



How State Service Commissions Can Advance Equity in AmeriCorps

MARCH 1, 2023 – ROBERT GODFRIED

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AmeriCorps is a national service program that enrolls roughly 75,000 full-time members every year to serve in communities across the United States. The program pairs mostly young people with diverse backgrounds and educational experiences, with local organizations to help communities tackle tough challenges, such as administering COVID-19 vaccines, clearing brush to prevent forest fires, and tutoring students who need additional help in public schools. For AmeriCorps to equitably deliver on the program's potential to serve communities while preparing members for a post-service career or educational opportunity the AmeriCorps federal agency, state service commissions, and grantee organizations should make it a goal to ensure that members are adequately trained, paid, and supported and that the organizations hosting them are sufficiently resourced and staffed.

This report aims to provide actionable information to state service commission staff, government officials, statewide policymakers, and elected officials on the challenges and opportunities to build more equitable AmeriCorps programs by leveraging the broad authority state service commissions have in their states. It highlights best practices on new and innovative ways state service commissions

across the United States are leveraging national service funding to solve local problems, as well as providing policy recommendations on how state service commissions can create more equitable AmeriCorps programs.

This report was informed by over a dozen interviews with state service commission staff, grantee organization staff, and staff of national service advocacy and policy organizations. The interviews prioritized stakeholders in states that are experimenting with innovative policy ideas to create more equitable AmeriCorps programs. Additionally, the interviews focused on stakeholders interested in creating more equitable AmeriCorps programs, but that lacked the resources or the know-how necessary to translate that into action. All interviews took place over the course of the summer and fall of 2022. They were composed of 30–60 minute phone conversations based on pre-written interview questions, as well as on feedback from some respondents on a draft version of this report. These interviews and feedback provided valuable insight that informed the best practices and recommendations that are outlined below.

This report can be found online at: <https://thenext100.org/how-state-service-commissions-can-advance-equity-in-ameri-corps/>

Structure and Function of AmeriCorps State Service Commissions

The AmeriCorps federal agency has an annual budget of \$1.3 billion, with more than \$580 million distributed in fiscal year 2022 as part of the AmeriCorps State and National program. This program distributed some of these funds directly to non-profit organizations, known as “national directs” that operate in multiple states and receive funding directly from the AmeriCorps federal agency and state budgets (City Year and Teach for America are both national direct AmeriCorps programs). Another portion of these funds are distributed to state service commissions, which are state-level organizations that have broad statutory authority over how to allocate funding to nonprofit organizations in their state. State service commissions also receive federal funding for their operations and to support the monitoring, compliance, training, and development of their AmeriCorps State subrecipients as well. Approximately 85 percent of state service commissions receive some level of additional funds from their state (with some commissions receiving no additional state funding). This additional funding ranges from \$30,000 to \$9 million, with some commissions also receiving in-kind funding or support from their state through administrative or fiscal support.

There are fifty-two state service commissions (all states have a commission except for South Dakota; Puerto Rico, Guam, and Washington, D.C. also have commissions). These commissions are composed of over 1,000 commissioners, who are collectively charged with distributing AmeriCorps funds to organizations in their state. Of the fifty-two commissions, forty-four are located within state government, with 60 percent of these commissions housed within another state agency, such as the state department of labor or the department of child and family services. The other eight commissions function as nonprofit entities that operate outside of government. While state service commissions are structured differently from state to state, and may have a wide range of activities, their common role across states is the same: to distribute AmeriCorps State funds to grantee programs.

State service commissions have different degrees of power and flexibility, and have different mandates as well, all of which are dependent on the individual governor or state legislature and how they prioritize national service programs. This results in an uneven investment across states, because some state service commissions enjoy robust state investment—which supplement federal AmeriCorps dollars to make robust programs—and priority from the governor’s office or state government, while other commissions receive no state funds and less support to do critical national service work, such as rebuilding communities after a disaster, helping refugee families find homes, and upgrading critical green energy infrastructure.

