



Reimagining National Service:

A Roadmap to a Service Presidency

Published by Service Year Alliance
April 2021

www.serviceyearalliance.org

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Introduction

Reimagining National Service

Our country is facing a crisis unlike anything it has experienced since the Great Depression. The long-term public health consequences of COVID-19 remain uncertain. Education has been disrupted and children face continued learning loss. Millions of Americans, especially women and people of color, have been left behind by the workforce. Communities across the country are dealing with the impacts of climate change in the form of fires, hurricanes, and coastal degradation. And while traditional infrastructure, like bridges and roads, are in desperate need of repairs, the pandemic uncovered the essential nature of broadband for all Americans.

At the same time, a generation of young people is increasingly disconnected from education and employment. Millions graduated from college and found no job prospects. Others who might have gone on to higher learning have faced uncertain futures. The impact on educational opportunities has been disproportionately felt by economically disadvantaged youth and youth of color.

Finally, the events of the last few years, climaxing with the coup attempt at the Capitol, have demonstrated just how polarized we have become as a nation.

The Biden-Harris Administration has made tackling these issues their core priorities. These challenges — COVID response and recovery, workforce development, climate change, crumbling infrastructure, racial justice, and healing a divided nation — are complex. They require significant capacity and coordination from local communities up to the federal government.

While each of these challenges requires nuanced policy solutions, there is one tool flexible enough to begin to address each of them head on: national service.

Communities across the nation already utilize national service to meet their pressing needs, offer people a pathway to employment, and forge a common American identity by bringing people from different backgrounds together in shared purpose to solve problems. With additional investment and strategic expansion, it can rise to meet this unprecedented occasion, much like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) did during the Great Depression under President Roosevelt.

This paper offers a roadmap for how President Biden can reimagine national service to meet his Administration's priorities. It highlights opportunities for expanding national service, outlines the gaps, and offers solutions to improve and expand upon the existing national service infrastructure. It offers six steps that would allow President Biden to make national service a

foundational part of his Administration building off the principles and ideals that have shaped his career.

Prioritizing national service in the Biden Administration means:

1. Expanding national service positions, including to 250,000 AmeriCorps positions a year, up from 75,000 a year today, and 10,000 Peace Corps positions, and progress toward an ultimate goal of one million;
2. Flooding the nonprofit sector and communities with critical support through a Service Year Fellowship and the creation of on-ramps for new programs;
3. Leading a whole-of-government effort to put Americans into national service to meet our country's urgent needs, including elevating service in the White House by creating a National Service Advisor and service corps within and between departments and federal agencies;
4. Launching an awareness campaign and an online portal to connect people to military, national, and public service opportunities;
5. Making national service positions accessible to youth of all races, ethnicities, and income levels by increasing stipends and benefits and eliminating barriers for groups working with opportunity youth; and
6. Setting young people up for success by ensuring workforce development is integrated into national service programs.

By spearheading this bold transformation of national service and breaking down barriers to make national service more equitable and inclusive, President Biden will reimagine what it means to serve our country and make national service the cornerstone legacy of his Administration.

Meeting the Moment

President Biden has the opportunity to make a historic call to service that meets the demands of our next generation. And if asked, young people would answer the call.

A national poll¹ conducted in January 2021 by Change Research on behalf of Service Year Alliance found that 44% of young people ages 18-28, including 60% of young people of color, would be somewhat or very likely to participate in a paid year of national service — that's the equivalent of approximately 1.7 million young Americans who would be interested in service if given the opportunity. Interest from historically underrepresented communities suggests an enormous opportunity to provide young people of color, in particular, the tools to make change in their communities that can also put them on a path to good-paying jobs in sectors that could benefit from increased diversity.

¹ ["New Poll: As President Biden Calls for National Unity, Majority of Americans Support National Service to Bridge Divides."](#) Service Year Alliance, January 25, 2021.

Further, these young people indicate that a call to service from President Biden would be more persuasive than hearing from virtually any other messenger, with almost half of young people — and more than half of young people of color — indicating that if President Biden urged them to join a national service program, they would feel even more positively about national service.

Additionally, by significant margins, Americans of all ages and demographics support measures to increase national service opportunities. More than three-quarters of Americans — including 93% of Democrats and 59% of Republicans — support expanding national service opportunities. And because national service is highly cost-effective — for every \$1 spent on national service, the government, corps members, and society see a return of \$11² — it is a shrewd investment to make that pays dividends to the nation.

With the right investments and support from the current Administration, national service can tackle many of our nation's problems and demonstrate to Americans their own ability to make a difference. It is effective, bipartisan, and time-tested, and it is a solution that meets this moment in history.

Executive Summary

The following high-level changes, which are detailed throughout this report, aim to reimagine national service and serve as a roadmap to make national service a central part of the Biden Administration:

Expand National Service Opportunities and Stabilize & Strengthen AmeriCorps

1. **Fully Fund 250,000 AmeriCorps and 10,000 Peace Corps Positions:** Grow the existing AmeriCorps infrastructure to 250,000 positions — across interagency corps, fellowships, and the expansion of current programs, including YouthBuild — as authorized in the Serve America Act. Double the size of the Peace Corps over the next decade, to 15,000 Volunteers serving, with a goal of 10,000 volunteers by fiscal year 2025.
2. **Create Matching Fund Flexibility:** Ensure matching fund flexibility as well as find money to fill the gaps to keep existing programs functioning and help others grow.
3. **Invest in an Empowered Board:** All members of the AmeriCorps Board have termed out, which allows the Biden Administration the opportunity to shape the Board in a manner that truly elevates service in America.

² Modicamore, Dominic, and Alix Naugler. *AmeriCorps and Senior Corps: Quantifying the Impact*. Voices for National Service, July 2020.

