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## ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH NATIONAL SERVICE

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### About Us

[New Profit](#) is a venture philanthropy organization that backs breakthrough social entrepreneurs advancing equity and opportunity in America. Since 1998, New Profit has partnered with over 150 social entrepreneurs who have created powerful ideas, organizations, and movements to turn the tide on entrenched social problems and advance opportunity for millions of underserved people across America.

[America Forward](#) is New Profit's national nonpartisan policy initiative. America Forward unites social entrepreneurs with policymakers to transform local impact into national systemic change. Our Coalition of over 100 organizations advocates for public policies that advance equity, foster innovation, and reward results. To date, we have leveraged over \$1.7 billion for social innovation and successfully advocated for breakthrough federal education, workforce development and economic justice, national service, and social innovation legislation. Our members work in over 15,000 communities across America, touching over 9 million lives every year.

### Overview of Policy Proposal

Based on its proven track record to date, we see national service as a powerful tool to support students, increase opportunity, grow the capacity of nonprofit organizations, and address a variety of needs in under-resourced communities. Now, at a time when the nation must marshal its resources to address profound inequities, we believe that policymakers should embrace the transformational potential of national service to advance equity and move all of America forward. We believe that AmeriCorps should grow to 250,000 positions and beyond, and YouthBuild and youth service and conservation corps should expand significantly as well. But growth alone is insufficient. We believe that growth must be accompanied by a concerted effort to increase education, employment, and civic equity through policies that address who is able to serve, who leads service organizations, and who is served.

### THE CATALYTIC POTENTIAL OF NATIONAL SERVICE IN THIS MOMENT

#### Why Now?

In the midst of the current public health crisis, we also face a related, unprecedented education crisis as children across the country experience profound learning loss that—without significant integrated student supports—could adversely impact an entire generation. Evaluating datasets from online learning during the pandemic, [McKinsey and Company](#) projects that Black and Latinx students will lose 11 to 12 months of learning, and white students will lose seven to eight months of learning, by the end of the 2021 school year. As concerning as they are, these projections could be low estimates because they do not include students who have completely disengaged from learning and for whom there is no testing

available, and they do not capture pre-existing trends in educational inequity that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, we face an economic crisis as millions of Americans have lost their jobs, with the burden falling most heavily on those least able to bear additional economic hardship: [households making less than \\$40,000](#), people of color, and young adults. [As millions of young adults were preparing to graduate from high school or college in 2020](#) and expecting to enter a robust job market, the pandemic hit, devastating the job market, particularly in service industries where the youngest workers typically find employment. [Young people of color](#) have been hardest hit, and without work experience, they face uncertain futures. Those who had not been employed prior to the pandemic did not receive federal assistance. And even after the economy recovers, they are likely to earn [lower wages throughout their lifetimes](#), if past experience holds.

Community organizations positioned to assist those hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis and address its economic and education repercussions have been similarly strained. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 2.5 million human- and social-sector jobs were lost at the start of the pandemic at the same time as demand soared for services. Prior to the pandemic, three-quarters of nonprofits only had enough savings to support six months of operating costs, and 1 in 5 had only enough savings to [survive for a month](#). Many are [expected to close their doors](#), and among organizations serving low-income communities, [65% of nonprofits](#) report they have not been able to meet the level of demand for their services. Nonprofits led by people of color have been particularly hard hit; according to one [study](#), nearly half of Black leaders of nonprofits reported that their grant income had fallen, and roughly two-thirds reported that earned income and individual donations were also down.

There is no question that the unprecedented devastation resulting from the pandemic exacerbated long-standing systemic inequity resulting from structural racism, and young people of color and the organizations that serve their communities are facing enormous challenges. With problems of this magnitude, we need solutions at scale.

### **Why National Service?**

As the country begins to build back better, national service not only offers a path forward for young people, but also provides a powerful force to strengthen civil society and enable communities to tackle their biggest challenges. National service at scale can and should be part of the solution.

