



# National Service and Disaster Response

## BENS Commission White Paper

National service should be a key component of America's disaster response infrastructure. Corps members in service year programs are often among the first to respond to communities affected by disasters, and the last to leave. They are trained, highly motivated, and efficient, yet policymakers often overlook national service as a resource in disaster response.

Since 1994, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) — which administers AmeriCorps, the largest national service grant program — has assisted with efforts across all aspects of disaster relief, from preparedness and response, to recovery and mitigation. Disaster Services is one of the agency's primary focus areas. The agency has a detailed [framework](#) to coordinate disaster response and recovery efforts.

Highly cost-effective,<sup>1</sup> with greater outcomes than traditional volunteering or jobs programs, the American model of national service shares the burden of costs in a public-private partnership. While today it is underutilized, it has the potential to become the premiere humanpower resource for the federal government and local communities to respond to emergencies while transforming the lives of the individuals serving and offering the nation a renewed civic identity.

While national service includes federally-funded civilian service with programs like AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, and YouthBuild, the broader term, "service year," describes both federally and non federally-funded opportunities, like those offered independently by states or nonprofits.<sup>2</sup> All of these positions are paid opportunities to develop real-world skills through hands-on service. Most service years last 10 to 12 months.

## Service Years & Emergency Response Policy and Infrastructure

Service years primarily respond to state or national emergencies that could lead to humanitarian crises.<sup>3</sup> In these cases, CNCS uses a [Disaster Response Framework](#) modeled after

---

<sup>1</sup> According to a [2013 study](#), national service was found to have a return on investment of over 4:1, with proportionally greater returns the more positions available. A [new study](#) conducted by Voices for National Service suggests that the benefits of national service to corps members, society, and government have an 11:1 return on investment.

<sup>2</sup> Programs that meet Service Year Alliance's [certification criteria](#) are considered service year opportunities, regardless of their funding source.

<sup>3</sup> According to Merriam-Webster, a [national emergency](#) is "a state of emergency resulting from a danger or threat of danger to a nation from foreign or domestic sources and usually declared to be in existence

the Department of Homeland Security's National Incident Management System. In this framework, activities are coordinated through CNCS's Disaster Services Unit. This unit communicates with partners at the federal, state, and local level and deploys corps members or other resources in response.<sup>4</sup> There are three AmeriCorps types that are readily available for deployment in a disaster by the federal government: AmeriCorps Disaster Response Teams (A-DRTs), National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) Traditional Corps, and FEMA Corps.

### *A-DRTs*

[AmeriCorps Disaster Response Teams \(A-DRTs\)](#) are AmeriCorps State and National grantee programs that have a heightened focus and commitment to disaster response and recovery work. They engage in activities and training year-round, and deploy nationally to respond to emergencies across the country. CNCS deploys A-DRTs when it receives a request for assistance (in the form of a Mission Assignment) from a state or federal government.

A-DRT capabilities include individual assistance (such as supply distribution and emergency home repair), volunteer and donations management (such as field leadership and database management), capacity building (such as interagency facilitation and surge capacity staffing), community management (such as case management and logistics), and public assistance (such as critical debris removal and public land restoration). There are currently 18 AmeriCorps programs certified as A-DRTs.<sup>5</sup>

Most A-DRT teams are conservation corps.<sup>6</sup> When they are not undertaking disaster response mission assignments, they are often doing work that falls into the category of prevention, particularly proactively preventing or mitigating the effects or likelihood of natural disasters.

### *NCCC*

The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) [Traditional Corps](#) is a full-time residential program for men and women, ages 18-24, that aims to strengthen communities while developing leaders through direct, team-based national and community service. Corps

---

by governmental authority." A humanitarian emergency, according to the [Humanitarian Coalition](#), is "an event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or other large group of people, usually over a wide area." This can include natural or man-made disasters that leave survivors in urgent need of assistance or support. While some national emergencies are humanitarian emergencies, not all are. For the purposes of national service emergency response, we will assume that any emergency situation to which national service members might respond would be a humanitarian emergency, or be at risk of creating a humanitarian emergency.

<sup>4</sup> A condensed list of CNCS disaster response assets is available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> A full list of A-DRT capabilities is available [here](#).