Flood the Nonprofit Sector and Under-resourced Communities with Critical Support Through a Service Year Fellowship and New Grantee On-Ramps

1. **Establish a Service Year Fellowship:** Establish a fellowship that would swiftly deploy corps members across the country, give young people choices, connect national service to local and state needs, and provide additional support to organizations to help address the devastating impacts of COVID-19 and other community needs.
2. **New Grantee On-Ramps:** Invest in new program development by AmeriCorps and State Service Commissions and develop intentional new grantee on-ramps for underserved communities and organizations to ensure all communities have access to national service as a resource.

Lead a Whole-of-Government Effort to Put Americans Into National Service to Meet Our Country's Urgent Needs

1. **Cabinet-Level Leadership to Align Service in Government:** Create a Cabinet-level "Service Czar" who can ensure alignment between military, national, and public service, while also chairing the interagency task force to ensure better alignment.
2. **Interagency Task Force:** Bring together an interagency task force and mandate that it incorporate national service into the federal agencies' COVID response work.
3. **Place-Based Work:** Look at best practices for building an ecosystem of investment in national service. Communities that have an infrastructure in place deliver service more effectively, have a higher return on investment and have better outcomes for corps members.
4. **Continuum of Service:** Incorporate the full continuum of service for individuals, starting with service learning, through to an alumni-veterans' reserve corps, and to public service as a career.

Raise Awareness and Enable Matching of Young Americans Through State-of-the-Art Technology

1. **National Awareness Campaign:** Establish a national awareness campaign to amplify the President's Call to Service.
2. **Online Platform:** Establish an online platform to make it easier for young Americans to find and apply to service opportunities.

Make National Service Positions Accessible to All Young Americans

1. **Increase Stipends:** Increase the stipend to 175% of the current AmeriCorps VISTA living allowance, with adjustments for regional cost of living, and eliminate the tax on it.
2. **Provide a Meaningful Education Award and Wraparound Services:** Change the Eli Segal Education Award to twice the amount of the Pell Grant and make it tax-deductible in line with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Additionally, provide wraparound services like housing or a

housing stipend for corps members and childcare to make national service more accessible.

3. **Build Flexibility into the 80/20 Rule:** Provide waivers that allow for more time to be devoted to personal and professional development in programs targeting opportunity youth in a standardized manner.
4. **Create Flexibility in Match Requirements and Increase Cost Per Corps Member:** Create flexibility in the match requirement and raise the cost per corps member to allow programs to better engage opportunity youth by investing in additional training and wraparound services.
5. **Improve Access for Justice-Involved Youth:** Explore best practices for incorporating justice-involved youth in national service and prioritize these programs for grants.
6. **Expand Eligibility for Young People with DACA, TPS, DED, Refugee, or Asylee Status:** Allow young people DACA, TPS, DED, refugee or asylee status to participate in all AmeriCorps programs.

Set Young People Up for Success

1. **Civic Apprenticeships:** Develop programs or training components that allow national service programs to be designated as “civic apprenticeships” and would help graduates grow professionally and signal their capabilities to hiring managers at nonprofit organizations.
2. **Workforce Development Training:** Build in training to develop skills and experiences needed for critical sectors to make national service a clearer pipeline to 21st-century jobs.
3. **Create a Path to Higher Education:** Work with colleges and universities to accredit programs that can provide college credits or skills training that help young people transition from national service programs to higher education.
4. **Create a Path to Public Service:** Allow service year corps members to receive the same preferential hiring and non-competitive eligibility for federal jobs as returned Peace Corps volunteers, AmeriCorps VISTA members and Public Land Corps members.

National Service Addresses Biden-Harris Administration Priorities

As a lifelong public servant and advocate for service in all its forms, President Biden has the opportunity to call young people across the nation into service to support our country’s unmet needs — all while addressing his Administration’s top priorities of COVID response and recovery, workforce development, climate change, infrastructure, racial justice, and healing a divided nation.

COVID Response & Recovery

Across the country, national service programs are leveraging federal, state, and local resources to combat the immediate and chronic challenges that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other activities, national service corps members are delivering food to the hungry, contact tracing and supporting vaccine distribution, and tutoring students to combat learning loss and support virtual learning.

Service Year Alliance convened a COVID Response and Recovery learning cohort to bring together national service programs directly addressing public health needs through contact tracing and vaccination coordination. These programs have shared information and learnings since the spring of 2020. One key element that came out of these convenings is the importance of cultural competency as part of this service. Contact tracing and vaccine distribution require the confidence of the communities involved. Programs, such as Philadelphia's COVID Response Corps and Baltimore Health Corps, have trained local corps members, who are reflective of the community they are serving, to assist with contact tracing and vaccine distribution through on-the ground logistical support, public health education, and outreach to local residents.

Programs have also been adapting and new programs are being established to address some of the other, long-term effects of COVID, such as unprecedented levels of food insecurity. In June 2020 in Washington state, the Schultz Family Foundation and Serve Washington, the state's service commission, partnered to create the WA COVID Response Corps to address unprecedented levels of food insecurity.³ They wanted to bring new programs into AmeriCorps to meet the needs of communities and to recruit more diverse young people to serve their communities. To date, this innovative public-private partnership has deployed 120 AmeriCorps members and served more than 4.7 million meals.

This is not the first public health crisis that has utilized national service. When the vast impact of the Flint water crisis became clear in 2015, Flint was in the midst of its National Service Accelerator five-year plan, with a goal of increasing its service year positions tenfold in five years. Using a combination of corps members already working in the community and AmeriCorps NCCC corps members, national service became a significant part of the public health crisis response. They provided aid to more than 100,000 people, including distributing bottled water, information, filters, and preparedness kits, as well as recruiting and coordinating volunteers and facilitating trainings. Anticipating about twenty years of long-term needs associated with the water crisis, Flint then established the Flint Urban Safety and Health Corps, which addresses many of those needs and continues to assist in Flint's recovery. National service can do the same for the COVID-19 public health crisis, aiding in both current and future issues due to the pandemic.

³ WA COVID Response CORPS Overview of the Model & Early Learnings. Schultz Family Foundation, March 2021.