National service experiences can be [life-changing for young people of all backgrounds](#), especially those facing limited opportunities due to race, education, geographical location, and income. [According to numerous studies](#), national service builds work skills and leadership experiences for service members, cultivates power and agency, and provides financial support for postsecondary education. Importantly, at a time of extreme civic stress, national service prepares participants to solve problems, engage others,

and become deeply committed to their communities. Many positive outcomes associated with serving are [even stronger among Black corps members and corps members from marginalized groups](#). It is not surprising that [AmeriCorps alums](#) vote and participate in community meetings and events at a higher rate, are more likely to continue volunteering in adulthood, and have higher rates of social trust.

National service programs also [transform communities](#) by improving education, strengthening nonprofits, and addressing social challenges rooted in injustice. In educational settings, national service improves student outcomes and provides critical talent supporting students and youth through tutoring, student success coaching, mentoring, and postsecondary advising. Utilizing national service to mobilize hundreds of thousands of adults of all ages to help millions of students get back on track could help address both our education and economic crises while building civic equity in communities. At the same time, national service can strengthen nonprofit organizations, expanding their capacity, increasing their ability to collaborate, and strengthening their sustainability.

AmeriCorps, the largest federal national service program, has provided grantees of all types, including small nonprofits with limited access to capital, with the people power to pursue innovative solutions in diverse fields, from solar power to school success. The three programs under AmeriCorps—VISTA, NCCC, and State/National—engage people of all backgrounds in addressing locally identified challenges through a year or more of full-time or part-time service. AmeriCorps participants receive a living stipend during their service, and at the completion of their term, they receive an education award, equal to the maximum Pell Grant, to pay for educational expenses including college or graduate school. Other federal national service programs include AmeriCorps Seniors (formerly Senior Corps), the Peace Corps, YouthBuild, and the Public Lands Corps. YouthBuild and youth service and conservation corps combine service with job training and education, as well as comprehensive supports focusing on opportunity youth (young people ages 16-24 who are neither enrolled in school nor working).

Our intention is to identify policy challenges and begin to offer solutions. Many of our recommendations will require further exploration by the field to identify specific programmatic, statutory, and regulatory changes required to achieve our proposed outcomes. To enable national service to have maximum impact at scale, we propose the following goals and policy changes to enhance equity through national service.

- 1. Those who serve.** Policies should ensure that service opportunities that offer financial support; build skills, leadership, and agency; and provide funds for college are equitably available to all adults who want to serve. [More than half](#) of national service participants today identify as people of color. However, we can do more to increase equity in national service by boosting representation of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color across program models of all types (today people of color are more likely to be participants in physical service programs like [YouthBuild](#) than in other models) and engaging more men in education programs so that more students see near-peer role

models who look like them. This shift will yield the additional benefits of creating a pipeline into teaching, diversifying the education workforce, and addressing teacher shortages.

- 2. Those who lead service organizations.** Policies should make it easier for community-based nonprofit organizations to participate in national service programs, particularly those led by individuals who reflect the population they serve. While demographic data is not available regarding the leadership of national service programs, there is reason to believe that many programs are led by people of color. However, across the nonprofit sector more generally, Black and Latinx leaders are underrepresented. According to a [2018 New Profit analysis](#) of nonprofit leadership, despite making up approximately 30% of the population, Black and Latinx leaders held only an estimated 10% of nonprofit executive leadership roles. Structural changes in national service policy could increase the ability of community leaders to access national service funding, and in doing so, build the capacity of nonprofits led by people of color.
- 3. Those who are served.** Policies should continue to prioritize under-resourced communities, with new resources going to communities across the country—urban, suburban, and rural—that face structural, multi-generational poverty, with an emphasis on inclusion of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other people of color communities. These communities have been [hardest hit by the recent COVID-19 crisis](#) with disproportionate economic and educational impact. A majority of AmeriCorps members serve in education. Leaning into this expertise by dramatically increasing mentoring, tutoring, student success coaching, and college advising could directly address inequities that leave too many students without the supports they need. Other relevant fields, from public health to food insecurity, are in desperate need of the kind of assistance that AmeriCorps and other national service programs offer.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE EQUITY THROUGH NATIONAL SERVICE**

The following policy recommendations are designed to increase equity through national service while maximizing effectiveness and efficiency, and meeting critical community needs during this time of national crisis.