The dynamic in California is an illustration of this uneven investment, where the state service commission, California Volunteers, reports directly to the Office of the Governor. Governor Gavin Newsom has a vision for the value that AmeriCorps and service programs can deliver, and has adopted multiple state-level investments in public service programs, including the College Corps. The program aims to create debt-free pathways to college while engaging students to help solve community problems. The goal is to provide more than 10,000 college students with the opportunity to support and learn from community-based organizations while earning \$10,000 (which includes a living allowance and an Education Award) to help afford the cost of college. In other states, state service commissions do not have a direct line to decision-makers, receive limited or no additional state funds, and provide only the minimum living allowance and training required by the AmeriCorps federal agency.

State service commissions can play a vital role in creating a more equitable AmeriCorps. They are in a unique position when compared to the AmeriCorps federal agency as they are much closer to programs in local communities. This local knowledge gives them the ability to create programs that directly address community needs and create corps positions that are accessible for members from local communities. Given the authority state service commissions have over how to spend AmeriCorps dollars, they also have the ability to support and promote equitable

practices and reward programs that meet local needs while training, supporting, and providing a positive member experience for corps members.

Equity, the Living Stipend, and the Recruitment Crisis

Many AmeriCorps programs offer their members a low stipend and inadequate professional development, conditions that force participants to live on the edge of or below the poverty line without a clear path to a full-time job after their service. Full-time AmeriCorps members usually receive a stipend below the living wage, a \$7,395 (pre-tax) education award, and some training and professional development. This low living allowance and modest education award make it difficult for many without external financial support to participate. Despite constraints that exist due to federal statute and congressional funding limitations, many programs can offer their members far more than they currently provide.

One former state service commission executive director noted that part of the reason grantee programs do not provide increased member benefits (or the maximum allowed under federal statute) is that the historic funding model prioritized the number of people served by AmeriCorps members over the quality of the member experience or the accessibility of the program to members from underserved communities. The AmeriCorps federal agency used to encourage programs to request the minimum cost per member possible, and commissions were encouraged to try to increase cost efficiency over time. As a result, programs requested the lowest minimum member pay and benefits possible because they were told this was the only way to remain competitive for AmeriCorps grants over time. In other words, historically the incentive structure for many programs has been a race to the bottom, where priority was given to keeping costs low regardless of the impact on member experience or service delivery to communities.

Recently, there has been renewed commitment from federal leaders to improve equity in AmeriCorps by

increasing the living allowance and education awards. President Joe Biden called on Congress to provide additional funding to support an increase to \$15-per-hour living allowance for all AmeriCorps members, and the new AmeriCorps CEO Michael Smith has made it an administrative priority to increase the stipend for AmeriCorps members. However, due to the reality of divided power in Washington, the task of creating a more equitable AmeriCorps may fall to the federal agency, state service commissions, and grantee organizations using the resources they already possess.

Given this reality, state service commissions have a unique opportunity to drive forward equitable innovations in AmeriCorps programming over the next few years. It is a state service commission that ultimately makes many decisions regarding funding prioritization for AmeriCorps programs in their state. State service commissions are well positioned to champion a more equitable AmeriCorps due to their knowledge of local needs, ability to collaborate with state government, authority set statewide standards, and capability to apply for state and federal resources.

State service leaders will likely be forced to face the inequities in AmeriCorps sooner rather than later, given the ongoing recruitment crisis in AmeriCorps. During interviews, multiple state service commission staff reported that their subgrantees are unable to fill many of their AmeriCorps slots. They speculated that this may be due to the current economic climate, wherein an AmeriCorps position with a low stipend (approximately \$8–9 an hour in many states) and a modest education award is simply not competitive with other opportunities that provide better pay, benefits, and professional development. Interviewees reported that one bright spot is that AmeriCorps programs with more robust benefits, workforce pathways, or a focus on climate-related issues, were less likely to face recruitment shortfalls.