Workforce Development

Through national service, the Biden-Harris Administration has a significant and unique opportunity to reshape the way we think about both employment and national service to cultivate sustainable practices that foster talent development and lead to economic stability and mobility. By breaking down the conceptual barrier between national service and employment — thereby restoring the New Deal and Civil Rights eras' values of the dignity of work that has been deeply eroded alongside the decline in civic engagement — this Administration can equip future generations with necessary experiences to address skills gaps and workforce development needs while also building civically engaged citizens, renewing the value Americans put in themselves, in one another, and in the greater purpose of the nation.

A service year experience offers younger generations, particularly opportunity youth⁴ and recent high school graduates, the opportunity and time to learn about their strengths while aligning their skills and experiences to future education and career goals. National service affords younger generations a year-long opportunity to navigate a professional experience in a supportive environment, alleviating some of the pressures that occur in first job experiences. Additionally, national service cultivates social capital development and gives agency to young generations to drive professional development and active participation in their personal economic mobility.

More intentionally embedding workforce development into national service programs would bring great added value to corps members and to our economy. By committing to a year of service, they would be able to take advantage of career exploration and navigation, build the technical skills necessary to compete for jobs, and develop the interpersonal skills that contribute to understanding the value of the work. They would also be engaging meaningfully with members of a community, and forging civic and cultural attitudes that align with being an engaged participant in a healthy democracy.

As the Biden administration embarks on the journey of building back better with a 21st century workforce, strategically developing young people who are well-suited for the economy, and who possess the values and attitudes crucial to restoring American civic life, is essential to the nation's future. National service positions cannot under law compete with existing jobs, nor should they impede new job creation. Rather, they can and should be leveraged to help develop the workforce by integrating skills training, certifications, and credentialing into programs more intentionally. The Administration has the opportunity to work with institutions of higher learning, workforce development organizations, unions, and employers to help national service positions operate as pipelines to 21st-century jobs.

⁴ Opportunity youth are young people who are between the ages of 16 to 24 years old and are disconnected from school and work.

Climate & Infrastructure

National service has a long and storied history of offering significant benefit to the environment. The earliest iteration, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), had immediate and long-term effects on conservation during the 1930s, while also serving to create lasting change indirectly. On top of its well-known restoration and infrastructure building efforts, which transformed national parks and public land, the CCC prevented fires,⁵ preserved and restored historical sites, and prevented diseases in and restored populations of native species.⁶ The program also had indirect impacts like helping to lift communities near CCC camps out of depression and reducing crime by upwards of 50% by offering employment to hundreds of thousands of unemployed young people.⁷ The CCC contributed to a work and civic revival that primed the nation for its most civically active generations in American history.⁸

Much of this impact was due to its scale: while the program was in operation, an average of 300,000 individuals were enrolled a year, meaning that around a third of all young men at the time had the opportunity to participate in conserving the nation's natural resources. The effects were highly tangible as a result, and a significant part of a generation of people experienced working alongside other Americans to make the country better.

Inspired by that legacy, many other conservation corps have operated as national service programs around the country over the past few decades. These corps undertake conservation and environmental restoration work, and many also serve in emergency response roles when disasters like fires, hurricanes, or flooding, often exacerbated by climate change, hit the country.⁹

From AmeriCorps' response after Hurricane Katrina to the team of dedicated AmeriCorps members who were on the scene in Joplin, Missouri just hours after the tornado destroyed the community — national service programs have been critical to the immediate and long-term recovery of communities in the wake of natural disasters and have the power to help communities prepare for future disasters that arise as a result of climate change.

National service programs, including conservation corps, also focus on addressing the impact of climate change on communities through weatherization and urban farming programs, and by bringing renewable energy to underserved communities. Many of them also prioritize corps

⁵ The CCC's efforts in fire prevention reduced the amount of land lost to fires in the US each year to its lowest point to date, despite a record number of fires reported at the time.

⁶ Salmond, John A. *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: a New Deal Case Study*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967.

⁷ Spooner, Alicia, ed. *Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)*. <https://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1586.html>.

⁸ Bass, Melissa. *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, Vista, and AmeriCorps*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

⁹ See [National Service and Disaster Response](#) for additional information on how national service has and can be a powerful tool in emergency preparedness and response efforts.

member development, offering training and credentialing that prepare corps members for the workforce.

Cities across the country are establishing new corps to tackle pressing community challenges, including climate change, while ensuring that corps members are paid and gain valuable work experience. With additional investment, national service programs could be mobilized to fight the climate crisis by building more resilient communities, reducing carbon emissions, and assisting in the development of renewable energy systems — from supporting city plans to combat climate change to installing solar and more.

There is ample existing evidence of the impact of environmentally focused national service programs; importantly, though, young people are interested in serving in these programs. According to our January 2021 polling, about one in five young people would be interested in serving in environment-related national service positions — equating to about 350,000 young people.

In addition to bringing communities' perspectives into climate and conservation, national service can also bring communities to the forefront with respect to infrastructure projects, broadband expansion, and disaster response and resilience.

In the past, AmeriCorps VISTA members have been used as community planning coordinators, ensuring that communities are involved in the planning process of new construction that alters the nature of their neighborhoods.¹⁰

Programs like Lead for America put individuals into local and county government fellowships to assist with planning. CivicSpark places individuals in local governments to assist with transit and mobility, water management, climate adaptation, and more.

Another growing model centers on deploying AmeriCorps members across city and county departments in more holistic, cross-government approaches. One example is New Orleans' use of VISTA members in five city departments to increase capacity and public services, like delivering action around the Moving New Orleans Transportation Action Plan and facilitating conversations about the city's 10-year homelessness plan.

There is also a great opportunity to utilize national service to decrease the digital divide and bring broadband and information access to every community throughout the country. A federal program could scale many of the structures that the Center on Rural Innovation is piloting with a VISTA program to increase rural broadband and build a diverse local talent pipeline into tech jobs.

¹⁰ See, for example, the Everett Station District Urban Planning Coordinator VISTA and the City of New Orleans VISTA.

Federal agencies may also look to partner on disaster response and resilience, and can utilize national service to prepare communities for future natural disasters.

