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National Service Works:

A Review of Federally Administered National Service Programs

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ABSTRACT

National service in the United States permeates through most communities. Despite a significant number of participants, national service programs like AmeriCorps and Senior Corps are relatively unknown. People understand the concept of the Peace Corps – programs may refer to their AmeriCorps model as the “domestic version of the Peace Corps.” National service programs engage individuals in providing services to their communities in exchange for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Individuals ranging from 18 to 99 join national service programs for a number of reasons, including a desire to “give back” or “make a difference.” People also find national service as a way to develop their professional skills before seeking employment. Participants are provided with a number of benefits during their service which range from educational awards to living allowances and health benefits depending on the program. National service is currently administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). CNCS oversees volunteerism efforts at the federal level, administering a number of grants and initiatives to drive results in making communities “smarter, safer, and healthier.” National service is a solid program model that lends itself as a way to encourage volunteerism, promote civic engagement, and make meaningful impacts in communities across the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others”. The concept of serving others takes many forms, existing in cultures for generations. Service can be tied to an individual’s value, belief, and ethics systems and it is typical for most service to occur at the individual level due to individual choice. When thinking of service, activities that serve the most vulnerable populations often come to mind. People participate in service to improve their communities, make a difference, and follow teachings from their religious or faith-based systems. Service to one’s country is also a notable concept. The most common form of service to country is through the military. Lesser known opportunities to serve one’s country is found in national service. Both have their own merits as each have different tasks and objectives. In the United States, national service is a voluntary engagement. National service has existed in the United States in some fashion since the founding of the country. National service is an integral part of the country, despite continuously maintaining a low profile. To understand the value of national service programs for the United States, one can start by examining the history of national service in the United States, along with the current national service programs. This paper will show the solidity of national service programs as a way to promote volunteerism, influence civic engagement and public service motivation, and address critical community needs. A review of demonstrated motivations for national service participation and the experiences gained from serving in order to better understand the benefits and impact of national service. The challenges associated with government funded national service programs will also be assessed, concluding with a look at the future of national service in the current climate of the country.

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History of National Service in the United States

The history of national service in the United States is found in a number of presidential visions and actions within their administrations. When looking towards the beginning of a concentrated national service effort, sources look to philosopher William James. In an early 20th century essay, James spoke of a use for national service to “to form ‘the moral equivalent of war’ to inspire patriotism and ‘redeem the society from a dull existence built upon a ‘pleasure economy’ of insipid consumerism.’” (Neuman, 2009). An early, loose structure of a future AmeriCorps program was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was created in response to unemployment during the Great Depression. Characteristics of the CCC are present in today’s national service programs, such as education, training, and stipends. (“Civilian Conservation Corps”, 2015). The work of the CCC, albeit not entirely service-oriented, had similar themes to current AmeriCorps programs, like conservation efforts, parks revitalizations, and disaster responses.

One of the most famous quotes from President John F. Kennedy can be used to describe the mission of national service. “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country” is indicative of a national service orientation. While President Kennedy was responsible for the creation of the international service program, Peace Corps, his administration also pushed for domestic efforts through the National Service Corps. In 1964, President Johnson created Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) as part of an effort in the War on Poverty. Additional service programs that were established in the 1960’s included the Foster Grandparent, RSVP, and Senior Companion Programs. Under President Nixon, the ACTION federal agency was developed, coordinating volunteer efforts throughout the country and taking on the

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coordination of VISTA and the eventual Senior Corps programs (“Celebrating 50 Years of VISTA Service”, n.d.).

In 1990, President Bush signed the National and Community Service Act, which put new focus on volunteerism in the United States. It also established the Commission on National and Community Service. Just two years later, the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) was brought to life, modeled after the CCC (“Celebrating 50 Years of VISTA Service”, n.d.). Under the Clinton administration, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as a unique federal agency was established through the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. CNCS combined President Bush’s Commission and President Nixon’s ACTION agency. The act also served the purpose of creating the AmeriCorps State and National program.

In recent years, there has been minimal change to the structure of CNCS. The most recent significant legislation passed in regards to national service was the Serve America Act in 2009. The law expanded national service opportunities, increased eligibility for participants, and channeled focus into six focus areas for all national service programs. (The Serve America Act, 2009). CNCS also oversees the National Days of Service, the National Service Knowledge Network, and the Volunteer Generation Fund (“CNCS Fact Sheet”, 2017)

Defining Current AmeriCorps Programs

Under the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), there are two distinct branches of national service – AmeriCorps and Senior Corps. Under AmeriCorps, the three programs are State + National, VISTA, and NCCC. Senior Corps is also comprised of three programs – Foster Grandparents, Senior Companion, and RSVP. For the purpose of this paper, the encompassing term of simply AmeriCorps will be used moving forward.

AmeriCorps State and National

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Participants in the state and national programs focus on providing direct service to communities. Known as ‘members’, participants serve in schools, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations to provide services such as student tutoring, case management, and connecting veterans to housing. Members are placed in hour-focused service terms, ranging from 300 to 1700 hours over the course of a year. Benefits include living allowances (stipend to cover the cost of service), health insurance, child care assistance (for those eligible), and a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award after completion of service (“Become A Member”, n.d.)

AmeriCorps VISTA

The longest continuous national service program, VISTA focuses on capacity building efforts to create sustainable solutions to issues related to poverty. Members serve in a full-time capacity for a one-year service term at nonprofits, government agencies, or schools. Members receive a modest living allowance, health care benefits, and child care assistance (for those eligible).

VISTAs have the option to receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award or an end-of-service cash stipend. VISTAs also have a one-year non-compete eligibility clause for government jobs after service is successfully completed. Focus areas for VISTA service include program development, grant-writing, fundraising, community outreach, and volunteer recruitment (“AmeriCorps VISTA FAQs”, n.d.)

AmeriCorps NCCC

The model of the NCCC program somewhat resembles Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. NCCC focuses on team-based national service, with teams working on a number of programs throughout a designated region in the United States. Member serve for ten months in a team of 8-10 individuals, receiving living allowances, healthcare coverage, and a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. During their service, members receive room and board, transportation, and

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uniforms. Members are between 18 and 24 years old. NCCC has two sub-models of the program. The NCCC Traditional Corps assigns teams to various projects with designated partners to conduct services such as disaster relief, low-income housing construction, and park clean-up. In 2012, CNCS established FEMA Corps to address needs related to disaster preparedness and response (“AmeriCorps NCCC”, n.d.).