### **1. Equitable Access to Service Opportunities**

AmeriCorps broadens participation by providing a living allowance, health care, and child care benefits for full-time AmeriCorps members, as well as an education award that can be used for higher education expenses or to pay back student loans. However, even with this package of support, [many individuals from under-resourced communities struggle to participate](#), which leads to inequitable opportunities to engage. While young people from more affluent backgrounds may receive subsidies from their families, those from under-resourced communities may be expected to [contribute to their families' support](#). To address this inequity, the following policy changes are needed:

- a. Make it possible for individuals from under-resourced communities to serve in AmeriCorps.**

*Provide crisis funding to bridge AmeriCorps service members' emergency needs.* AmeriCorps stipends leave little to no room for additional unanticipated expenses for AmeriCorps members and/or their families. The inability to access emergency funds can erect an additional barrier for recruiting and retaining service members, especially in systemically under-resourced communities. The federal government should establish a fund to provide tax-exempt Emergency Financial Grants to AmeriCorps members who face unexpected financial crises that would cause them to leave their service positions.

*Increase supplemental benefits to ensure equitable access.* AmeriCorps members receive health insurance as well as child care benefits, and these should be preserved. However, additional supports, such as housing, relocation allowances, transportation, and technology (cell phones, computers, and access to the internet), may be necessary to enable individuals from under-resourced communities to participate. Programs should be encouraged to develop the community partnerships necessary to secure additional supports that facilitate all members' ability to serve, such as bus passes or technology. Additional policy strategies should ensure that need-based supplemental funds are available and remain separate from grantee budgets.

*Increase the living allowance.* While extremely valuable to participants, the current living allowance falls well short of providing a living wage (and in some states falls short of minimum wage), which creates an insurmountable obstacle for many potential participants from under-resourced backgrounds and serves as a barrier to equitable participation. By increasing the living allowance, more individuals would be able to serve, thereby creating a more inclusive and diverse talent pool that is representative of the communities that national service programs are designed to serve.

*Set the living allowance according to the local cost of living.* According to policy guidance, "the living allowance is designed to help members meet the necessary living expenses incurred while participating in the AmeriCorps Program." Under current law, the minimum living allowance is set based on the poverty line. Increasing the minimum living allowance to 175% of the federal poverty line (as reflected in current legislative proposals) and adjusting it to reflect differences in the cost of living across the country would expand the pool of those able to serve. Any change in the living allowance (and supplemental benefits) will increase grantee budgets and require programs to raise more in nonfederal funds. To avoid unintended harmful consequences to grantees, match funding requirements and other financial regulations governing programs will need to be revised.

*Exempt the education award and living allowance from federal taxes.* Congress should exempt the education award from federal income tax. Because taxes cannot be withheld from the education award itself, some young people are left with a tax bill they cannot pay, and some are discouraged from accessing the award at all. The living allowance and supplemental member benefits should similarly be exempt from payroll and income taxes, thereby increasing its spending power.

*Increase the Segal Education Award.* Under current law, the Segal Education Award earned by full-time AmeriCorps members is equivalent to the maximum value of the Pell Grant for the fiscal year in which the term of national service is approved. To ensure financial resources do not limit participation, the Segal Education Award should be increased to twice the value of the maximum Pell Grant, as reflected in current legislative proposals.