National service corps members can support mapping needs, reaching out to communities to address their needs and educate them about opportunities, and provide capacity to local governments. By leveraging national service programs, agencies can utilize the infrastructure, models, and innovations in national service to meet the needs of communities and of young Americans, especially in underserved communities — both rural and urban.

Equity & Inclusion

National service is already targeted at meeting communities' unmet needs. A reimagined national service would reach more underrepresented communities and be truly accessible to all young people.

AmeriCorps was initially established with the idea that those who serve should do so selflessly while experiencing some of the challenges facing the communities where they are serving. At the same time, AmeriCorps was also originally meant to offer greater benefits after the completion of service, more in line with those of the G.I. Bill for military veterans. However, the program's benefits have been significantly cut back and pay has remained low over the past 25 years. As a result, it has remained challenging for people of all backgrounds to serve. Making it easier to serve and a more accessible opportunity for all Americans is possible and the CORPS Act, which would increase benefits to respond to the impacts of the pandemic, demonstrates that it could have bipartisan support.

At the same time, national service, historically, was intended to support marginalized communities, including rural, tribal, and underserved communities. Such communities, which are often under-resourced, have not always been able to compete for this resource. They would find substantial value in the additional capacity added to nonprofit organizations, schools, and local government agencies through national service programs and the easing of barriers to access for new programs.

Making these programs available in marginalized communities allows for local recruitment, thereby ensuring that programs have corps members who understand the needs of the community. This leads to culturally competent services being delivered, as well as investments in the local civic-talent pipeline.

Finally, national service is a powerful way to introduce or reintroduce formerly incarcerated or justice-involved individuals into the workforce. By helping them build skills and giving them opportunities to reconnect with their community, national service programs can help reduce recidivism. Unfortunately, current policies make it harder for justice-involved young people to participate in national service programs.

Healing a Divided Nation

Our nation is currently deeply polarized. This lack of trust and understanding¹¹ is an existential threat to our democracy and national security.¹² There are few obvious solutions to the crisis; national service is one of them. We must invest today in a common experience and shared American identity that will combat this civic decay, depolarize individuals, and develop increased tolerance and empathy in the future. With expansion and additional resources — ensuring that a critical mass of Americans participate in the experience — national service has the potential to help to heal divides in the nation. A majority of Americans agree on this, too — two-thirds of Americans, including a plurality of Republicans, feel that it is important for the Biden Administration to prioritize programs that have the ability to heal divides in the country. Additionally, 63% believe national service programs are a good way to achieve this.¹³

Over the past few decades, Americans have become less civically engaged.¹⁴ ¹⁵ This correlates with increasing mistrust in institutions and a rise in disinformation.¹⁶ ¹⁷ While there are some early indicators that trends may finally be turning among young people,¹⁸ these attitudes must be fostered and embraced in order to ensure a more civically vital future. Much of the early and mid-20th century was characterized by Americans having ways to meaningfully and critically engage with their government — the CCC, Works Progress Administration, and the creation of the G.I. Bill, for instance — which created a cycle of civically active and empowered individuals. The nation needs a new civic infrastructure through which Americans can help themselves and others by getting involved in their communities — one that ensures that the government truly represents their interests and empowers them to reaffirm the social contract on which our nation was built.

Americans have also become more separated by lines of difference. There are few opportunities in our society for Americans to serve with people who are different from them, learn from them, and build trust. Military service provides this opportunity but is only available to the 29 percent of young people who qualify. It is also not the right choice for all. Civilian

¹¹ Gomez, Vianney. [“Democrats More Optimistic than Republicans That Partisan Relations in Washington Will Improve in 2021.”](#) Pew Research Center, December 1, 2020.

¹² See, Rice, Susan E. [“A Divided America Is a National Security Threat.”](#) *The New York Times*, September 22, 2020.

¹³ [Majority of Americans Support National Service to Bridge Divides](#), Service Year Alliance.

¹⁴ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020. [Thirty Year Trends in U.S. Adolescents’ Civic Engagement: A Story of Changing Participation and Educational Differences](#)

¹⁵ Syvertsen, Amy K., Laura Wray-Lake, Constance A. Flanagan, D. Wayne Osgood, and Laine Briddell. [“Thirty-Year Trends in U.S. Adolescents’ Civic Engagement: A Story of Changing Participation and Educational Differences.”](#) *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21, no. 3 (September 21, 2011): 586–94.

¹⁶ Aguilera, Jasmine. [“Trust in Social Institutions Eroded Further in 2020: Study.”](#) *Time*, January 13, 2021.

¹⁷ Rainie, Lee, and Andrew Perrin. [“Key Findings about Americans’ Declining Trust in Government and Each Other.”](#) Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020.

¹⁸ Sparks, Sarah D. [“Volunteerism Declined Among Young People.”](#) *Education Week*, December 1, 2020.

national service gives young people the chance to serve across lines of difference in common purpose — serving our communities.

If made an opportunity for all, national service could offer young Americans the strategies and skills they need to revive this crumbling civic infrastructure that once imbued American's work with dignity and meaning and uplifted American communities. They can also come to rely on and learn from Americans who are different from them. As the CCC once contributed to the civic transformation of the 19th century, so too could the Biden-Harris Administration leverage national service towards empowering Americans to create a brighter, more civically vibrant future.

A Roadmap to a Service Presidency

National service can aid the Biden-Harris Administration in accomplishing its key priorities while transforming the lives of young people, strengthening communities, and fueling civic renewal. As the Administration sets its sight on rebuilding the economy, additional investments and innovations in national service can maximize its potential.

Reimagining national service, as detailed throughout the following recommendations, will greatly expand the current impact of national service on young people, local communities, and our country.

The following recommendations provide a roadmap for a service presidency.