Senior Corps

Senior Corps works with older adults over the age of 55, placing people in three possible programs. These programs include Foster Grandparents, RSVP Volunteers, and Senior Companion Program (Georges, A., Longitudinal Study, 2018). Individuals are able to use the skills they have developed throughout their life to serve by tutoring and mentoring students, helping elderly seniors stay independent, and provide volunteer services to nonprofit organizations such as the Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity. Senior Corps places 220,000 adults each year. The programs may offer simple stipends and other resources to offset the cost of volunteering (“Senior Corps”, n.d.).

Motivations for National Service Participation

As voluntary engagement, participation in a national service program stems from different motivations and reasons from individuals. Not everyone is comfortable, able, or willing to enter military service. Service with AmeriCorps offers an alternative route, allowing individuals to fill a potential internal duty to serve their country. A study commissioned by the Points of Light Enterprise expresses that “AmeriCorps presents a pathway to serving our country. Like military service, national civilian service shapes alumni’s personal identities long after their term with AmeriCorps is complete.” (“Untapped Potential”, 2014, p. 4). National

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service is also an opportunity meet a desire to “give back” or “make a difference” (Frumkin and Miller, 2008).

National service programs also support professional growth and development. Individuals new to the workforce are able to spend a year in service, learning what they like or dislike about a possible career path. Additionally, members are able to learn new skills with the chance to hone newly-developed skills under supervision of field professionals (Frumkin and Miller, 2008). Service also offers connections to future employment. A recent initiative by CNCS, Employers of National Service, recruits participants from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors to actively recruit national service alum (“Employers of National Service”, n.d.). Current employers in this initiative include private sector companies like Disney and MasterCard, universities such as University of Rochester and Arizona State University, and major nonprofits such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Heifer International (“Search Employers of National Service”, n.d.). Even if alum are not actively seeking employment with Employers of National Service, findings demonstrate that national service can make an impact in the job-seeking process. CNCS released a report, “State of the Evidence”, in 2017, explaining results of a survey conducted by researchers:

The researchers found that college graduates with AmeriCorps experience on a resume had a positive and significant effect on the likelihood of getting an interview offer: 24 percent of college graduates who were national service alumni received an interview offer, compared to 17 percent of college graduates without a service record. (p. 4)

Service with AmeriCorps can also contribute to personal growth through continued education. The minimum age requirement for service in the majority of programs is 17. One of the benefits to service is the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award which is used to pay qualified

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student expenses at eligible institutions or repayment of qualified student loans (“Use Your Education Award”, n.d). Research from studies conducted by CNCS indicate that “the education award continues to be an important motivator for individuals to join AmeriCorps, and consistently is identified by members as one of the main reasons for joining” (“Still Serving”, 2008, p. 43). Those who are considering service may be influenced by the post-service benefit or it may be considered a secondary benefit for those fulfilling other reasons for service.

Experiences Earned from National Service

In addition to the tangible benefits of service, such as the living allowance and education award, there are a number of experiences and opportunities for learning that can be considered benefits to service. These benefits are not only associated with the individual in service, but how those experiences impact the communities being served as well as the nation as a whole.

One of the purported results of national service is to help members understand the need for community involvement, with the anticipated results being that individuals are more civically engaged after service (“Still Serving”, 2008). This can be accomplished as a direct result of the type of work AmeriCorps members are engaged in. Frumkin and Miller (2008) note that “national service promotes critical citizenship primarily by exposing members to injustice and systemic failures that they would not otherwise experience firsthand, which can lead to future citizen action” (p. 437).

For participants reporting belonging to a privileged status of upper or middle class income levels, service places individuals in situations that provide experiences with populations and expectations that they are not accustomed to (Ceresola, 2018). National service also “creates an opportunity to work on problems of public concern and participate in the lives of others

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whose paths one might never otherwise cross in a structured and supportive environment” (Frumkin and Miller, 2008, p. 438).

AmeriCorps also includes members that can be considered low-income. In fact, “one of the goals of AmeriCorps is to provide service opportunities for those from economically disadvantaged circumstances” (“Still Serving”, 2008, p. 9). Service can be particularly impactful for that population. Ceresola (2018) notes:

Those that were raised in lower-income households do speak on their ability to bond with those that they serve and understand their service population’s experience. For these members, this has led to some truly transformational moments in their service careers – where they learn about themselves and their population in a very personally meaningful way. (p. 101).

No matter what income level or other demographic members belong to, national service programs provide hands-on experiences that give participants something other than tangible benefits to define their service with.

NATIONAL SERVICE AS A FORM OF VOLUNTEERISM

What is volunteerism?

Volunteerism has been present in the United States for as long as the country has existed (Dreyfus, 2018). The concept of volunteerism is woven into the cultural fabric of the country. Emphasis on giving back to the community and helping one another is found in part by religious organizations and educational institutions. Volunteers are an essential part of any nonprofit, community service agency, or other organization, as “volunteers are used to increase the capacity of organizations to deliver services and achieve planned outcomes for service beneficiaries” (McBride, Greenfield, Morrow-Howell, Lee, & McCrary, 2012, p. 101).

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The structure for volunteerism varies depending on the needs of the organization seeking volunteers, the desired outcomes for volunteers, and the knowledge and skill set of volunteers. For volunteers serving a specific purpose with an organization, there is a likelihood of a higher-level structured program. Usually, tasks and activities within a volunteer program are organized by the existing staff at such an agency or nonprofit, with volunteers completing such assignments for a specific amount of time (McBride et al., 2012). Examples of short term or episodic volunteer engagements include providing meals to people facing food insecurity, sorting donations at an emergency shelter, or constructing a wheelchair ramp for individuals with disabilities.

Motivations for engaging in volunteer activity vary greatly. Motivations can depend on sex, age, status, education level, and other demographics. Gerstein, Wilkeson, and Anderson (2004) determined variants in motivation between sexes. Their research found that women were more motivated by altruism, potential career benefits, and the chance to develop new skills (Gerstein et al., 2004). Shye (2010) assessed that “for the general population, the opportunity to develop friendships and gaining a sense of belonging to a community, are the most important motivations for volunteering. The possibilities of expressing one's personality and of expressing one's beliefs are also very important” (p. 198). Other noted motivations for volunteering include the opportunity to develop new skills and serve an organization with a mission that resonates with the volunteer (“Understanding Volunteer Motivation”, 2019).