**b. Remove barriers to national service.**

Current policies present barriers that discourage or, in some cases, prevent groups of people from participating fully in national service. To make national service more equitable and inclusive, we propose that the government should:

*Revise policies related to [criminal history checks](#) for AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors members and staff.* Current policy requires everyone serving in AmeriCorps or AmeriCorps Seniors to submit to extensive criminal history checks. This policy discourages many individuals with any criminal history, however minor, from applying to serve, even if their offenses are not disqualifying (currently only individuals convicted of murder or listed on the sex offender registry are banned from serving). This policy also makes it hard for smaller community organizations to participate in AmeriCorps, the largest funding stream for national service, because any minor administrative error can cause significant financial penalties and financial risk to the organization. As a result, some choose not to participate. Amendment of the National and Community Service Act is needed to remove references to criminal history in the definition of eligible participants. Instead, policies should protect vulnerable populations by aligning with existing state and local law; individual school district and professional practice requirements; and other screening, training, and supervision practices that are appropriate and relevant given the nature of the services provided.

*Fund a recruitment campaign to ensure that underrepresented groups are aware of national service opportunities.* Awareness of AmeriCorps, in general, is low, particularly among Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other people of color; opportunity youth; immigrant communities; and under-resourced communities in urban, suburban, and rural America. In addition, men are significantly underrepresented in AmeriCorps. To ensure that underrepresented groups have equitable access to information about opportunities, funding should be made available for a focused recruitment campaign, tied to the launch of a state-of-the-art website, described below.

*Provide a state-of-the-art search tool to enable individuals to find programs that match their interests, geographic preferences, and skills.* While an individual may have heard of a single program, they often do not realize that other options are available that might better fit their interests. A high-quality searchable database, accessible online, is needed to enable individuals to identify positions that will advance their career interests, are located in the community they want to serve, and fit their skills



and backgrounds. Such a website should include AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, youth service and conservation corps, the Peace Corps, and other publicly or privately funded service year programs.

*Expand AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National, and Segal Education Award eligibility to include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiaries, asylees, and refugees.* Eligibility criteria for AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National, and Segal Education Awards, authorized under the National and Community Service Act, should be expanded so that they align with current AmeriCorps VISTA citizenship status eligibility criteria under the Domestic Volunteer Service Act. AmeriCorps VISTA is open to U.S. citizens, U.S. nationals, lawful permanent residents, DACA beneficiaries, TPS beneficiaries, asylees, and refugees. AmeriCorps NCCC, AmeriCorps State and National, and Segal Education Awards are available only to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents. Aligning all three programs to the current AmeriCorps VISTA citizenship status criteria would create consistency while expanding eligibility for all critical programs.

*Make it easier for AmeriCorps programs to access funding to support reasonable accommodations for members with disabilities.* While 2% of AmeriCorps funding, until \$20 million, is set aside to support the inclusion of people with disabilities, programs report challenges with the implementation of this fund. A decision to offer a position to a person requiring reasonable accommodations for a disability must be made before funding can be secured. Programs are expected to pursue alternative sources for accommodations (such as technology, sign language interpreters, ramps, etc.) before accessing AmeriCorps funding. Even if funding for accommodations is approved, it is offered only on a cost-reimbursable basis, which means programs must front the costs and take the risk that the costs might be denied. Furthermore, because unexpended funding from the set-aside may be used for other purposes, there is an incentive for the agency to operate restrictively. Reforms are therefore needed to remove the disincentive for programs to recruit people with disabilities by making it easier for them to secure funding to provide accommodations.