This recruitment crisis is an opportunity for state service commissions to flip the old values of the funding model on its head and embrace more equitable AmeriCorps programming. In the recommendations below, I outline how

state service commissions can utilize statewide interagency collaboration, partnerships with local stakeholders, and embrace creative braided funding streams to increase member pay and benefits while fostering more diverse programming that is responsive to community needs.

Recommendations for State Service Commissions

1. Create and prioritize benchmarks that lead to equitable outcomes, and invest in the additional resources needed to support statewide AmeriCorps programs in achieving them.

State service commissions have tremendous agenda-setting power to incentivize equitable practices from grantee organizations. Commissions, who only have the ability to fund a limited number of programs, can make clear that they plan to prioritize funding to grantees that comply with the benchmarks they set. Commissions can set standards for programs, dictating that if grantees wish to be competitive for AmeriCorps funding, they should integrate equitable benchmarks and best practices into their program design.

Signal to AmeriCorps grantees that the state service commission will favor diverse programs that provide robust member benefits in funding decisions and support grantees to meet equity benchmarks.

State service commissions should make it clear to grantees that they want to prioritize programming that provides more robust benefits for members through better pay, workforce development training, and wraparound services (such as child care and transportation subsidies). In addition, they should encourage programs to recruit members who reflect the demographics of the community they serve in. State service commissions can provide grantees with a rubric specifying equitable benchmarks they expect programs to meet and make funding decisions based on these metrics. State service commissions should work with grantees to meet these standards, provide

resources and support, and create timelines to give programs a runway to slowly work up to these equity-focused benchmarks.

Encourage programs to request higher cost per member service year to increase member pay and benefits.

State service commissions can promote equitable AmeriCorps programming by encouraging grantees to request a higher cost per member service year (cost per MSY) in the grant application process and releasing notice of funding opportunities that explicitly asks programs to apply with robust member benefits. In addition, state commissions should advocate to the AmeriCorps federal agency that further increases in the maximum cost per MSY is a necessary change to improve member benefits. Increasing the cost per MSY, and using these additional funds to raise the living stipend, could immediately make AmeriCorps positions more accessible to those who could not afford to serve with the lower living stipend, as well as provide funds for member professional development and training. Providing a higher living stipend, more robust member benefits and professional development may attract more applicants, make members more likely to complete their service terms or return for an additional service year. Higher member recruitment and retention also ensure that community needs are met by dedicated AmeriCorps members with the resources necessary to adequately serve, rather than unfulfilled by members who leave for better opportunities.

Support programs that request a higher cost per MSY in applying for match relief.

AmeriCorps grantee programs are required to match a percentage of all federal funds from the AmeriCorps agency. New grantee organizations must match progressively more funds over time until they match 50 percent (\$1 for \$1) of total expenses after ten years; they then match this amount in perpetuity. Increasing member pay and benefits would require AmeriCorps grantee programs to raise additional funds to meet the federal

match requirements.

State service commissions should support programs that request a higher cost per MSY to increase member pay and benefits by helping them apply for match relief. This match relief would take the form of a waiver request sent to the AmeriCorps federal agency. If approved, this waiver would allow these programs to match a lower percentage of their overall total expenses (or provide no match at all). A match waiver can take the burden off of programs who are interested in increasing the cost per MSY (and overall program costs) but feel unsure they can raise the appropriate amount of philanthropic dollars to meet the increased match requirements. While the waiver-granted reduced match requirements must be reapplied for regularly (and can sometimes be temporary), it can provide programs a longer runway with which to ramp up their fundraising to eventually meet the full match requirement.

The AmeriCorps federal agency is currently re-evaluating the match requirements for AmeriCorps grantee organizations, and many national service advocates including Next100, continue to advocate for changes to matching requirements for grantee organizations.

2. Collect and leverage data to improve transparency about demographically representative recruitment and promote positive post-service outcomes.

