a strong organizational backbone to train and support Members, AmeriCorps programs cannot be effective vehicles for community change. Northern California programs have made substantial progress organizationally, and at this point, the majority are secure and stable organizations able to serve communities now and positioned to serve into the future.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT PROGRAM STRENGTHS

AmeriCorps Members are helping to build and sustain healthy, viable communities throughout Northern California. The annual efforts of close to 1,000 local AmeriCorps Members are changing the lives of individuals, families, organizations and communities. In a recently released national study of sixty AmeriCorps programs across the country from 1994 through 1996, Aguirre International found that AmeriCorps: 1) effectively prepares young Americans for the future, 2) strengthens communities and nonprofits, and 3) provides a substantial return on investment – at least \$1.66 of effort for every dollar invested. These results are also being realized on the local level, where AmeriCorps’ contributions are critical to the social fabric of the neighborhoods served.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT PROGRAM IMPACT

The majority of Northern California AmeriCorps programs report that they are unable to demonstrate the true and total value of their efforts. Programs face three primary challenges in evaluating impact. First, AmeriCorps Members are only one factor influencing the lives of those served. Second, it is difficult to measure the impact of service on Members in such aspects as self-esteem or civic engagement. The third challenge is resources. In general, few programs have the capacity or the skill to independently evaluate their program efforts beyond what is required. To the extent that the community wants to understand impacts over time, there needs to be an investment of significant resources to establish that capacity.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT AMERICORPS MEMBERS

Most AmeriCorps Members are female. The prevalence of females locally and nationally who are participating in service and volunteer efforts raises important questions for outreach, marketing and recruitment overall.

AMERICORPS MEMBER DEMOGRAPHICS YEAR 4 (1997/98)		
Gender	75%	Female
	25%	Male
Race/Ethnicity	19%	African American
	13%	Asian/Pacific Islander
	32%	Caucasian
	17%	Latina/o
	14%	Multiethnic
	5%	Other
Age	65%	Under 25
	21%	25-30
	14%	Over 30
Education	2%	Less than high school
	17%	High school
	26%	Some college
	5%	Vocational training
	46%	College graduate
	5%	Graduate degree

AmeriCorps brings people from different backgrounds together to serve side-by-side. AmeriCorps Members in Northern California are more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity than the state of California overall, with a smaller proportion of Caucasians and Latina/os than statewide but a larger proportion of other ethnic groups. The majority of Members are under the age of 25 and approximately half are college graduates.

The goal of program efficiency can conflict with the goal of personal transformation – both are important. AmeriCorps programs report that there are advantages to recruiting older and more educated people to serve as AmeriCorps Members. They tend to have a better understanding of what is expected of them in their service experience and are more likely to complete their full year of service. While programs benefit from an older and more educated Member, it is important to value the AmeriCorps experience as a formative one, providing an opportunity to seed and cultivate habits and ethics that will stay with the Member for a lifetime.

High retention rates can mean selective recruitment. Observers and critics should be cautious in comparing retention rates across programs because the education and background experience of Members varies, and retention appears to be a function, at least in part, of those characteristics.

The best marketing and recruitment strategies depend on a great AmeriCorps experience. AmeriCorps programs use different strategies to recruit new Members, however word-of-mouth from current and former Members is the most successful strategy overall. Several programs con-

sciously recruit Members from the communities they serve, although this is often difficult.

A good service experience means investment in good preparation and support. AmeriCorps programs provide Members with extensive training and support throughout their service. Programs report that it takes more staff time and effort to prepare and support Members who are involved in various service activities as compared with Members who are all assigned to the same activity. Training and supporting Members at different levels of development (particularly when first and second year Members are combined in a program) is critical to program success, and requires dedicated resources.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT TAKING RESPONSIBILITY PERSONALLYSM