*Reduce the maximum AmeriCorps term of service length to align with the school year, and increase eligibility for maximum Segal Education Award.* AmeriCorps members are enrolled for a specific term of service, between 300 and 1,700 hours during a period of not more than one year. It is exceedingly difficult for some members (particularly those serving in education-focused programs) who have other obligations outside of their service, such as caring for family members, to reach the 1,700-hour threshold. Many service programs operate over a 10-month period tied to the school year, to allow some time to exit one class of corps members and plan for the next incoming group. An AmeriCorps member who is trying to complete 1,700 hours in 10 months may have to exceed a 40-hour workweek, often in high-stress environments. In addition, many members have a lengthy commute to service sites—in some cases, two hours or more each way—making their already long day even longer. This

challenging requirement has negatively impacted member retention and program completion. A reduced-hours floor would permit more members to complete service requirements successfully.

*Allow returning veterans to perform a year of civilian service as part of their transition to civilian life.* Each year, nearly 200,000 military service members transition back to their communities. Given their strong sense of mission, it is not surprising that veterans who serve their communities through national service upon returning to civilian life are far more likely than their peers to say that their transitions are going well. However, only 20% have been asked to serve as civilians after their discharge. Given that 4 in 10 returning veterans say they have difficulty transitioning to civilian life, more options should be available to meet the needs of this diverse population. By giving returning veterans the option of civilian service, we can provide much-needed transition time, pathways to education, training for jobs, and the dignity of continuing their service here at home. Local organizations, their communities, and the nation would benefit from the time and talents of dedicated men and women who have served their nation in uniform. Most importantly, these veterans would have access to a proven option for successful reintegration into civilian life, and one that would resonate with their commitment to service. Accordingly, a [Veterans Civilian Service Option](#) could be funded through the GI Bill and created through a partnership between AmeriCorps and the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to support returning veterans.

*Enable military spouses/families to participate in national service.* Military [families](#) represent a valuable resource to the country but often face significant [challenges securing employment](#). According to the Department of Defense, there are approximately 1 million spouses and 2 million children of active-duty military personnel, reservists, and members of the National Guard. They embody the idea of duty and service to others and represent a source of potential members for AmeriCorps programs. The Department of Defense should enter into an interagency agreement with AmeriCorps to establish a Military Family Service Corps as an AmeriCorps affiliate funded by the DOD. In addition, the AmeriCorps law should be amended to enable military families to serve overseas where they are posted.

**c. Increase connections to college and career.**

[Research](#) shows that national service participants have higher college completion rates than nonparticipants, choose public service careers more often than their peers, and are better paid when they do pursue public service. National initiatives such as Employers of National Service and Schools of National Service have helped AmeriCorps members access jobs and education after completing their service. In addition, some programs enable participants to earn workplace credentials, receive credit through partnerships with community colleges and other higher education institutions, or partner with employers to transition program graduates into jobs. However, too few programs have these arrangements.



The nation could strengthen its pipeline of diverse talent, especially in fields experiencing shortages, while increasing the value of national service for young adults, particularly those who have few opportunities, if we:

*Recognize the role that national service plays in workforce development, especially for the nonprofit sector, and incorporate it into policy strategies designed to increase employment.* National service has played an important but poorly understood role in developing America’s workforce in several ways by: (1) providing “bridge building” work experience to youth and young adults who teach essential workplace skills (21st century skills) and building their professional networks; (2) providing a reliable employment pathway to the nonprofit sector and other specific career fields as a kind of “[civic apprenticeship](#)”—a service experience that combines workforce skills development with a motivating social purpose; and (3) building the capacity of programs that assist others in preparing for and finding employment. In addition to expanding existing national service programs such as YouthBuild and AmeriCorps, communities that develop plans to integrate national service into their workforce development and higher education strategies should receive extra funding from new sources to scale positions. National service should be recognized as a form of [workforce development](#) and considered as part of all employment and “future of work” strategies.