Currently, most data on AmeriCorps members are collected by the AmeriCorps federal agency. Many stakeholders interviewed for this report shared that turnaround of these data is slow, with the agency sometimes taking years to make data publicly available; furthermore, the federal agency does not release statewide or programmatic level data. As a result, many state service commissions reported that they lacked basic data about who participates in their programs, and only a handful of state service commissions collected these data themselves. Interviewees reported that this lack of data makes it difficult for state service commissions to understand who is serving in their programs, where the participants are from, and

what programs are effective and ineffective in achieving the goals of a given organization. For example, a state service commission that has embraced a mandate to recruit AmeriCorps members who are racially representative of their state's demographics is unable to get these data from the AmeriCorps federal agency, as they do not release data broken down by state, and instead would have to collect data itself to try to meet this goal.

To solve this problem, state service commissions should mandate data collection from programs that receive AmeriCorps funding in their state. State service commissions are located closer to their communities than the federal agency, and because of their understanding of the local context, are better positioned to quickly collect, process, organize these data and make them publicly available. By making up-to-date data publicly available on a quicker timeline, state service commissions can highlight effective programs, track the impact of modifications to a program, and identify best practices in encouraging equity at the program level. These data can also help state service commissions make more informed decisions about which programs to prioritize and fund.

State service commissions can require grantee programs to survey participants at the start of the program to collect quantitative data on member demographic information. Commissions should also require programs to send out a member feedback survey at the end of the program to collect qualitative data. Grantee programs can then report these data to the commission, which would disaggregate the data by race, ethnicity, income, location, AmeriCorps program type, placement, and issue area. The AmeriCorps federal agency can be supportive of this effort by allowing commissions access to the data and survey questions they utilize and provide funding and administrative support for commissions to collect this data in a regular and detailed fashion.

State service commissions should also collect qualitative data from AmeriCorps members across the state annually. These data would allow state service commissions to get a better understanding of member experience, satisfaction,

and outcomes. In addition, these data can help the commission better understand how to best support both grantee organizations and corps members. State service commissions can provide technical capacity and assistance to support grantees with this data collection and ensure consistency across different programs. State service commissions should disaggregate these data and make all collected data publicly available and share them on their commission website.

Quantitative data, collected by grantees, should include the following:

- Whether AmeriCorps members complete their service and, upon completion, if members find a job or educational opportunity.
 - These data should be tracked at the half-year and one-year mark, to get an accurate snapshot of post-service activities over time.
 - Post-service education opportunities should include post-secondary education as well as occupational skills training and credentialing opportunities.

- Members' wages in their post-service positions.
- Which industry members work in post-public service and disaggregation of those data by sector, under, at the minimum, these specific criteria:
 - The private sector, public sector, the nonprofit sector, or an additional AmeriCorps service year.
- Demographic data, including these critical elements:
 - Race and ethnicity, socioeconomic information, and educational attainment of corps members and parents—by state and county, service area, and placement type.
- The percentage of corps members who are serving in the communities in which they grew up or have lived.
 - These data would give commissions a better sense of how many corps members are serving in the communities to which they have a personal connection.
- A personal email address

These data would allow commissions to create an AmeriCorps alumni listserv that they could utilize for post-service communication, feedback, and alumni engagement.



**Best Practices from the Field:
ServeMinnesota**

ServeMinnesota is piloting a career survey with a select number of programs this year with the hope of rolling it out to more programs in the future. The survey is sent to members at the beginning and end of their service term. The survey asks members about their career and personal development goals, as well as what they plan to do after their service. In the end-of-service survey, they also ask members about their experience and whether their service helped them achieve any of their personal development goals.

At the beginning of the survey, they ask for members' long-term contact info (a personal email address rather than a work-related or school email address) to ensure they can contact members after the program. They hope to use this info for a future alumni survey, starting one year after their service ends and on an annual basis. In this survey, they plan to ask participants where they ended up working, if they are currently in school, and ask about their satisfaction in their career. They also plan to ask participants if they are interested in continued engagement with the program and if they will serve as alumni mentors for current AmeriCorps members.