<sup>6</sup> According to the National Park Service's Youth Conservation Corps [website](#), some activities of a conservation corps might include: building trails, maintaining fences, cleaning up campgrounds, improving wildlife habitat, environmental education planning and teaching, stream restoration, historic building preservation, etc.

members are assigned to one of four regional campuses. They are trained in CPR, first aid, disaster response, and firefighting, and have responded to local and national disasters since the program was established in 1994. Between 2000 and 2015, NCCC corps members contributed more than [5 million hours](#) to nearly 2,000 disaster service projects across America.

CNCS deploys NCCC teams in response to requests from qualified organizations responding to an emergency, including government agencies at any level, nonprofit or faith-based organizations, schools, and tribes. The American Red Cross can also request NCCC teams. In 2018, there were about 1,200 NCCC Traditional corps members.

There are many activities NCCC teams can undertake as part of disaster response, including:

- Construction, environmental work, volunteer management
- Volunteer coordination
- Mass care
- Sheltering – safe spaces training
- Feeding operations
- Debris removal, mucking out homes, mold remediation
- Tarping
- Donation warehousing, distribution
- Special needs support
- Casework
- Hotline operations
- Pet shelter operations
- Community outreach
- Construction management

### *FEMA Corps*

[FEMA Corps](#) is a partnership between CNCS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Created in 2012, the partnership established a new track of corps members within AmeriCorps NCCC dedicated to FEMA disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts. The creation of FEMA Corps has strengthened the nation's ability to respond to and recover from disasters. FEMA Corps members are deployed directly by FEMA in response to emergencies. In 2018, there were about 1,600 members of FEMA Corps.

Because of the efficiency of leveraging national service corps members for disaster relief and recovery, this partnership between FEMA and CNCS [saves the government](#) an estimated \$60 million per year. FEMA Corps also serves as a [talent pipeline](#) for young professionals looking to start their careers in emergency management.

## Service Years & Emergency Response in States

State service commissions currently manage about three quarters of all AmeriCorps funding. In nearly [half of states](#), state service commissions are involved in disaster response plans for the state as a whole. Many of those plans come with policies or procedures at the state service commission or in statewide policy that offer guidance on how corps members are to be used in

emergencies. AmeriCorps\*Texas and California Conservation Corps are two examples of state-wide policies for utilizing corps members in response to emergencies:

### *AmeriCorps\*Texas*

The state service commission in Texas, the OneStar Foundation, has a Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery [clause](#) that allows them to activate AmeriCorps\*Texas members to support in disaster response and recovery work as needed. Remote activities are preferred, like manning call centers or monitoring social media, though corps members can be deployed in direct service roles as well. Those corps members receive appropriate training for whatever emergency services they are providing.

The OneStar Foundation activated corps members using this clause in 2017 to respond to the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey. Most corps members were used to man the Crisis Cleanup's Virtual Call Center, where they returned a backlog of calls and fielded incoming calls. Other corps members implemented a Volunteer Reception Center and some assisted with the operation of a donations warehouse.<sup>7</sup> Recently, this clause was used to put AmeriCorps\*Texas corps members to work on contact tracing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *California Conservation Corps*

The California Conservation Corps (CCC) is an integral part of the state's emergency response plans, and its programs are mandated to make emergency response a high priority. The CCC enrolls about 1,500 corps members at a time. Established in 1976, it has contributed more than [11 million hours](#) of emergency work to California and, on occasion, to other states as well.

Their emergency response work has included a number of natural and manmade disasters that are an acute or chronic threat to the well-being of Californians, ranging from fighting fires to cleaning up oil spills, and mitigating floods to cleaning up after earthquakes. They even respond to agricultural emergencies, such as removing invasive pests infestations and combatting livestock disease. What's more, much of their non-emergency efforts focus on conservation to mitigate the risk of disasters like forest fires and flooding, making their work not only relevant to disaster response, but also to disaster prevention and resiliency.