Beyond motivations for volunteering are the benefits associated with volunteering. Research from Post (2007) indicates that volunteering results in physical and emotional benefits, as well can lead to more satisfaction in life. Piliavin and Siegl (2007) concluded that “volunteering is positively related to psychological well-being” (p. 461). Outside of an increase

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in general health, research by Wilson and Musick (1999) demonstrates that volunteering can have a positive impact in regards to professional goals such as gaining employment or status in one's career, as well as supports previous research indicating improvements in physical and mental health derived from volunteering. However, there are considerations for organizations to weigh when working with volunteers. Maki, Dwyer, and Snyder (2015) note that the volunteers may incur expenses related to their service. Since volunteering is an optional engagement with limited to no tangible benefits, it may lead to potential unreliability in volunteers. Additionally, because "volunteers operate in a less structured environment with intrinsic motivation and intangible incentives such as awards and recognition" (Cady, Brodke, Kim, & Shoup, 2017, p. 289), organizations may want to consider how to incorporate more tangible motivations in order to increase reliability and satisfaction.

What is the relationship between national service and volunteerism?

National service can be viewed as a structured volunteer program with tangible benefits that brings in participants with similar motivations as volunteers. Depending on the national service stream, members receive a range of benefits from a living allowance to health care coverage to education awards. The intrinsic motivations for national service members are also present. Maki et. al (2015) found that "members are most strongly motivated to serve for value-based reasons, such as acting on one's concerns for the less fortunate" (p. 274-275). Consistent with research by Wilson and Musick (1999), members may be driven to service in order to increase their professional opportunities, whether through networking, skill development, or real-world experience. Maki et al. (2015) also found that members were interested in national service "in order to develop their resume or get a foot in the door where they would like to work" (p. 275). While there are similarities between national service and volunteerism, the two have

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enough differences and bring value in their own respective ways to understand the existence for both (Maki et al., 2015).

Participation in a national service program may also lead to continued volunteerism. Research conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) found that a majority of national service members continued volunteering past their service term (“Still Serving”, 2008). CNCS’ research from “Still Serving” also indicated that national service could influence future volunteerism:

The study also analyzes a subgroup of respondents who had not volunteered in the five years prior to joining or inquiring about AmeriCorps. A short term analysis of this subgroup in 2004 found positive and significant effects on volunteering, suggesting AmeriCorps has the ability to increase volunteering of individuals who have not been previously engaged in service (p. 30).

With volunteering indicating a desire to serve one’s community, enrollment in a national service program may signal a concentrated effort to dedicate a designated amount of time to community service.

What is the viability of national service as a form of volunteerism?

Understanding national service as a form a volunteerism is an easy undertaking, given that the two share many of the same characteristics and motivations. National service is already a structured program with predetermined tasks and assignments that alleviate an organization’s staff responsibility of continuous oversight and supervision as is required with volunteers. National service balances altruistic motivations with tangible benefits that result in similar outcomes of service to the community

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National service may be considered a viable form of volunteerism. In addition to the similarities between the two, there is research indicating that existing volunteers seek more than simple feel good responses to volunteering. Research by Georges et al. (2018) demonstrated that volunteers have motivation other than altruism for service. The researchers met with older individuals enlisted in national service programs. Other reasons cited by the study included self-improvement and tangible benefits (for example, the living allowance). In other studies, Gerstein et al. (2004) found stark differences in the way paid (such as national service participants) vs. unpaid volunteers responded to motivations for service:

Paid as compared to nonpaid volunteers also had stronger convictions about the altruistic and egoistic functions linked with volunteering. Paid volunteers reported greater values associated with altruism and a concern for others (Values subscale), and they were more inclined to think that volunteering would introduce them to new experiences and facilitate opportunities to express their knowledge, abilities, and skills (Understanding subscale). Paid volunteers were also more likely to believe that volunteering would enhance their ego development and growth (Enhancement subscale) and to report that volunteering would increase their chance to be with others and be perceived in a favorable way (Social subscale)” (p. 173).

This research may indicate that intrinsic rewards are not entirely able to recruit or retain volunteers. This concept is suggested by Gerstein et al. (2004), who noted an implication that “both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards are necessary to retain volunteers” (p. 168). The study also found that compensation, no matter intrinsic or extrinsic, is present in volunteerism. In another study, McBride, Gonzales, Morrow-Howell, and McCrary (2011) support the idea of extrinsic factors as motivators for service, noting that “Perhaps volunteers who receive stipends feel more

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recognized or more positive about the experience because the associated costs of volunteering are not so burdensome” (p. 857). National service participation allows for individuals to receive such benefits while engaging in voluntary activities. This indicates the viability of national service as a form of volunteerism for individuals seeking additional rewards for volunteering.

NATIONAL SERVICE TO PROMOTE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) dedicates a portion of the statement to reflect the push for civic participation through service and volunteerism (“About CNCS”, 2019). Civic participation encompasses a number of activities from community volunteering to voting to organizing. Engagement in civic life is not exclusive to national service, but the relationship between national service and civic engagement is worth examining.

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement encompasses the ideas and actions of individuals hoping to improve or influence their communities from the micro to macro levels. In “Civic Life in America” (2010), CNCS and the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) describes civic engagement as “in essence, the common thread of participation in and building of one’s community” (p. 2). Adler and Goggin, as cited in McAweeney (2017), categorize civic engagement in three subcategories (2005). These categories include:

- Community service: voluntary service to one’s local community either as individuals or in a group. Some examples provided by the authors are the active obligation as citizens to participate in volunteer service activities for the community well-being.
- Collective action: Action taken in groups to improve society such as protests or initiatives to influence the larger civil society.

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- Political involvement: actions that involve government involvement and directs individual efforts to collective action for solving problems through political mechanisms.

(McAweeney, 2017, para. 3)

The sections identified by Adler and Goggin represent such a large number of opportunities for individuals to participate in that civic engagement is a possibility for just about anyone. Various demographics can influence civic engagement.

The research conducted by CNCS and NCoC found that the generation known as baby boomers have a higher rate of civic engagement than other generations (“Civic Life in America”, 2010). The table below describes the differences in various civic activities by multiple generations:

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TABLE 3.2: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY GENERATION				
ACTIVITY	MILLENNIALS (BORN 1982 OR AFTER)	GENERATION X (BORN 1965- 1981)	BABY BOOMERS (BORN 1946- 1964)	OLDER ADULTS (AGE 65 AND OLDER)
Voting, 2008 Election (CPS 2008)	35.6%	52.2%	64.4%	68.1%
Participating in one or more non-electoral political activities (CPS 2008)	17.8%	24.6%	30.7%	27.2%
Volunteering with an organization (VIA 2007-2009)	21.2%	27.7%	29.7%	23.7%
Working with neighbors to fix a community problem (VIA 2007-2009)	3.8%	7.7%	10.2%	8.4%
Exchanging favors with neighbors (at all) (CPS 2008-2009)	42.7%	57.6%	62.7%	61.7%
Participating in one or more groups (CPS 2008-2009)	27.6%	36.7%	37.6%	36.3%

Figure 1. A chart depicting Levels of civic engagement by different generations in various activities. Reprinted from *Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of America* by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship (September, 2010).