Best Practices from the Field: Volunteer Iowa

Volunteer Iowa is piloting a fellowship program for representatives of Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC)-led nonprofits and rural-based nonprofits that are interested in applying for AmeriCorps funding in Iowa. The fellowship aims to build the capacity of these organizations to apply for AmeriCorps funding. The commission meets with the fellows once a month to discuss challenges in applying for AmeriCorps funds, supporting AmeriCorps members, or in meeting matching fund requirements. The commission helps these organizations determine the best AmeriCorps grant option to meet their organizational needs and establish goals for future opportunities to apply for national service grants. (Examples include: applying to be a host site in an existing AmeriCorps program or applying for an AmeriCorps planning grant to explore whether AmeriCorps funding might work for their organization). The commission plans to support these fellows through the AmeriCorps grant application process, and if an organization fails to qualify for AmeriCorps funding, will help them determine what might have prevented them from receiving the grant.

Qualitative data, collected by state service commissions, should include the following:

- Annual feedback (from surveys and focus groups) from a demographically diverse sample of members—about their experience, including the application process; their overall satisfaction with the program; and the training and support they receive.

3. Recruit more programs led by people of color and in underserved communities by providing increased support and technical assistance.

The 2022 AmeriCorps Strategic Plan sets out the organization-wide goal to “partner with communities to alleviate poverty and advance racial equity.” In order to achieve this goal, state service commissions must prioritize investing in nonprofits led by people of color (POC) in underserved communities. However, interviewed state service commission staff reported that they had experienced challenges recruiting grantee programs from these communities. They reported that many of the nonprofits in these communities were newer and smaller organizations (compared to programs they had worked with previously) and had never previously applied for

AmeriCorps funding. As a result, many organizations were unaware of AmeriCorps grants or how to apply for them, and reported that the grants imposed onerous administrative burdens and reporting requirements. State service commissions should address this issue by building a pipeline explicitly for these types of programs and supporting these programs after they receive their first round of AmeriCorps funding. The following recommendations provide further detail on how state service commissions can achieve these goals.

Engage, inform, and recruit people-of-color-led organizations from underserved communities to apply for AmeriCorps funds.

State service commissions should seek out POC-led nonprofits in underserved communities interested in AmeriCorps members. They should help these organizations understand the benefits and impact AmeriCorps members can make in a community, the requirements of the program, and help them apply for a planning grant (a grant that provides programs with the funding necessary to plan how an organization could utilize and support an AmeriCorps member). Once a program receives a planning grant, the state service

commission should provide advice and logistical support for the duration of the grant to ensure the grantee has the resources and knowledge necessary to execute the grant deliverables and is prepared to apply for AmeriCorps funding in the following grant cycle.

Support these new programs through their first AmeriCorps grant cycle and provide assistance to programs who do not receive funding in a particular grant cycle.

Once a nonprofit has received AmeriCorps funding, the state service commission should provide guidance and logistical support to ensure that the grantee is in compliance with the grant and has the resources necessary to meet the requirements. If a grantee fails to receive AmeriCorps funding or receives it one cycle and fails to qualify in the following cycle, the commission should provide meaningful feedback on what caused them to fail to receive funding and help them address these needs so that they can qualify for funding in the future. State service commissions are uniquely positioned to support these types of grantees, given their knowledge of statewide needs and proximity to local communities.

Leverage philanthropic partnerships to support new and small AmeriCorps programs in underserved neighborhoods with accessing match funds.

Whether or not a state service commission can raise funds from local nonprofits is dependent on how a state service commission is structured and operates in the state. Some state service commissions exist as a part of the governor's office, while others exist in state offices such as the state department of education or the office of child and family services, while others exist outside of state governments altogether as independent nonprofits. As a result, state service commissions have varying capacities to fundraise, but usually have the ability to connect local nonprofits to larger sources of philanthropic funds.