While the basic qualifications for enrolling in the program are low — the program has an age range of 18-25 and an in-state residency requirement — corps members are expected to leave the program with a variety of basic training, progress towards education (if they did not already have a high school diploma), soft skills like leadership, teamwork, and communication, and hard skills such as first aid, and fire and flood fighting. Corps members are also required to take a 12-hour conservation awareness program which instructs them on a number of

---

<sup>7</sup> To read more about member activation for Hurricane Harvey, see United Way of El Paso County's [press release](#).

environmentally-focused issues like the food chain and water cycle. All corps members must design and complete an environment-focused volunteer project and 48 hours of volunteering during their service year. Finally, specialized training is available that can lead to certifications in energy efficiency, firefighting, or as first responders, among others.<sup>8</sup>

The estimated cost per corps member is about \$36,000, and the approximate budget for the CCC is a little over \$100 million a year. Some of that funding comes from fee-for-service projects. Some policies, like [Proposition 68](#), ensure that conservation projects that plan to use the services of the CCC are preferred recipients of grants, increasing the public benefit of these projects by offering workforce development opportunities to young people and ensuring the impact is more cost-effective.

## Community Plans

Assessing local needs and coordinating organizations that can address those needs would be best served by involving local service year initiatives. Not only does having such coordination in place help to meet the everyday needs of the community, but it saves significant time and increases effectiveness in a disaster — as the Flint Water Crisis, discussed below, demonstrates. Service Year Alliance has been working with a group of communities, called [Service Year Impact Communities](#), to ensure such community coordination can be achieved through coaching, strategic planning, partnership building, and identifying funding sources.

Developing a community plan typically involves engaging local decision-makers — usually in local government and backbone nonprofit organizations — to bring stakeholders and community members to the table to outline local goals and needs within a community. Those organizations collaborating on the plan should have a shared vision for those goals and a common understanding for how to achieve them in coordination, often using shared data to understand outcomes and impact. Service years can be used as a community development tool by being placed in organizations that require their support and establishing service year programs where there are gaps. With programs coordinating locally, they can offer better infrastructure and higher quality programs that meet the needs of participants, while making a greater impact. The [Flint National Service Accelerator](#) is an example of a high-quality and successful community plan put into action using service years.

## Examples of Emergency Response

After almost every major disaster in the last [15 years](#), CNCS has mobilized AmeriCorps members as part of the immediate response and long term recovery efforts. Floods, hurricanes, and fires, as well as less common disasters like mudslides, [volcanic eruptions](#), [explosions](#), and [oil spills](#) count among the humanitarian crises addressed by the nation's civilian service members. Since 2011, CNCS has responded to [over 500](#) state and federally declared disasters.

---

<sup>8</sup> A more comprehensive list of certifications can be found [here](#), and more information on training and career pathways is available [here](#).

For moderately-skilled work that requires humanpower, AmeriCorps has repeatedly demonstrated its utility and effectiveness.

### *Hurricane Katrina*

Almost [40,000 AmeriCorps members](#) are estimated to have supported response and recovery efforts in Louisiana and Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina struck the region. These AmeriCorps members leveraged nearly 650,000 volunteers over the tracked 10 year period of recovery.

Work by national service corps members was crucial in a region whose basic infrastructure to even accept volunteers or provide aid was devastated. Corps members managed and coordinated thousands of volunteers, cleared debris, served meals, tarped roofs, and mucked and sanitized houses in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. Though corps members are not designated first responders, their work did much to support first responders by providing mass care to people in need, connecting them to services, and setting up and staffing the main emergency call center of the Red Cross. According to the former Executive Director of the Mississippi Commission on Volunteer Services, an AmeriCorps team from St. Louis with disaster experience became the backbone of coordination in Mississippi. As victims of the devastation spread to every state in the country, local AmeriCorps members helped to support them in these places as well. While NCCC and other disaster response-trained corps were the first on the ground, all types of AmeriCorps members across the country engaged in response and recovery efforts in various ways.

In the long term, corps members helped the region rebuild the capacity of nonprofits to resume their work. Many corps members who were involved in immediate efforts shifted to work like building and remediating homes, organizing school activities for displaced children, and salvaging reusable materials from wreckage. A [CNCS report](#) from the first year of the disaster details additional incredible achievements made by corps members in the region.

### *California Wildfires*

From the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s to today, national service corps members have frequently been mobilized to help prevent, fight, contain, or recover from forest fires. In fact, about [70%](#) of California Conservation Corps' 1,400 annual corps members work on some aspect of fighting or mitigating the risk for wildfires. One important aspect of their work is supporting fire camps, which can temporarily house and manage upwards of 5,000 firefighters and support staff. Every California Conservation Corps member is trained in fire camp operations.