While the older adult generation holds the highest levels of civic engagement, the younger generations decrease in participation in descending order. The generation with the smallest demonstrated participation in civic life are millennials. Civic engagement may be a concept that requires development in young adults in order for the concept to take hold as civic engagement may not come naturally. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), cited by Flanagan and Levine (2010), assess that civic engagement occurs when young adults are motivated by issues requiring attention in certain settings, such as church or work. Verba et al. (1995) also note an influence of “normative pressures” in order for young adults to engage in civic activities (Flanagan and Levine, 2010, p. 165).

Civic engagement by any demographic can result in positive outcomes. CNCS and NCoC found that individuals who volunteer are more likely to be engaged in other forms of civic

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engagement, including broad categories such as political action and social connectedness (“Civic Life in America”, 2010). Flanagan and Levine (2010) put an emphasis on civic engagement in younger adults, assessing that such participation is “important to the health and performance of democracy” (p. 160). They also note that by providing a seat at the table for younger adults, they are able to then share their perspectives that can contribute to identifying solutions to community issues. These evaluations only review the general impact of civic engagement on the participant and general concept of civic engagement, not necessarily examining specific outcomes.

Barriers to active participation in civic activities exist. There are limitations to the amount of involvement one can have, particularly as it relates to time and resources. Varying demographics may also influence the level of civic engagement in groups. Flanagan and Levine (2010) note that “opportunities for civic engagement are not evenly distributed by social class or by racial and ethnic group, and wide disparities in political participation exist” (p. 159). The authors also explain that a contrast exists between the background one has the number of opportunities to engage in practices that develop civic engagement tendencies. The goal of CNCS to increase civic engagement lends national service as a partial remedy to the current disparities experienced by different social, racial, ethnic, political, and income classes and their ability to engage in civic activities.

How does national service promote and develop civic engagement?

One of the goals of national service programs is to promote civic engagement during service and develop interest in activities that members will continue after service is finished. Programs and sponsoring organizations implement trainings on civic engagement (training related to service positions that can be considered enhanced volunteer activities), provide opportunities for engagement in addition to regular service duties (Days of Service initiatives),

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and encourage civic participation (i.e. voting) throughout the culture of the program. Bonnie, Stroud, and Breiner (2015) share that trainings provided by various channels, such as programs and state service commissions, include different sessions teaching professional development, promoting team building, outreach through service projects, and an opportunity to reflect.

National service can also benefit individuals from various backgrounds by allowing them to engage in their communities in ways they may not have been able to before. As Flanagan and Levine (2010) realize, there is a certain stereotype associated with national service members. A college aged student typically comes to mind when thinking of AmeriCorps or other branches, but it is notable that “36 percent of participants report having received public assistance or lived in public housing before their service work” (Flanagan and Levine, 2010, p. 172). The authors pose that national service can be an opportunity for individuals that have experienced disadvantages to engage with their communities. Bonnie et al. (2015) support that concept, explaining that “as a substitute for or in addition to college, national service can offer opportunities for civic engagement, building social connections, exposure to training opportunities, and recruitment into civic life for those from disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 178). National service can work to promote civic engagement in individuals from all backgrounds through the term of service itself, in addition to the development provided by programs and sponsoring organizations.

What are the challenges to developing civic engagement in national service members?

Members in national service programs and the services they provide fall in the community service category outlined by Adler and Goggin, rendering participation in civic engagement during their service. Members may not be intentionally seeking out such opportunities by enrollment in the programs, however. During service, members are restricted on

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the types of activities they can participate in while representing AmeriCorps or “on the clock”.

Although it brought a significant number of positive changes to national service, the inclusion of prohibited activities during service was a result of the Serve America Act, enacted in 2009.

Prohibited activities mostly relate to political and religious activities. Flanagan and Levine (2010) explain what challenges and consequences the inclusion of prohibited activities bring, particularly as it relates to the ban on political activities:

The Kennedy Act represents an important investment but could be improved in several ways in the future. It forbids corps members from engaging in political activity of any sort. Thus, youth who become engaged in sustained efforts to address national needs as outlined in the legislation (safeguarding the environment, strengthening schools, improving health care in low-income communities) may not use the knowledge and experience gained in their service to work for policies that could potentially improve the very problems they are addressing in their volunteer service (p. 175).

The ban on political activity does not only impact youth in their service, as the implications provided by Flanagan and Levine in their concerns about the changes in the Serve America Act affects all members. Some argue that the prohibited activities take away the opportunity to develop civic engagement in children and youth through national service programs. Drogosz (2003) criticized the ban, stating “cultivating leadership, teaching kids about the political process, and assisting with voter registration should not be considered a politically partisan activity” (p. 18). The inclusion of prohibited activities ultimately changed the approach CNCS programs took in regards to civic participation as it limited previous activities, such as the facilitation of voter registration drives.

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The other challenges of the promotion of civic engagement stem from a shift in priorities. At one point, Bonnie et. al (2015) point out, members were taught from a curriculum titled “Effective Citizenship through AmeriCorps” to encourage civic engagement. Bonnie et. al (2015) also explain that “the emphasis on demonstrating community impact eclipsed the goal of member development” (p. 183). These changes likely resulted in response to increase political pressure to work towards a nonpartisan approach to national service. The prohibition on political activity, regardless of a nonpartisan status, can negatively impact the benefits of national service. Dionne and Drogosz (2002) assess that “when service is seen as a bridge to genuine political and civic responsibility, it can strengthen democratic government and foster the republican virtues” (p. 4). The 2009 Serve America Act possibly restricts that bridge from developing. At the same time, criticism of the entire legislation is not necessarily fair. Flanagan and Levine (2010) express encouragement at particular changes, specifically the inclusion of targeting the needs of low-income communities and a push towards recruitment of and services for low-income and opportunity youth.

What is the impact of national service on civic engagement and public service motivation?

National service not only influences civic engagement during participation in the program, but it also can develop habits that continue after service has ended. The impact that national service has on civic engagement tendencies is measured in a number of ways. Bonnie et al (2015) share that national service can lead to an increase in confidence on the part of an individual in how they relate to and interact with their governments in addressing community issues. Flanagan and Levine (2010) support that assessment, by explaining that national service members “were more confident in their ability to work with the local government and lead a

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community-based movement, and participated more in community affairs” (p. 172). Frumkin and Miller (2008) explain how national service can influence participants for the future:

By providing opportunities to demonstrate responsibility and take action in a supportive and structured context, people experience making a difference for themselves and others, building a sense of efficacy, reinforcing their idealism and inspiring them to take on further responsibility in the future (p. 439).