Interviewed grantees stated that one of the biggest challenges for newer, smaller, and people-of-color-led

AmeriCorps programs is fundraising enough money to meet the match requirements of an AmeriCorps grant. (The current match regulations use a graduated scale that mandates grantees raise 24 percent of total expenses with non-AmeriCorps funds in their first few years in the program. Over time, grantee organizations must match progressively more funds until they match 50 percent of total expenses after ten years; they then match this amount in perpetuity.) This high-match threshold poses an equity issue, because older, larger, and more established organizations can rely on existing funders while newer programs need to cultivate donor relationships from scratch. State service commissions can act as a force to disrupt this inequitable status quo by connecting smaller, newer, and people of color-led programs to philanthropic funders.

State service commissions can engage in fundraising activities to provide additional funding for grantee programs. Commissions have the unique ability to act as a representative for programs across a state, allowing them to more efficiently raise funds. Commissions can also use their state-wide partnerships to access funders that may be inaccessible to smaller or less well-known grantee programs.

Leverage America's Service Commissions benefits and The Corps Network resources to provide health care and benefits for AmeriCorps members, as well as training for commission staff.

State service commissions can partner with America's Service Commissions (ASC), a member-based nonprofit organization composed of a peer network of state service commissioners and state service commission staff. ASC focuses on providing training, resources, and advocacy on behalf of state service commissions, and makes a number of resources and benefits available for all interested state service commissions and programs. One such benefit is mental health services for AmeriCorps members through the AmeriCorps Member Assistance Program (MAP), which provides telephonic counseling services, medical advocacy, financial and legal assistance as well as a number

of additional benefits for a \$250 program fee and \$5–\$15 cost per member depending on the plan. A full list of available resources and training on topics such as alumni engagement, community-centered program development, and recruitment and retention can be found in the member portal on the ASC website. Commissions should work with ASC staff to understand what additional resources or services they could provide for AmeriCorps members.

The Corps Network, a national nonprofit association of conservation corps that supports over 150+ corps that are members of its network, also provides health care to corps members who serve in programs that are part of their organizational network. The Corps Network Health Plan provides minimum essential coverage health insurance that includes medical, dental, and vision insurance for AmeriCorps members. The plan is meant to be both comprehensive and affordable for AmeriCorps programs. Commissions can find more information about this program on the Corps Network website or by contacting Corps Network staff.

Create a member emergency fund.

Multiple state service commissions staff interviewed mentioned the value of emergency funds, sometimes referred to as relief funds, in helping members get through a tough time. Emergency funds are pools of funding that a commission sets aside for emergency situations that arise for AmeriCorps members during their term of service. Situations include a member's car breaking down, or an unexpected medical expense. Commissions can create these funds for members and programs to apply to meet the need of sudden, unexpected emergency expenses.

The Corps Network recently created the Patricia Sagawa Corpsmember Relief Fund to provide financial support for service members in their network facing barriers to participating in or completing their term of service. The fund operates through an application portal where members can apply for short term relief to cover expenses associated with clothing and supplies, food, housing, medical expenses, transportation, unforeseen need to travel

home, or utilities. Applicants can apply for up to \$500 at a time with an annual maximum of \$1,000. This emergency fund can be a model for commissions interested in creating similar funds to assist members with emergency expenses.

America's Service Commissions recently announced they received a grant from the Schultz Family Foundation to support the creation of AmeriCorps member emergency funds. For more information, check out America's Service Commissions website.

Create a hub of shared workforce development resources for AmeriCorps members and program staff.

State service commissions are in the unique position of having a better understanding of the dynamics of the labor market in their state, an understanding of local employers, and the skills necessary for individuals to access the jobs that these employers offer. Commissions can use this knowledge to create shared resources that are available for all AmeriCorps programs in the state. Resources could include a list of the biggest employers in the state, in-depth information on regional industries and what skills they look for in employees, skill building training modules/materials, and information on state and federal workforce training programs and funding. State service commissions can also provide organizational management resources and training materials for grantee staff. Documents on equitable hiring, retention, development, and community engagement would also be highly useful. More information on how to integrate workforce development into AmeriCorps programming can be found in the Next100 report, *How Embracing Workforce Development Can Set Up AmeriCorps Members for Post-Service Success*.