*Increase emphasis on AmeriCorps member education and employment.* Increased emphasis on member development will drive more equitable recruitment and participation. In recent decades, outcomes relating to community and education service delivery have received the greatest emphasis at AmeriCorps. While these outcomes remain important, they should not overshadow corps member impacts, including those related to workforce training, post-service workforce progression, or postsecondary education. Incentives should be offered to encourage AmeriCorps programs to support participants in attaining workplace credentials, college credit (through partnerships or credit based on portfolio assessments), or post-service employment (through job guarantees or streamlined pathways to employment through employer partnerships). These opportunities could be supported by recruiting professional mentors, or by providing college application assistance or employment placement assistance. Federal funds should support smaller programs in developing these opportunities through place-based or issue-focused partnerships, and the federal government could improve and expand the existing Employers for National Service and Schools for National Service initiatives.

*Eliminate the cap on training time in AmeriCorps.* Current policy requires that 80% of a participant’s program time be spent on service. However, in some cases, such as programs focused on opportunity youth, allowing more time for training would increase college or career outcomes while improving the quality of service delivered. Programs should be allowed to determine participant time for training and education as needed to enable participants to deliver quality service and develop members’ education, workforce, and civic skills consistent with the program’s application.

*Provide accelerated Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) for all AmeriCorps members.* To fulfill the PSLF requirements, participants must make steady loan payments while working full time in an approved public service position. Under current law, AmeriCorps members are able to defer student loan payments during their term of service and therefore are not making steady loan payments. An exception should be made to allow AmeriCorps members to count their AmeriCorps term of service toward loan forgiveness, even if the AmeriCorps members seek loan deferment and loan payments are not made during their AmeriCorps term of service. AmeriCorps members, who receive far less than the average nonprofit or public employee, should receive three years of public service credit for each year of service.

*Build strong pathways to recruit AmeriCorps members into teaching.* Nationally, 17% of public school teachers are people of color, and less than 2% are [men of color](#). A growing body of research reveals that students of color increase their performance and persistence when they have at least one [same-race teacher](#), underscoring the urgent need for more teachers of color to serve in high-need schools that serve large numbers of students of color. National service programs—both teacher professional corps and other models—have long provided a pathway into teaching for young people from diverse backgrounds, and such programs should be part of an intentional strategy to recruit men and people of color into teaching. This pathway can be formalized and strengthened through recruitment and fellowship programs funded by the Department of Education that reach out to AmeriCorps members, particularly men and people of color, and support them on a pathway to teaching.

*Provide streamlined access to federal jobs for all AmeriCorps members, and lengthen the period of eligibility.* Peace Corps and AmeriCorps VISTA members who have satisfactorily completed their service earn one year of “noncompetitive eligibility” for federal jobs, which allows them to be hired into federal jobs without going through the regular process. This noncompetitive status has been an important tool in recruiting and retaining talented, dedicated young people for public service careers. Executive authority could be used to extend both preferred eligibility, to individuals who have served in AmeriCorps State and National, NCCC, and FEMA Corps, and the period of eligibility, from one to three years.

*Expand allowable uses for AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards.* Under current law, the Segal Education Awards earned by AmeriCorps members, which are equal to a Pell Grant, can be used only for higher education expenses allowable under the Department of Education’s Title IV student aid programs; for educational expenses associated with enrollment in programs of education, apprenticeships, or job training approved for educational benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill and the Post-9/11 GI Bill; or to repay qualified student loans. For participants who do not plan to attend college, alternative allowable uses should include other workplace training programs or expenses associated with starting a small business or nonprofit.

*Expand YouthBuild.* YouthBuild programs provide opportunity youth the chance to achieve a GED or high school diploma while teaching opportunity youth construction and other skills through service such as building affordable housing in their neighborhoods. While YouthBuild has a dedicated funding stream at the federal Department of Labor, it also participates in AmeriCorps, which enables members to earn money for college. For many YouthBuild corps members, receiving the AmeriCorps education award enables them to purposely plan for postsecondary education. In addition, participation in AmeriCorps also influences their new and lasting identity as service-givers rather than service-receivers and positions them as community leaders. This targeted, effective program should be expanded to enable all young people who could benefit to participate, and all should be eligible for AmeriCorps Segal Education Awards.