Expand National Service Opportunities and Stabilize & Strengthen AmeriCorps

Fully Fund 250,000 AmeriCorps Positions and 10,000 Peace Corps Positions

In order to make national service an opportunity that's available to all young Americans, AmeriCorps must grow from its current size of around 75,000 annual positions to 250,000 positions in the short-term, and to more than one million positions in the long-term. Corps members are making a tremendous impact now; increasing the size of the program would flood communities around the country with committed corps members who can tackle their most pressing needs and would allow national service to become a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans.

AmeriCorps was authorized to grow to 250,000 in the 2009 Serve America Act but has never been fully appropriated. The CORPS Act, a bipartisan bill that would expand the number of AmeriCorps positions over a three-year period as part of COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts, is a good stepping-stone toward this goal.

To grow like this, significant investments in existing AmeriCorps State and National, VISTA, and NCCC programs, as well as YouthBuild, are critical. AmeriCorps State programs, in particular, give state service commissions the opportunity to fund programs that are tailored to addressing the needs of their communities, ensuring that local problems are addressed with local solutions.

Further, the Peace Corps should also grow to maximize its impact. The Administration should aim to have 10,000 positions by fiscal year 2025 with an ultimate goal of 15,000 positions.

Create Matching Fund Flexibility

AmeriCorps was designed to be a public-private partnership, with the expectation that federal investments would be matched by local funding sources. Recently, the national service field reached a threshold where more than every federal dollar invested in AmeriCorps annually was matched by other funds. With the economic downturn due to the pandemic, state and local government agencies and non-government agencies are struggling financially, therefore the availability and stability of matching sources for AmeriCorps grants has been disrupted.

Creating match funding flexibilities and match replacement opportunities to ensure that new and existing programs can afford to bring on the corps members they need can significantly ease the burden on programs. Further, the Administration should look at the current maximum cost per member to assess how to grow its support for new programs sustainably. Addressing these issues would go a long way to ensuring that such an expansion is successful.

Invest in an Empowered Board

Further, naming a strategic and empowered AmeriCorps board would also go a long way towards improving the impact and equity of national service. The Board members should serve as advocates of service with Congress and the American people, in addition to providing oversight functions. At present, all members of the Board have termed out, allowing the Biden-Harris Administration the opportunity to shape the Board in a manner that truly elevates service in America.

Flood the Nonprofit Sector and Under-resourced Communities with Critical Support Through a Service Year Fellowship and New Grantee On-Ramps

Establish a Service Year Fellowship

Expanding AmeriCorps with new, complementary program models would be of significant benefit, as well. Through impact reports and ROI studies, national service has demonstrated its ability to have a significant impact on the communities in which programs operate. This was

demonstrated again in a more recent study¹⁹ which found that communities with AmeriCorps programs have higher levels of subjective well-being. The study also found, however, that AmeriCorps programs tend to be allocated to communities that already have a higher subjective well-being, suggesting that communities with larger, more active organizations and a stronger infrastructure are better able to obtain and maintain grants.

This, and other reports from state service commissions across the country, indicate that the communities most in need of the benefits offered by AmeriCorps members have a harder time accessing these programs. There is a need for infrastructure in the national service space that would allow less developed organizations without the administrative capacity to manage an AmeriCorps grant — including faith-based organizations and organizations in rural, tribal, and other underserved areas — to take advantage of the wide array of benefits AmeriCorps members offer. One solution is the creation of Service Year Fellowships.

This decades-old national service concept²⁰ would award young people who wish to serve with fellowships, and those fellows would be matched to serve with qualifying organizations. Our Service Year Fellowship proposal, outlined further in the Appendix, would have these qualifying organizations be, if possible, part of communities that submit plans for how they will integrate national service to serve the community and the participants, thus ensuring the best possible investment.

Service year fellowships have the potential to swiftly deploy corps members across the country, give young people choice, connect national service to local and state needs, and provide additional support to organizations to help address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for recovery, among other community needs.

Independent Sector has found that nonprofit organizations have lost nearly one million positions because of COVID-19, and around 10 percent of nonprofits may permanently close.²¹ These fellowship positions can provide a surge of human capital to nonprofits while creating a pathway to jobs in the nonprofit sector as the economy recovers.

Service year fellows would have the opportunity to choose to serve with one of a wide variety of nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and faith-based organizations that have been certified by State Service Commissions and certifying nonprofit organizations. This bipartisan

¹⁹ Velasco, Kristopher, Pamela Paxton, Robert W. Ressler, Inbar Weiss, and Lilla Pivnick. "[Do National Service Programs Improve Subjective Well-Being in Communities?](#)" *The American Review of Public Administration* 49, no. 3 (2018): 275–91.

²⁰ More recently, other proposals for national service fellowships were included in the Serve America Act authorized in 2009, and in the report from the Commission on Military, National, and Public service, [Inspire to Serve](#).

²¹ Castronuovo, Celine. "[1 In 3 Nonprofits in Danger of Closing Due to Pandemic: Study](#)." *The Hill*, March 3, 2021.

concept²² empowers individuals with additional choices in where they want to undertake their service years.

The Service Year Fellowship program would also arm state service commissions with additional national service resources with new flexibility that would allow them to effectively meet state and local priorities.

New Grantee On-Ramps

Every community in America should have access to national service to meet their unmet needs. National service is a particularly useful and cost-effective tool in helping to address pressing challenges in underserved communities. However, these communities face challenges when accessing AmeriCorps funding including the availability of matching funding, navigating AmeriCorps' grant competition, compliance with federal grants, and the awareness of national service as a resource to help meet their needs.

To ensure all communities have access to national service as a resource, AmeriCorps and State Service Commissions should significantly invest in new program development and new grantee on-ramps for underserved communities and organizations.

Commissions must play a critical role in this process. Currently, the vast majority of new programs are developed by state commissions. As new sources of funding come in, it is critical that commissions have the flexibility to respond to the needs in their states and communities, and build upon the successes and real areas of opportunity that surface — especially over the past year of the pandemic.

Further, increasing community access to national service requires investing in modernization and user-centric grantmaking processes and technology, creating planning grants geared toward under-resourced and diverse communities, updating the match scale and/or grant structure for new grantees, increasing the maximum cost per member as needed, and prioritizing incubation partners to help with grant management and compliance.