4. Partner with state agencies and workforce development boards to create AmeriCorps programming that is responsive to state needs, takes advantage of braided funding streams, and emphasizes workforce development.

Identify and leverage state-level interagency partnerships and braided funding sources.

Despite some federal limitations, member compensation and benefits can be supplemented by seeking out additional state and philanthropic funds, especially through partnership with other state agencies. State service commissions can organize meetings with staff in the governor's office and state-level departments (such as the state department of labor, department of workforce development, department of energy) and discuss ways to reach shared objectives through interagency partnerships. If these state-level interagency partnerships result in pooled funding initiatives, it can increase the amount of funding available for AmeriCorps positions and programs while allowing state agencies to partner directly with local nonprofit organizations to more efficiently and cost-effectively address community issues. In addition, commissions can work with other state agencies to be included in their applications for federal funding opportunities through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act.

Build a relationship with your regional workforce development board.

State service commissions should build a relationship with their regional workforce development boards and look for opportunities to work together on job pathways for AmeriCorps members. These boards are tasked with directing federal, state, and local funding to workforce

development programs. Successful partnerships can result in additional workforce development training or funding for AmeriCorps programs. Furthermore, these workforce development boards can serve as invaluable resources in helping AmeriCorps members understand the industry landscape in their area and connect to potential employers after their service.

Encourage grantees to help members apply for and leverage federal and state funding streams.

State service commissions can tap into federal and state workforce development funds and use these resources to provide training or other workforce development resources to grantee program staff and service members. The state may have unallocated or flexible American Rescue Plan Act funding, workforce development funds, or other funds from the federal government that have not been fully allocated and can be used to support workforce development.

State service commissions should suggest that all grantee organizations assist eligible members apply for federal and state funding streams, including the following:

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- The SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T)



Best Practices from the Field: Serve Colorado

Serve Colorado (Serve CO) provides an illustrative example of the power of state-level partnerships and braided funding streams. Serve CO is partnering with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) to create the Colorado Healthcare Corps, which will provide critical support to the state's health care system and robust opportunities for those interested in launching a career in health care. Serve CO used AmeriCorps funding at the maximum allowable cost per MSY and CDPHE provided the remaining funds necessary for additional member benefits, including a housing stipend, child care, and increased professional development training and certifications. The additional benefits have expanded opportunities for more individuals to serve.

Program¹

- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funding opportunities
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding

5. Recruit state service commission staff that are demographically representative of the state, prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion, and are accountable to the needs of current AmeriCorps members.

Interviewed participants reported that many state service commissioners and staff are not racially and economically representative of the demographics of their state. These interviewees noted that commission members and staff could be better and more effective decision makers if they reflected the diversity of their states population.

Collect and report demographic data on state service commission members and staff.

Most state service commissions do not collect or publicly report information on the demographic makeup of the commission and staff, making it difficult to make qualitative claims about commission demographics. State service commissions should collect and release demographic data about their commission and commission staff and release this data publicly in an annual report. This data would help state service commissions assess their demographics and start the process of building a more representative staff.

Foster a more diverse state service commission staff and build a pipeline of new service commission staff.

State service commissions should seek to hire a staff that is representative of the racial and economic diversity of the state. They should keep an eye towards hiring folks who have participated in service programs and have a sense of what problems these programs have. Next100 released a report detailing specific policy recommendations for how government and policy organizations can build a more diverse, inclusive, and effective team. State

service commissions should employ some of these recommendations to build a state service commission staff that is reflective of the state they serve.

Hire a staff member to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion or make it a central part of a current staff member's responsibilities.

If state service commissions and their staff are committed to equity and ensuring that their programming better reflects the needs of underserved communities in the state, they should hire a staff member to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives or make it a large part of a current staff member's responsibilities. A DEI-focused staff member can help ensure that specific resources and funding goes directly to POC communities and that the commission is thinking about how to prioritize equity while creating a more inclusive work environment for all commission staff members.