Beyond direct service fighting fires, corps members in California also support efforts indirectly by helping those affected by the fires. [CalSERVES](#), for example, had [89 corps members contribute 1,900 hours](#) towards recovery efforts after the 2018 fires devastated Napa and Sonoma counties. Their service included working at evacuation centers, assisting the Red Cross, participating in neighborhood watches, and distributing goods and supplies. Though

most of these corps members started their service year expecting to serve in education-related activities, they and the organization they represented were able to quickly pivot to support emerging needs in the community.

### *Flint Water Crisis*

While most of the disaster response and recovery work of national service has been related to weather events, corps members have been used to respond to public health disasters as well. When the vast impact of the Flint Water Crisis became clear in 2015, Flint was in the early stages of launching their [National Service Accelerator](#), aiming to increase their service year positions from 25 to over 200 in five years. Using a combination of corps members already working in the community and NCCC corps members, national service became a significant [part of the crisis response](#). NCCC alone provided aid to nearly 100,000 people, including distributing bottled water, information, filters, and preparedness kits, as well as recruiting and coordinating volunteers and facilitating trainings. Anticipating about 20 years of long-term needs associated with the water crisis, the accelerator also helped to establish the [Flint Recovery Corps](#), which addresses many of those needs. As the community already had a plan and relationships in place to organize existing corps members and the infrastructure to quickly take on additional corps members throughout the crisis, AmeriCorps helped provide immediate relief to those affected and is part of the long-term solution, building the community's resiliency to this and any other potential crises.

### *COVID -19*

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a novel public health disaster. The truly national scale of the problem has contributed to a highly localized response; service years corps members have been part of that response nonetheless. In places where service years were already embedded into the local or state disaster response framework, corps members were more quickly mobilized to staff food banks, ensure children had meals available when schools were closed, assist in virtual learning for students, and, more recently, contribute to contact tracing efforts. With most programs beginning their new terms imminently, the service year field is adjusting to continue to contribute to an immediate response, a long-term recovery, and what many expect to be a prolonged unemployment crisis.

Overall, CNCS has utilized their Disaster Services Framework to strategically guide the COVID-19 response, though some of the activities and tactics used by disaster response teams have been altered to fit the context of the crisis and ensure corps member safety.

## Core Competencies of Service Years & Disaster Response

Upon entering a service year, minimum qualifications vary. A few service year opportunities are designed as professional corps, like [MedServe](#).<sup>9</sup> Some service years have a minimum requirement of a college degree, others require a high school degree or GED. Some programs do not require a degree, but offer opportunities for students to earn their GED throughout the course of their service, such as [YouthBuild](#). Many service year positions require no other qualifications, though those that do often fall along the lines of a willingness to work on a team, ability to adapt to new situations, or a willingness to learn new skills.

The vast majority of service years are meant to offer young people new skills through service. Some programs offer intentional pipelines into careers, like [Teach for America](#), [Lead for America](#), [Green City Force](#), or [FEMA Corps](#). Most intend for their corps members to learn transferable skills that make them better employees and better citizens to the nation.

## Skills Developed through Service Years

The 2015 [AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes Summary Report](#) asked AmeriCorps Alumni to self-report on a variety of skills related to self-efficacy. Of NCCC alumni, who are most likely to do disaster response and recovery work, 89% agreed or strongly agreed that they were capable of solving problems and dealing with challenges, compared to 68% prior to service. 96% of alumni overall agreed or strongly agreed that they had confidence dealing with unexpected events, 94% that they could handle unforeseen circumstances, each an increase of 24 percentage points from prior to service. Alumni also rated their professional soft skills highly, like interacting with others, verbal and written communication, leading teams, facilitating groups, recruiting and managing volunteers, and managing events. The alumni reported that their AmeriCorps experience helped them develop many of these skills.

In a 2013 study by [The Corps Network](#) of conservation corps, which includes nearly all of the nation's A-DRT certified programs, several targeted outcomes were identified as transferable skills corps members would attain by the end of their service. Those skills, as defined [in the study](#), included community engagement, environmental engagement, teamwork, leadership, self-responsibility, grit, critical thinking, and communication. When compared to a control group from the general population, corps members were found to have significant increases in each of these skills after their service year.