Lead a Whole-of-Government Effort to Put Americans Into National Service to Meet Our Country's Urgent Needs

Cabinet-Level Leadership to Align Service in Government

²² The concept of a service year fellowship has a long history of bipartisan support. It was included in the bipartisan 2009 Serve America Act that was signed into law but never fully funded. Additionally, a similar concept was included in legislation put forward in the spring of 2020 by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service.

To ensure the success of a program that is scaled appropriately to meet the nation's needs and create a culture of civically-inclined citizens capable of working with all types of Americans to solve problems, the Biden-Harris Administration should establish a National Service Advisor at the cabinet level. This would allow all streams of service — military, national, and public service — to be coordinated to greater effect. The National Service Advisor should also oversee the interagency task force (see below).

Early in 2020, the independent and bipartisan congressionally created National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service issued its final “Inspire to Serve” report.²³ The Commission looked at how to strengthen each of these different forms of service while also looking for areas of synergy. It identified the lack of coordination between different types of service efforts within the federal government as a challenge to each of their effectiveness. By establishing an interagency council within the White House chaired by a Senate-confirmed presidential appointee, a National Service Advisor, all forms of service would be elevated and joint efforts to promote service could be advanced.

Interagency Task Force

Encouraging the establishment of interagency corps, modeled after FEMA Corps, could expand the capacity and impact of government agencies and expose young people to a variety of opportunities and careers in federal service. By bringing together an interagency task force and mandating that it incorporate national service into federal agencies' work, the president can weave national service into multiple lines of effort and ensure that they are effectively and efficiently coordinating as part of our nation's COVID-19 relief and recovery. The 2009 Serve America Act encouraged the Corporation for National and Community Service to partner with other agencies and the private sector to direct national service toward issues being tackled elsewhere in government and society. President Obama furthered this directive by creating the Task Force on Expanding National Service, which worked toward this goal and left a [final report](#) that is a blueprint for moving forward. Unfortunately, the energy of the task force and many of the initiatives did not persist after his presidency. President Biden has the opportunity to build on the Task Force's work while also adjusting for today's needs and learning from developments in the last few years.

Such interagency corps could be completely national service-oriented or could include a hybrid of national service positions and jobs. Some examples of potential corps include the Civilian Climate Corps, the public health jobs corps, a corps focused on education, a military family service corps, a digital service corps, or a veterans transition corps.

²³[Inspired to Serve: The Final Report of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service](#), March 2020

Place-Based Work

Since much of national service is shaped by the needs in places — in communities around the country, and in programs embedded in those communities, — making programs stronger by connecting them with one another allows national service to thrive at the local level. Service Year Impact Communities are a network of programs and partners run by Service Year Alliance that exemplify this sort of local collaboration. Impact Communities include local government, businesses, and/or higher education institutions that collaborate to achieve greater impact, plan for expansion, and otherwise fill in the gaps inherent in a national program that operates locally. Initiatives like these help to create a more informed and vibrant base of programs, offer corps members more opportunities to stay engaged and develop personally and professionally, embed national service more effectively in community needs, and provide a more cohesive identity revolving around national service to all involved.

The Task Force should be mandated to look at best practices for building such an ecosystem of investment in national service, in particular looking at the role that Impact Communities can play in strengthening and expanding national service. A recent cost-benefit analysis has shown that communities that have an infrastructure in place — a collaboration of programs who meet regularly, pool resources like funds and trainings, and tackle community problems in coordination — deliver service more effectively, have a higher return on investment, and have better outcomes for corps members.²⁴ Investing in opportunities to develop and maintain such local infrastructure, and building in ways that this infrastructure can sustain would make national service far stronger.

Continuum of Service

Our democracy remains fragile; meanwhile, our federal government personnel and capacities have been significantly depleted over the last few years.²⁵ The Administration should develop a continuum of service and civic engagement for individuals, starting with service learning and thoughtful civics education,²⁶ which can set young people on a path toward service, through to national service and then alumni engagement, including a Reserve Corps that allows alumni to hone their skills and be available when the nation needs them, and to public service as a career. The National Service Reserve Corps could prepare and deploy corps members to respond to disasters and emergencies in support of requesting programs and agencies. Such a Reserve Corps would be composed of individuals who have completed a term of national service or veterans. It would allow those who have served to continue down the path of service and also work with members who come from other service programs. The Administration should also invest in the alumni experience beyond the Reserve Corps. Creating a more

²⁴[Quantifying the Impact](#), Voices for National Service

²⁵Cassella, Megan, and Alice Miranda Ollstein. "[Biden Confronts Staffing Crisis at Federal Agencies](#)." POLITICO. POLITICO, November 12, 2020.

²⁶ For a thoughtful example of how to reform America's civics education to better prepare young people for later service and civic engagement, see [Educating for American Democracy](#).

engaged alumni would help with raising awareness about national service as well as improve the experience of corps members who can continue to build community and their networks after service.

Raise Awareness and Enable Matching of Young Americans Through State-of-the-Art Technology

Additionally, creating a better, more streamlined online platform on which people can apply to national service positions, and directing joint recruitment efforts across all types of service, would vastly improve awareness of opportunities and make the opportunity to serve more accessible to all.

National Awareness Campaign

The national service field has historically depended on word of mouth as a core recruitment strategy to bring the next generation into service. For this reason, the majority of Americans still are not aware of the opportunities that service can provide them, their children, or their family and friends. A ‘call to service’ campaign should direct individuals to serve in the wide variety of positions across the country to connect the many young people in the nation whose paths have been disrupted by the pandemic with opportunities to gain skills and contribute meaningfully alongside other Americans. It will be critical to ensure this campaign utilizes both traditional and digital channels to reach the target audiences and deliver them directly to opportunities to serve.