ServeMinnesota created a Vice President of Equity and Inclusion position, which can serve as a potential model for other commissions. Other commissions have similar roles such as Serve Washington's Director of Equity and Grants, a position that fits neatly within more traditional commission grant structures. State commissions that lack resources to create such a position but exist within state government can leverage existing resources or infrastructure related to diversity, equity that may already exist within government.

Create a youth advisory board or member council composed of current service members and recent service alums.

Interviewed participants reported that many state service commissioners and staff have no direct communication or data from current AmeriCorps members. It can be challenging to have accountable decision-making that reflects and understands members' experience, if state service commissioners and their staff do not regularly hear from current service members. In addition, many current AmeriCorps members interviewed reported that they were

not even aware that a state service commission exists, let alone what its purpose is.

To solve these problems and create more effective and accountable decision making, commissions should create a youth advisory board or member council composed of current service members and recent alums. This advisory board could serve as a mouthpiece for AmeriCorps members across the state and solicit service member input and feedback. This advisory board should have a

representative present at all public meetings of the state service commission and be tasked with bringing forward the ideas, thoughts, and concerns of current AmeriCorps members and recent alumni. This board should also be empowered to bring state service commission thinking to current AmeriCorps members to allow them to provide input on commission decisions. Some state service commissions, including in Michigan, Florida, and West Virginia, already have a member council with similar roles which can provide useful models for other commissions.



AmeriCorps

State Service Commissioners' Recommendations to the AmeriCorps Federal Agency

The recommendations aimed at state commissions above require varying degrees of funds and state service staff capacity. Some initiatives can be adopted through a change in practice or by building new collaborations with outside groups or agencies, others require additional resources. Given the current recruitment crisis, many commissions have unspent funds that could be used to implement some of these recommendations, however the AmeriCorps federal agency can also play a larger role in supporting commissions to reach equity goals aligned with the AmeriCorps' Equity Action Plan. Three recommendations for the AmeriCorps federal agency to increase state service commission capacity and provide additional funding to support these initiatives are outlined below:

Recommendation 1: The AmeriCorps federal agency should prioritize changes to agency rules and regulations including: reforming grantee match requirements, increasing flexibility with the 80/20 training cap, and eliminating the National Service Criminal History Check (for more information on these topics please review linked Next100 publications). Changes to these rules would decrease administrative burdens for state service commission staff who spend countless hours supporting struggling grantees meet these requirements and free up staff capacity to focus on equity initiatives.

Recommendation 2: The AmeriCorps federal agency should increase funding for the Commission Investment Fund, which provides funding for training and development for state service commissions and staff. The AmeriCorps federal agency should offer this additional funding opportunity for commissions that are interested in diversity, equity, and inclusion training or professional development for commission members, staff, and programs.

Recommendation 3: The AmeriCorps federal agency should repurpose unexpended AmeriCorps funds to equity innovation grants for AmeriCorps state service commissions to experiment with recruitment of grantees from traditionally underserved communities while providing additional member benefits, training, and workforce development initiatives. These additional grants should encourage commissions to try new ideas and can provide useful test cases for the agency to get a sense of which ideas work and do not.

For more recommendations on how to build a representative state service commission please see the Next100 report: *How to Build a More Diverse, Inclusive, and Effective Policy Sector*. For additional recommendations on how to center impacted communities in the policy making process checkout the Next100 report: *Inclusive Policy Research and Policy Development with Impacted Communities*.

Conclusion

State service commissions can lead the charge in the effort to create a more equitable AmeriCorps program. They represent an untapped opportunity for innovative policymaking, because they can fine-tune their work to the needs of their communities while leveraging state-level resources and support. By collecting better data, prioritizing equity when funding programs, fostering equitable recruitment and support, and providing regional workforce development resources, state service commissions can accomplish a vision of a more equitable AmeriCorps that is responsive to community needs and accessible to all who want to serve.

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Authors

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Notes

¹ SNAP E&T funds are available to eligible SNAP participants. They provide funding for training and supportive services such as transportation and child care.