Service in an AmeriCorps program can lead to even just a simple tie to one’s community, Flanagan and Levine (2010) explain.

The research released from CNCS in their report, “Still Serving” (2008), which focused on alum of national service programs support the same ideas. CNCS found that “state and National and NCCC members are significantly more likely than the comparison group to have a strong connection to community, as characterized by their level of commitment and attachment to their communities and awareness of the social issues facing their communities.” (“Still Serving”, 2008, p. 16). The research also found that direct service programs, specifically like AmeriCorps State and National, influence a member’s likelihood to participate in their communities. Bonnie et. al (2015) identify national service as an opportunity for individuals to develop many skills that are suited towards success in their next endeavors, such as leadership and organizing skills. They assess that the national service experience can help transition alum into their future.

National service can also influence the type of employment that members obtain. Flanagan and Levine (2010) explain that alumni of national service “were more likely than their counterparts in the comparison group to be in careers in public service or the public sector” (p. 172). The research from CNCS in “Still Serving” (2008) demonstrates that concept, finding that

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“forty-six percent of State and National members are employed in these public service fields (education, social work, public safety, arts, religion, government, or military service)” (p. 33). CNCS suggests that “the work experience and job connections these members gained during their service may have contributed to the impacts on entering careers in public service and working in the government and nonprofit sectors.” (“Still Serving”, 2008, p. 42). While national service cannot be responsible for all civic engagement and public service motivation, the link between each does exist, in part due to the mission and focus of CNCS and its programs.

NATIONAL SERVICE TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

Impact on Community Needs at the Federal Level

The current federal agency administering national service programs is the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The mission of CNCS is “to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering” (“About CNCS”, n.d., para. 1). To epitomize the objective of national service, one can look to the AmeriCorps pledge, where the final line states: “I am an AmeriCorps member and I will get things done” (“Take the AmeriCorps Pledge”, n.d., para. 1). “Getting things done” has been an emphasis of national service for several years. CNCS seeks to meet their mission through a variety of national service programs and volunteerism efforts. The national service programs operated by CNCS fall into six distinct priority areas that have each made an impact in meeting community needs across the country (“Focus Areas”, n.d., para. 2).

Disaster Services

The goal of the disaster services focus area is on prevention, preparedness, and recovery. National service programs work with individuals and communities to adequately react and respond to disasters (“Disaster Services”, n.d., para. 1). CNCS cites an impact of more than 3.6

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million disaster service hours coordinated, 280,000 volunteers managed, and repairs on more than 16,000 homes. (“National Service and Disaster”, n.d. para. 4.)

Environmental Stewardship

The goal of the environmental stewardship focus area is to encourage care for the environment through conservation and protection. Programs work with land, water, and air in maintenance and recovery efforts (“Environmental Stewardship”, n.d., para. 1.). CNCS reports an impact of 500 miles of hiking restoration, 25,000 acres of wildlife habitat restoration, and planting of over 230,000 native plants (“Environmental Stewardship”, n.d., para. 4).

Healthy Futures

With healthy futures, CNCS seeks to improve the quality of life for individuals through self-sufficiency, food security, increased physical activity, health education, and opioid crisis management (“Healthy Futures”, n.d.,). Examples of current programs activities include community garden construction, meal delivery, and work on farms (“Healthy Futures”, n.d.). One cited impact from CNCS is the work of Senior Corps members in providing over 360,000 fellow seniors essential services to maintain self-sufficiency in 2017 (“Healthy Futures”, n.d.).

Economic Opportunity

This CNCS focus area covers an extensive area of services. The overall goal is to improve the economic status of economically disadvantaged individuals through housing, employment, and financial literacy and stability (“Economic Opportunity”, n.d.). The program emphasis of VISTA as an effort to alleviate or eliminate poverty relates specifically to the economic opportunity focus area. CNCS touts the following statistic related to the Economic Opportunity focus area: “In fiscal year 2017, AmeriCorps NCCC members assisted with over 12,000 tax returns,

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constructed 162 homes, and renovated or painted more than 600 homes” (“Economic Opportunity, n.d.).

Education

Education under CNCS programming encompass a broad category. Programs are designed to generally give support to students and families, improve school-related outcomes, and prepare for additional education opportunities (“Education”, n.d.). CNCS cites involvement in almost 12,000 schools in the United States (“Education”, CNCS, n.d.).

Veteran and Military Families

The goal of this focus area is to provide services that enhance the quality of life for veterans and military families. The focus area also looks to increase the number of veterans or related family members participating in national service programs (“Veterans and Military Families”, n.d.).

CNCS reports the following impact (“Veterans and Military Families”, n.d.):

- More than 1,650 Senior Corps volunteers served at 140 Veterans Affairs locations across the country.
- More than 1,850 veterans served in AmeriCorps programs.
- AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps State & National administered 80 programs that focus on veterans and military families.
- AmeriCorps NCCC directly served more than 4,700 veterans and 2,300 military family members.

The focus areas of CNCS programs strive to meet the needs of communities across the country. National service programs fill in gaps in services, while engaging individuals to serve their communities. Frumkin and Miller (2008) note that national service works to address the needs of individuals instead of solutions through traditional employment opportunities.

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In addition to the six focus areas, CNCS also seeks to develop capacity in nonprofit organizations to strengthen their efforts in meeting community needs. As Frumkin and Miller (2008) explain, “getting things done may involve actually delivering a certain amount of service to a community, but it can also mean building the capacity of the organizations in the community so they can ‘get things done’” (p. 442). One national service program gives specific focus to such efforts. The VISTA program works with sustainable projects and individuals to fight poverty in communities. Since its inception in the 1960’s, VISTA has undergone programmatic changes. CNCS explains that “When VISTA was first created, the services that the volunteers provided were largely shaped by perceived community needs, available resources, and the skills of the volunteer” (“VISTA 50 Year Review”, 2018, p. 9). Currently, VISTA works with sponsoring organizations to place members at nonprofits, educational institutions, or government agencies to complete projects that relate to capacity building efforts.

In the 50 plus years that VISTA has operated, a study conducted by CNCS has posed that VISTA has made a difference at the local level. The study notes “More accurately, VISTA has probably improved the lives of beneficiaries by addressing needs often associated with poverty through enhanced or sustained services via an intermediary organization” (“VISTA 50 Year Review”, 2018, p. 32). As the sole indirect service program, VISTA holds a unique position in addressing community needs.