Online Platform

To ensure the success of a national ‘call to service’ campaign and that all of the national service positions are filled, it is essential to develop one centralized online platform within the federal government that allows young Americans to search for military and civilian service opportunities. It is critical to invest in a platform that would greatly expand knowledge of and access to different types of service for a generation that is geared toward online information.

In their “Inspire to Serve” report, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service called for a central platform for all service types in order to make it easier for all young Americans to serve regardless of whether it is through military or civilian service. In addition, Service Year Alliance, through generous philanthropic support, made significant investments in technology and best practices over the past six years to meet this need with the development and launch of [ServiceYear.org](https://www.serviceyear.org). This platform is a state-of-the-art online marketplace that houses service year opportunities — including AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and other non-federally funded positions — and makes it easy for users to browse positions, get matched with opportunities based on their interests, and apply to serve. Leveraging the technology and

learnings from this experience would enable the Administration to quickly roll out a cost-effective solution to support this national 'call to service' and match young Americans with the right service opportunity for them.

Make National Service Positions Accessible to All Young Americans

As national service expands and becomes a part of growing up in America, it is essential to ensure equitable access and opportunity to serve. Giving every young person the opportunity to serve our country in common purpose will not only transform lives and strengthen communities, it will also begin to heal our divisions. But making national service universal requires a commitment to valuing the experience appropriately, offering living wages and expanding wraparound services that meet the needs of historically underrepresented communities who might otherwise be unable to serve.

Increase Stipends

A 175% increase from the current AmeriCorps VISTA living allowance, with adjustments for regional cost of living, would allow all young Americans to choose service on their path to further education or potential careers. An increase like this would allow young people coming from lower-income families to choose national service and build long-term social capital, skills, and networks that will benefit their career.

Currently, AmeriCorps members receive stipends that are tied to the poverty level. These stipends make the choice of national service challenging for young people coming from lower-income families who may choose employment opportunities over national service out of necessity. Even those who do choose to serve often depend on food stamps. Increasing stipends and eliminating the tax on these stipends can make national service a more accessible opportunity for people of all backgrounds.

Provide a Meaningful Education Award and Wraparound Services

One of the most appealing benefits of national service is that corps members receive the AmeriCorps Segal Education Award at the completion of their service. Currently, the education award is tied directly to Pell grants which has historically kept the award amount very low. Compounding the low sum of this award is the fact that it is considered taxable income.

By providing a more meaningful education award at the end of service, national service could, in turn, incentivize more young people to attend and complete college, improving the opportunity for national service to be a pathway to higher education. In fact, alumni of national service programs go on to complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than their peers — 24% of national service alumni who do not have a bachelor's degree during their service go on to

earn a bachelor's degree, compared to 11% of their peers.²⁷

To better convey the value of service, Congress should change the education award to twice the amount of the Pell Grant and also make it tax-deductible in line with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. If it were to be increased and made tax-free, it could become a substantial incentive to participate in national service, including more of an opportunity for young Americans from economically disadvantaged families.

Additional wraparound services such as housing and, in some instances, childcare assistance can make the difference when it comes to national service becoming an opportunity for all young Americans.

Housing in many of the locations in which people serve is either expensive or impossible to find. Corps members need safe places to live near their program site so that they can focus on serving their communities. Programs can address this by providing housing or providing a housing stipend for their corps members. Similarly, a lack of childcare can be a barrier to participation by young parents. Restrictions on the amount of income a corps member can earn and the amount of family assistance a corps member can receive often prevents corps members with families from getting the help they need. Loosening these restrictions, or making childcare more readily available, would make it easier for young people to choose national service.

Build Flexibility into the 80/20 Rule

The Administration should provide waivers that allow for more time to be devoted to personal and professional development in programs targeting opportunity youth in a standardized manner. Programs that work specifically with opportunity youth have identified the 80/20 rule as a barrier to growing their reach. The 80/20 rule says that only 20 percent of corps members' time should be spent preparing for service and enriching their personal and professional development. Programs often need to invest more time in the personal and professional development of corps members to ensure that they are successful in national service and beyond. This investment is valuable both in keeping the corps members in a program through its full term and in investing in young people who need more support developing the skills that can help them succeed in the future. Building in this flexibility would allow such programs to work with AmeriCorps while also meeting their corps members' needs.

²⁷Those who entered their year of service without a bachelor's degree are twice as likely to go on to earn their degree compared to a peer group with similar years of work experience. Walsh, Matthew, Dan Restuccia, Jikuo Lu, and Scott Bittle. [Pathways After Service: Education and Career Outcomes of Service Year Alumni](#). Service Year Alliance and Burning Glass Technologies, December 2018.

Create Flexibility in Match Requirements and Increase Cost Per Corps Member

Currently, AmeriCorps programs receive funding to cover costs associated with each person who serves. This funding must be supplemented with matching funds from non-governmental sources and dictates the maximum investment that programs can make in an individual's national service experience. It therefore controls the types of training, wraparound services, and additional benefits that they can provide their corps members.

The matching funds required by AmeriCorps and by the other federal national service programs to ensure community commitment to national service can be particularly onerous for programs working with opportunity youth, who may need to invest more in wraparound services and supports. This deters programs from participating in public-private partnerships and therefore stops them from growing. It also makes it hard for programs to truly invest in their participants.

Creating flexibility in the match requirement would allow programs that engage opportunity youth and serve under-resourced communities to better engage individuals in their programs without the burden of finding additional match funding to meet the higher cost. This flexibility will allow for additional training and wraparound services that can equip these national service programs to serve as effective pathways to education or careers for opportunity youth in particular.

Further, to most effectively support opportunity youth and grow programs in underserved communities, the Agency should also use the full cost per corps member allowed under the law and Congress should look at growing that limit.

Improve Access for Justice-Involved Youth

Finally, the Administration should explore best practices for incorporating justice-involved youth in national service and prioritize these programs for grants. While AmeriCorps does not bar most justice-involved youth from participating in its programs,²⁸ the requirements around justice-involvement can be seen as too great a commitment from programs, which simply choose not to work with this community. Additionally, the onerous criminal history check process required has proven to be not only an unnecessary financial and overhead burden for AmeriCorps and grantees, but also a significant barrier to justice-involved individuals applying for positions. Investing more time and resources in young Americans who are justice-involved can help create an exit ramp from the school to prison pipeline that provides them with opportunities for new futures.