FEMA Corps [identifies](#) skills learned through serving with their disaster management and response teams including communication and empathy, problem-solving, teamwork, decision-making, using appropriate tools, effective planning, and professionalism in difficult environments. [SBP](#) expects similar outcomes for their [Disaster Recovery positions](#), as do Red Cross affiliates hosting [Disaster Corps members](#) and [AmeriCorps NCCC positions](#).

---

<sup>9</sup> MedServe requires applicants to have Pre-Med bachelor's degrees and prefers that they are taking a year off prior to medical school to complete this service year, giving them an opportunity to experience the medical field first hand before attending medical school.

Many of the skills developed during a year of service align with the core competencies described in the [Core Humanitarian Competency Framework](#). These skills include adaptability, professionalism, accountability, teamwork, communication, motivating others, and critical decision-making, among others.

There are other benefits of service years to the individuals serving that make it a better option than intermittent volunteering in a disaster. Many service year programs have intentional, built-in supports and resources to ensure their corps members have a positive experience. For instance, programs whose corps members work in disaster response through a service year may have mental health and wellness materials — many programs are now developing such materials tailored to working in a virtual environment. Service year programs also incorporate professional development into what corps members are doing and learning, which is rarely a part of hourly or contract work or intermittent volunteering. Further, corps members have access to healthcare through AmeriCorps, which is critical during a disaster — especially a health-related disaster — but is generally unavailable to volunteers.

Various outcomes are also more pronounced with service years. According to a [study](#) by Burning Glass Technologies, service year alumni are more likely than their peers to complete a bachelor's degree after taking time off and are more likely to work in public service occupations like education and social services.

Service years also have a proven track record of leading to increased volunteerism by corps members after their service year is completed. The [Alumni Outcomes](#) study introduced above demonstrates that alumni were more likely to volunteer and to participate in community organizations because of their experience in AmeriCorps. YouthBuild's impact evaluation, [Building a Future](#), similarly found that 54% of YouthBuild participants reported volunteering 30 months after their service year was completed, compared to 31% of the control group.

Not only do service years lead to increased volunteerism, but they also spur more people in communities to volunteer. An [evaluation](#) from 2016 to 2019 of Habitat for Humanity AmeriCorps programs found that two-thirds of Habitat AmeriCorps host sites strongly agreed that AmeriCorps members increased the capacity of sites to serve families, in part because they were strongly effective at recruiting volunteers.

As CNCS's [report](#) on Hurricane Katrina notes, “[u]nlike contractors, [national service corps members] provide a personal, patient, caring, touch to homeowners who often need to say ‘goodbye’ to a way of life that no longer exists. [They] spend a few extra moments with residents to console them about their loss...[and] bring a positive attitude and spirit to the long recovery effort.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> National Service Responds: The Power of Help and Hope after Katrina, 2006, pg 27.

## Recommendations

While national service does not always offer the highly specialized skills that may be needed in a disaster, such as medical training or social work expertise, there is often a great deal of moderately-skilled work that corps members can offer more broadly in a crisis. Most importantly, this includes dedicated and compassionate humanpower, which is often critical to support the wide variety of activities needed for response and recovery efforts, regardless of the type of disaster. This might involve anything from volunteer, donations, or data management and logistics support, to mass care support like shelter and food services, to creating and sharing information, to debris cleanup and rebuilding homes.

Because of the flexibility, benefits, and cost-effectiveness of national service and its proven ability to be highly effective in disaster situations, Service Year Alliance recommends the following actions:

- National service should be assessed for the value it could bring to all disaster response plans within the federal government, and someone able to represent national service should be included on disaster-related White House task forces to ensure swift and effective coordination.
- Federal agencies such as the CDC and HHS should consider partnering with CNCS to create their own corps like FEMA Corps that can be trained and deployed efficiently in ways that support said agency in a disaster.
- Where there are gaps in skillsets that can be critical to disaster response, federal agencies should consider offering training to corps members in those areas to create a stronger specialized civilian pipeline that can be tapped in disaster situations in the future — developing in the nation’s young people the skills the country needs.
- National service should be considered in state and local disaster response plans to ensure that corps members in communities are part of local emergency management infrastructure.
- Local and state governments should work with state service commissions, or local networks like Service Year Impact Communities, to identify policies that would make national service maximally effective to meet chronic community needs, as well as acute needs in disaster situations.