The current multifaceted structure of CNCS allows for a broad reach in meeting community needs across the country. All six focus areas work within national service programs to address vital issues, with each focus area including more specific approaches, such as increasing student test scores and addressing truancy through school turnaround initiatives within the education focus area. The direct service focus of Senior Corps, State and National, and

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NCCC programs blend with the capacity building efforts of the VISTA program to bring a comprehensive effort in fulfilling the mission of CNCS.

Impact on Community Needs at the State Level (Kentucky)

National service at the state level is currently overseen by two offices. AmeriCorps State and National programs are administered by a state service commission, which receive and distribute funding. The responsibility of oversight of the AmeriCorps programs rest with the state commissions (“Service by State”, n.d., para. 3). Serve Kentucky is the state service commission in Kentucky. Each state also has a CNCS office that oversees VISTA and Senior Corps programs, with the additional responsibility of public outreach and grantee support (“Service by State”, n.d., para. 2). NCCC oversees five regional campuses.

The direct impact of State and National, VISTA, and Senior Corps members are reported at the state and federal level. It is more difficult to assess the efforts of NCCC in Kentucky due to its transient nature and CNCS nor Serve Kentucky release data solely on NCCC impact per state. In the state of Kentucky, national service has had a big influence. Each national service stream is represented in Kentucky. CNCS reports:

Last year more than 6,400 Americans of all ages and backgrounds met local needs, strengthened communities, and expanded economic opportunity through national service in Kentucky. The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) invested more than \$18.5 million to support cost-effective community solutions, working hand in hand with local partners to empower citizens to solve problems (“National Service in Kentucky”, n.d. para. 1).

Specifically, more than 1,200 AmeriCorps, including State and VISTA, members served through different programs, while more than 5,200 individuals served in Senior Corps at more than 900

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locations (“National Service in Kentucky”, n.d.). It is worth mentioning that sites may host multiple members from across the national service programs. CNCS touts the following achievement for Kentucky:

Through a unique public-private partnership, CNCS, its grantees, and project sponsors generated more than \$10.6 million in outside resources from businesses, foundations, public agencies, and other sources in the last year. This local support strengthened community impact and increased the return on taxpayer dollars (“National Service in Kentucky”, n.d. para. 1).

Serve Kentucky, the state service commission, oversees 20 AmeriCorps State and National programs. The commission reports that over 13,000 individuals have served in Kentucky since 1994 (“AmeriCorps in Kentucky”, n.d., para. 3). In the last full program year operated by Serve Kentucky, the services provided by the 20 AmeriCorps programs and NCCC efforts are summarized in the following graphic:

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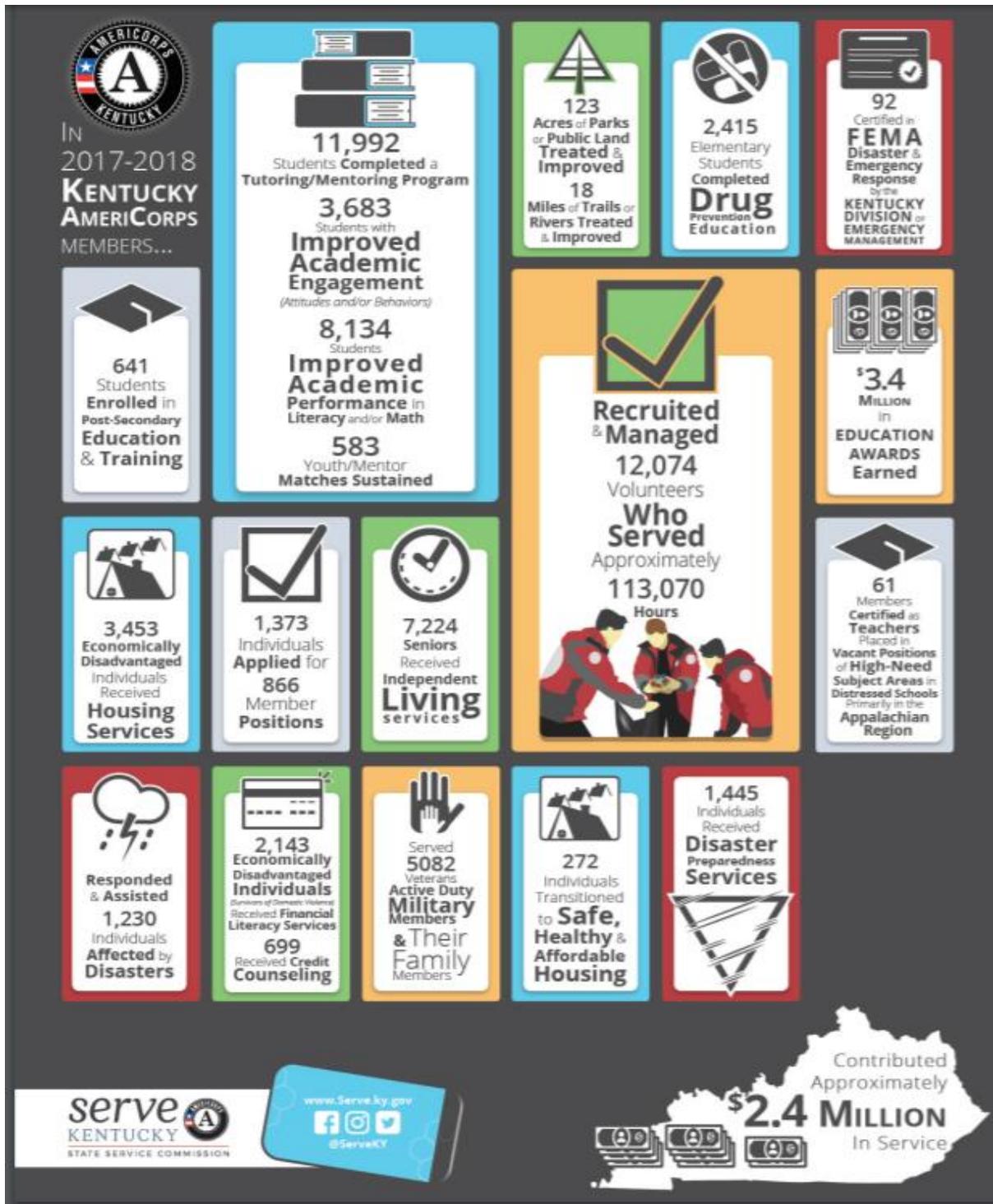


Figure 2. Graphic summarizing impact of AmeriCorps service members in Kentucky. 2017-2018 Kentucky AmeriCorps Infographic. Reprinted from Accomplishments from Serve Kentucky, by no author, 2018.