Expand Eligibility for Young People with DACA, TPS, DED, Refugee, or Asylee Status

²⁸ Only those found guilty of murder of child exploitation are barred.

Currently, refugees, asylees, and TPS, DED, and DACA recipients are only eligible to commit to national service as AmeriCorps VISTAs, and they are not eligible for the education award after completing their service. Yet there are thousands of enthusiastic, patriotic young people who would love an opportunity to serve their adopted country.

The Administration should work with Congress — or assess whether it can act through executive action — to allow AmeriCorps to accept young people holding TPS, DED, DACA, refugee, or asylee statuses into all national service positions. It should also assess what would be involved in giving them eligibility to earn the education award upon the completion of their service. These changes would allow young people residing in the United States to work with others in common purpose to make the country better. Further, it would put those young people on a pathway to education and work.

Such a change would help open up access to individuals and communities who currently are limited in their ability to serve this nation. These young people would also bring skills and experiences to their service like cultural and linguistic fluency that would make programs more effective in serving communities with different cultures and languages.

Set Young People Up for Success

Beyond the structural changes suggested above, ensuring the future success of corps members can be further achieved through making the right connections with other institutions or encouraging structural changes outside of AmeriCorps.

Civic Apprenticeships

Many AmeriCorps members already work at nonprofit organizations — and with a program such as Service Year Fellowships, this could be substantially increased. Being intentional in speaking to the nonprofit community and encouraging nonprofit organizations to partner with existing programs to offer certifications can turn many national service positions into “civic apprenticeships,” preparing them to be future leaders in the nonprofit sector.

Workforce Development Training

Similarly, national service can be leveraged as a way for Americans to develop the skills necessary to succeed in other high-demand careers. Programs such as Teach For America, Green City Force, California Conservation Corps, Champions of Aging, and YouthBuild USA already offer such professional certifications or trainings to corps members in a variety of fields.

As the Administration assesses the career landscape and creates programs that put people on paths to high-demand sectors, it should consider the role of national service. Agencies can consider the skills and credentials needed for those sectors and create the

“pre-apprenticeships” that help young people discover their passions and get a head start on their career pathways.

One way to make national service more clearly a workforce development tool is to work with Congress and the Department of Labor to designate national service in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reauthorization. National service already works as a talent pipeline and placement opportunity, but this could be more deliberate in designating national service programs as “pre-apprenticeships.”

By working with the actors in different sectors to build in the training in skills and experiences needed for those sectors and creating hiring pathways, national service could become an even clearer pipeline to careers and help America build a thriving 21st-century economy.

Create a Path to Higher Education

AmeriCorps should also work with colleges and universities to accredit programs that can provide college credits or skills training that help young people transition from national service programs to higher education. Many young Americans, and in particular economically disadvantaged and Americans of color, have chosen not to continue their education after high school or part way through college as many higher education institutions have been unable to offer the same quality of experience.²⁹ By accrediting programs that can provide college credits or give young people the skills for success in college, the higher education sector could help provide a path to higher education for these young people into degree programs that will allow them to compete in today’s marketplace.³⁰

Create a Path to Public Service

The federal government too, particularly with the introduction of additional interagency corps, can use national service as its own pipeline into public service. With an aging federal workforce, the Administration should allow all AmeriCorps programs to benefit from non-competitive hiring authorities — currently only Returned Peace Corps Volunteers and VISTA alumni are eligible for one year and the Public Lands Corps for two years — and expand this authority to three years for all.

National service alumni are dedicated Americans who would be prime candidates for federal employment. Creating this authority and ensuring federal agency chief human capital officers are working with AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps on awareness and recruitment could bring in a whole new generation of federal workers. By extending this authority to everyone who completes a year of national service, the federal government would not only incentivize

²⁹ Understanding Coronavirus in America, USC Dornsife, August 2020.

³⁰ For recommendations on how to pursue accreditation, see, The State of National Service.

national service but provide a pathway into government for highly motivated, civically-minded young Americans.

Conclusion

We are in a unique moment. As the Biden Administration looks to rebuild our economy along the lines of the New Deal and the Great Society, now is the time for a bold and transformational investment in national service.

Reimagining national service, and what it means to serve our country, can be a legacy for this Administration. President Biden has the opportunity to break down barriers to make national service more equitable and inclusive and make a historic call to service that meets the demands of our next generation.

The President can call this generation of young people into service to respond to the COVID pandemic and future disasters, combat our climate crisis, and rebuild our country's infrastructure. He can give them a chance to serve at a living wage, to find their passion while putting them on the path to good-paying jobs, and he can make sure this opportunity reaches every community in America. And he can use national service to bring the voices of communities into plans to rebuild our infrastructure and our economy.

It will require a bold investment and vision, and we believe President Biden, as a lifelong public servant and champion for service in all its forms, is the leader to make this roadmap a reality.



About Service Year Alliance

Mission

Service Year Alliance is working to make a year of paid, full-time service — a service year — a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans.

Vision

We envision a future in which national service — including civilian, military, and public service — is part of growing up in America.

What We Do

Service Year Alliance works to increase public and private investments in the service year ecosystem. We do this by developing and documenting evidence in priority focus areas to persuade decision makers — including federal, state, and local legislators, as well as private sector leaders — to unlock funds for service years.

To achieve our mission, we advance four areas of work: programs, partnerships, policy, and communications:

- **Program** and resource development in priority focus areas
- **Partnerships**, including coalition building, and corporate, community, and research partnerships
- **Policy & Government Relations** work that unlocks public funds to create the opportunity for all young Americans to serve
- **Communications** to elevate service years as an experience that transforms lives, strengthens communities, and fuels civic renewal

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For more information about this report, contact Moran Banai at mbanai@serviceyear.org.