AmeriCorps Members feel strongly that they are making a difference in the lives of the people they serve and that being an AmeriCorps Member is personally rewarding. Members report that their service experience provides them with the opportunity to learn about people from different backgrounds – something they gain both from other AmeriCorps Members and from those they serve. In addition to learning specific skills which they can carry with them to future jobs, Members feel they better understand their communities as well as their own strengths after completing their year of service.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT FUNDING

AmeriCorps programs are successfully generating private and local funding to match federal contributions. In the 1998/99 program year, Northern California AmeriCorps programs received \$8.3 million in AmeriCorps funding and raised an additional \$9.5 million locally to match the federal dollars; they are raising more than 50% of their funding through non-federal sources. Another source of essential program support is the in-kind resources provided by all of the agencies and organizations involved with AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps program leaders are creative entrepreneurs when it comes to raising money. The funding strategies vary from program to program, as illustrated by the following examples. City Year procures a large portion of funding from corporations that sponsor teams of AmeriCorps Members and associate those teams with “brand” names. BAYAC relies on contributions from its partner agencies where AmeriCorps Members provide direct service. The San Francisco Urban Service Project secures a variety of foundation and individual donations, while the Oakland Community Service Partnership supports its Members largely with funding provided by the school district in which the Members serve.

Funding should follow quality programs and not new fads. Generating program support takes staff time and effort

AMERICORPS MATCH FUNDING SOURCES 1998/99 PROGRAM YEAR

Foundations (including NCG)	\$1.54 mil.
Corporations & Individuals	\$1.03 mil.
Partner Organizations.....	\$1.34 mil.
School Districts	\$4.34 mil.
Other City, County & State Agencies.....	\$1.23 mil.

and comes at a great cost for most programs, particularly small programs that lack technical expertise in this area. Sometimes funders are more interested in supporting new models than proven programs, forcing programs to change their approach and strategy in order to stimulate support.

NCG's National Service Task Force created an effective collaborative pool of resources to support and match federal funding of local AmeriCorps programs. Unlike any other regional philanthropic entity in the country, NCG's collaborative fund pools the resources of several foundations and uses a single grantmaking process for AmeriCorps. It reduces the administrative burden for the donors and provides programs with a streamlined application and reporting process.

Consistent availability of federal funding contributes to a healthy network of AmeriCorps programs. The annual AmeriCorps grants are essential to program viability. Even though the federal proportion of AmeriCorps funding has declined over the last few years, federal funding still covers, on average, half of each program's budget. Most programs report that if federal funding ended, they would have to substantially scale back their programs and limit the number of service opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT POLICY

The national nature and network offered by AmeriCorps has the power to serve all people and their communities.

AmeriCorps as a national initiative means that federal funding provides the critical "first dollar" to programs and the leverage needed to garner local support. It attracts people from different communities, back-

grounds and ages to serve. AmeriCorps as a national initiative means that there is an education award that provides a significant incentive to participate, an incentive that community-based programs could not provide. It brings credibility to local programs and partners.

Some state policies and practices undermine the goal of AmeriCorps as a service experience. Unique to the state of California is that AmeriCorps Members are subject to the state's minimum wage laws, requiring them to be compensated in wages and not a stipend. This sends a message that the "service" experience is no different from a low paid "work experience," conflicting with the concept of "serving".

There is a need for a long-term commitment to AmeriCorps as a national service initiative in order to bring stability to programs and nonfederal funding. The political process associated with federal funding creates anxieties that adversely affect program operations and confuse the general public about the status and availability of AmeriCorps programs. The budget battles in Washington also create concern among private funders that can inhibit philanthropic giving. This situation provokes instability and thwarts appropriate program planning. It speaks to the value of developing policy to ensure long-term federal support of AmeriCorps.

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October 1999

For copies of this Executive Summary or program updates please contact Northern California Grantmakers.

Print production of this document was made possible by the Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service.

NCG NATIONAL SERVICE TASK FORCE – 1994-1999

Apple Computer • California Wellness Foundation • Community Foundation Silicon Valley
Compton Foundation • Mary A. Crocker Trust • East Bay Community Foundation • Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund
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