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Kentucky is one of 50 state and territory commissions reporting on national service in their locations (“Service by State”, n.d.).

ADDITIONAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

In addition to the national service programming offered, CNCS seeks to meet their mission by encouraging volunteerism through specific funding opportunities and days of service initiatives (“Volunteer Generation Fund”, n.d., para. 3). CNCS also promotes volunteerism through the recruitment and management of volunteers by existing national service members (“About CNCS”, n.d.). The emphasis on volunteerism combines the efforts of national service with local and community volunteers.

In 2009, as part of the Serve America Act, a new funding stream was created to assist state commissions and other organizations in strengthening volunteer efforts throughout communities. The Volunteer Generation Fund focuses on recruitment of and retention in volunteers, in addition to improving volunteer management and mobilization by state commissions and organizations using volunteers (“Volunteer Generation Fund”, n.d.). Currently, 23 state commissions receive a combined \$5.4 million dollars in funding from CNCS to support the objectives of the Volunteer Generation Fund (“2018 Volunteer Generation Fund...”, n.d.). Each grantee applies for the funding with different proposals to meet volunteer needs in their own state. These proposed activities include increasing volunteer leverage, developing skills of volunteers, and supporting Days of Service.

Another initiative of CNCS is the coordination of National Days of Service, which include MLK Day of Service and 9/11 Day of Service and Remembrance. MLK Day of Service was brought under the purview of CNCS in 1994 (“MLK Day of Service”, n.d., para. 2). The messaging of this day of service is an emphasis on strengthening communities in the vision of

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Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by becoming “a day on, not a day off” (“MLK Day of Service”, n.d., para. 2). CNCS poses that “MLK Day of Service is a way to honor his life and teachings by engaging in community action that continues to solve social problems. Service breaks down barriers by bringing people from different experiences together – volunteering can unite Americans of all ages and backgrounds while building stronger communities. (“MLK Day of Service”, n.d., para. 2). The 9/11 Day of Service and Remembrance was tasked to CNCS in 2009 to promote community service, in tribute of the victims of 9/11 and the individuals who provided services to individuals affected by the 9/11 attacks (“September 11th Day of Service”, n.d.). Both days of service are focused on engaging volunteers in service projects throughout communities. The inclusion of national service members as organizers and participants of dedicated service projects in response to National Days of Service is an additional objective coordinated by CNCS.

The scope of national service and its role in addressing vital community issues expands beyond the programs administered by CNCS. In meeting the agency’s mission, CNCS offers additional funding opportunities and initiatives for communities and commissions to apply for and participate in to increase the impact of volunteerism. Together, the efforts of national and community service work to solve problems, respond to demonstrated needs, and positively impact the state of the country.

NATIONAL SERVICE CHALLENGES + CRITICISMS

As with any government initiative, national service programs are not immune to criticism. Concerns about the effectiveness of programs, stewardship of government funds, and compliance with federal regulations are among a few of the issues found in national service. The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) for CNCS, an independent agency, has investigated

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multiple instances of fraud, abuse, and waste throughout CNCS. While national service has a demonstrated impact, the critiques of the programs are not to go unnoticed.

National service places individuals in positions that feature activities meant to address vital community needs. Members are not intended to supplement or supplant the hiring of staff. The Code of Federal Regulations states that national service members cannot displace an employee through full or partial means (45 CFR §2540.100). In *The Future of National Service* (2010), Reingold and Lenkowsky pose that national service programs serve as a conduit for grant funds to pay individuals to provide services. Reingold and Lenkowsky acknowledge the goal of AmeriCorps in meeting community needs, but they also point out that it is challenging to measure such an impact. Having such a broad focus leaves room for any number of programs, but it can lead to its own challenges. Reingold and Lenkowsky suggest the relatively generic mission of national service simply serves as a recruitment and labor channel for nonprofits and other organizations. In turn, this process garners plenty of support across the country, given the widespread reach in congressional districts (Reingold and Lenkowsky, 2010).

Another concern related to the actual effectiveness of national service relates to the goal of promoting further civic engagement and volunteerism. The 2008 report produced by CNCS, “Still Serving” (2008), indicates positive trends for future community involvement. However, Reingold and Lenkowsky (2010) indicate that research varies on whether national service has such an impact or not. The Code of Federal Regulations mandates a prohibited status on national service members on a number of activities, most of which relate to religious and political activities (45 CFR §2520.65). The prohibited activities are seemingly straightforward. Many would argue that it is reasonable to not allow political activity through a government funded program, given that those restrictions appear in any other number of government related issues.

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National service is funded from a bipartisan government, so a need to remain nonpartisan is understandable. Yet Drogosz (2003) poses that “The ban on political activity within AmeriCorps was understandable as a means of ensuring congressional support, but it has had the effect of denigrating politics altogether and of depriving AmeriCorps members of opportunities to learn” (p. 18). These learning opportunities may be avoided by programs in order to avoid blurring the lines of allowable versus prohibited activities. At the same time, a lack of emphasis on civic engagement during service may be related to a disconnect in alums of the program in regards to future engagement and volunteerism, as the research noted by Reingold and Lenkowsky (2010) suggests. Reingold and Lenkowsky also pose that national service could contribute to a potential decrease in volunteerism, as volunteers may no longer be willing to do the work without tangible benefits (2010).

Despite the source of funding for national service programs, there is limited external research available on the effectiveness and impact of programs as a whole. The majority of research available on national service programs is distributed by CNCS. Reingold and Lenkowsky (2010) attribute a lack of rigorous evaluations to an early emphasis on allowing programs to establish themselves before undergoing assessment. At the programmatic level, grantees are required to conduct varying levels of evaluations that are determined by program size, budget, and age of the program. Reingold and Lenkowsky (2010) also explain that programs, when conducting evaluations, focus “more on outputs and less on outcomes, and lack sufficient controls to properly measure the counterfactual (i.e., what would have happened in the absence of the service intervention)” (p. 118). However, Reingold and Lenkowsky acknowledge the challenges that programs may experience in conducting evaluations; one of which being that programs are expected to fit a generic evaluation guideline set by CNCS, which does not leave

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much room for individuality although each program has its own framework that does not necessarily align within CNCS evaluation guidelines (2010). Given the size and scope of national service programs, improvements in evaluation efforts would be valuable, particularly in assuaging critics of such programs.

One of the largest criticisms of national service comes from real and perceived instances of mismanagement in CNCS itself. In the latest audit for the full financial year in 2018, CNCS received a disclaimer of opinion (“Audit of CNCS Fiscal Year”, 2018). The disclaimer opinion is labeled by the report as the most unfavorable opinion an audit can result in. The audit included the following explanation:

Disclaimer of Opinion: CNCS was unable to provide adequate evidential matter to support a significant number of transactions and account balances due to inadequate processes and controls to support transactions and estimates, and incomplete records to support accounting for transactions in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles. We were unable to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence to provide a basis for an audit opinion (“Audit of CNCS Fiscal Year”, 2018, p. 2).

The unfavorable audit outcomes are a result from within the last two years, as prior audits released by the OIG included more favorable results from financial audits within the last ten years. However, there are additional unfavorable findings in audits of other areas. The OIG also released an audit in 2014 that stated “the Office of Inspector General found shocking waste of taxpayer funds, lax oversight, unauthorized contractual commitments and widespread noncompliance with rules, regulations and sound contracting practices” (“Audit of Blanket Purchase Agreements”, 2014, p. 3). The results of the audits and the concerns they raise pose a

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question of whether the issue of national service is with the actual mission and work of national service programs or the bureaucratic agency of CNCS.

Stemming from auditing challenges within CNCS is an inadequate oversight of grantees and programs. There are issues with monitoring and compliance efforts, which can help detect any misuse of funds or failure to follow federal regulations. In 2018, the OIG released the “Semiannual Report to Congress,” covering the period of April 1st to September 30th, 2018. This report included OIG findings of “unvalidated and inaccurate risk assessments and inadequate grant monitoring, which failed to prevent and detect, fraud, waste, and violations of laws and regulations” (“Semiannual Report to Congress”, 2018, p. 4). The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report, “Grants Management” (2017), that indicated many of the same issues. Deficiencies in monitoring practices by CNCS limit the ability to properly assess all sub-recipients. Poor compliance procedures also remove the opportunity to identify areas of misuse and implement corrective action. The “Grants Management” report (2017) encouraged CNCS to reevaluate existing monitoring and assessment practices, making improvements as needed.

Another issue related to the perceived mismanagement of federal funds relates to background checks. Every individual serving in a position, whether as a member or paid using federal funds (i.e. program staff) must undergo the National Service Criminal History Check. Issues of timeliness and accuracy of conducting the right checks occurs significantly enough that background checks are frequently a cause for cost disallowance (loss of federal funds) for programs. The issues related to background checks also appear in several OIG reports. In the “Semiannual Report to Congress,” the OIG revealed that CNCS leadership had acknowledged issues with conducting background checks (2018). To mitigate these issues, CNCS has begun

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contract work with external vendors to conduct checks, which is aimed to lessen the burden on grantees and programs and limit the number of cost disallowance issues, such as eligibility of candidates.

In the fiscal year of 2018, the OIG opened 44 investigations, found more than \$585,320 worth of misused funds, and branded more than \$4.8 million dollars as “funds that could be put to better use” (“Semiannual Report to Congress”, 2018). The work of the OIG is important. As a federally funded agency that awards federal funding, CNCS should adhere to strict standards demonstrating good use of that funding. Programs should also strive to conduct rigorous evaluations that demonstrate the effectiveness of their program models by evaluating both outputs and outcomes. Grantees would also benefit enforcing stricter monitoring efforts to ensure members are contributing effectively to their community efforts, as well as completing allowable activities that adhere to federal regulations. By implementing corrective action and recommendations from the OIG, CNCS should be able to satisfy some of the valid criticisms of national service.

THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL SERVICE

One of the most recent significant events in national service came with the passage of the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act. The Serve America Act focused on the expansion of national service, while also updating regulations to better reflect the needs of communities and benefits for national service participants. The legislation included changes that are still active today. These include the change to increase a post-service benefit, the Segel Education Award, to match the equivalent of the U.S. Department of Education Pell Grant award and the expansion of eligibility for Senior Corps programs. The Serve America Act was the last major reauthorization of national service programs in the United States.

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While CNCS and national service programs have continued to receive Congressional funding since the Serve America Act, securing that funding is not without trials. Proposed cuts to federally funded programs are standard as new administration and Congresses seek their own perceived fiscal and governmental views of responsibility. CNCS faced a challenge in 2015, when the United States House proposed a 42% cut in funding to CNCS (“Our View: Preserve AmeriCorps Funding”, 2019). Although those cuts were not included in the final fiscal year budget, supports of national service undergo fights to preserve funding during each budget negotiation, often having to overcome Congressional budget proposals to reduce or eliminate funding for national service. CNCS experienced a new challenge with the 45th Presidential Administration, as it is the first Presidential Administration to propose eliminating CNCS (Khatami, 2019). In the 2020 Presidential Budget, the proposal to eliminate CNCS is explained as “as part of the Administration's plans to move the Nation towards fiscal responsibility and to redefine the proper role of the Federal Government” (“President’s Budget...”, 2019, p. 1159). Voices for National Service note that the proposal for eliminating CNCS in the 2020 Budget is the third year in a row (“Fate of National Service...”, 2019). While the recent proposal from the White House is cause for concern, current grantees and programs have temporary assurance as CNCS is fully funded through September 30th, 2019. Advocates of national service programs are focused diligently on obtaining continued support from Congress, although funding is never a guarantee. Despite uncertainty in future funding, national service remains active in communities across the country.

CONCLUSION

The concept of national service has a longstanding history within the United States. While activities have varied since the inception of national service models, current programs like

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AmeriCorps and Senior Corps engage individuals to positively impact their communities.

Participants of national service join for a variety of reasons, from a desire to earn education money to developing professional experience to simply wanting to make a difference.

These programs are an important part of the United States and its territories, working to solve issues related to poverty, gaps in government funding and other services, and provide services to disenfranchised populations and communities. These goals are accomplished through a number of programs, initiatives, and focus areas. The outputs and outcomes of national service programs result in demonstrated impacts such as increased access to affordable housing, food security, and improved school grades and test scores. Not only do programs meet critical needs across the spectrum, national service also lends itself as a viable form of volunteerism by offering tangible benefits that offset the costs that can be associated with volunteering. The time spent in AmeriCorps and other programs can lead to continued or increased volunteer activity after service. People that serve with CNCS programs are also increasing their levels of civic engagement, which can positively impact and influence the neighborhoods and areas that people live in. Civic engagement is achieved by fostering a sense of commitment and drive to continuously strengthen communities. The impact of national service programs is found in the beneficiaries served, the individuals serving, and the country as a whole. The ability to demonstrate proper use of funding, adherence to federal regulations, and conduct rigorous evaluations of programmatic impact is essential to maintaining support for national service that is administered by the federal government. National service brings too much value to the culture of the country to do without.

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