*Increase resources available to support youth service and conservation corps.* Youth service and conservation corps are locally based organizations that engage young adults and veterans in service projects that address recreation, conservation, disaster response, and community needs. Through a compensated term of service that could last from a few months to a year, corps members gain work experience and develop in-demand skills. Additionally, many corps provide participants with educational programming, mentoring, and access to career and personal counseling. Some youth corps operate or partner with charter schools to help participants earn their high school diploma or GED, or participate in AmeriCorps. In addition to expanded access to grant funds through a dedicated funding stream, youth corps could benefit from a share of contracts under the more than \$1 billion National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund earmarked for the Department of the Interior's backlogged maintenance projects each year for the next five years. Other agencies should look to youth corps to address key priorities and provide fee-for-service funding for these programs.

*Provide incentives for higher education institutions to dedicate federal college work-study hours to service.* Career exposure and experience increase college completion rates. The original work-study program was intended to allow students to serve in the community. Some higher education institutions far exceed the minimum 7% mandated for work-study community service hours while others fail to achieve even this low minimum. To address this issue, 50% of any increase for College Work Study should be awarded by formula to those higher education institutions that in the previous year used more than 50% of their work-study funds for community service hours. Not only will this change in policy increase career connections for college students, but also it will create a bigger pipeline of volunteers available to tutor in schools and otherwise assist under-resourced communities.

*Use Learn and Serve America Higher Education grants to support community colleges and HBCU efforts to develop or partner with national service programs that will support learning and career outcomes for their students.* In keeping with the new administration's commitment to supporting partnerships

between community colleges and employers, funds should be made available to support community colleges and HBCU efforts to partner with or develop national service programs. These efforts can yield innovative “civic apprenticeship” programs that prepare students for social-sector jobs that lead to meaningful lifetime employment.

*Develop a Head Start AmeriCorps program with support from the Department of Health and Human Services to enable Head Start parents to serve in their children’s centers.* A qualified workforce must keep pace with growth in demand for early childhood education, including child care, Head Start, and school-based early childhood programs. National service could help address this challenge by steering corps members into careers in the early childhood field. About 25 AmeriCorps programs currently focus on this area. Common activities carried out by corps members serving in early childhood programs include:

- Providing one-on-one or small group tutoring in early literacy and math and other school-readiness skills;
- Conducting activities to support social-emotional learning;
- Promoting healthy nutrition and physical activity;
- Engaging families to support learning;
- Helping low-income families develop financial literacy, job search, and other skills;
- Supporting families in obtaining wraparound services;
- Recruiting and coordinating volunteers; and
- Building organizational capacity through fundraising, partner engagement, supporting data systems, and other activities.

A new program model that engages Head Start parents as national service members focused on family engagement could not only improve early childhood program quality and expand the potential workforce, but also encourage Head Start parents to serve as AmeriCorps members in the Head Start Corps, which will qualify them to earn an education award while they take their first steps on a pathway to a career and credential in early childhood development.

*Collect and report data that will determine the degree of equitable participation in all service programs.* Data confirm that a majority of AmeriCorps members are people of color, and evaluation and research demonstrate the positive impacts of serving on participant employment, education, and civic engagement. Additional disaggregated data and research across programs could inform efforts to improve equitable participation, including family income of participants, employment, education, and civic outcomes of those who serve, and racial and ethnic backgrounds of program directors.

## **2. Equitable Access for Program Providers**

AmeriCorps serves as a valuable resource to high-poverty communities by offering a triple bottom line: a resource to deliver services, an opportunity to improve college and career outcomes for community

members, and a way to strengthen civic participation and develop community leaders. However, many factors discourage grassroots nonprofits that are closest to the communities they serve, including organizations led by Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other people of color, from applying for grants. One of these is the criminal history check policy discussed in the previous section. To dismantle other obstacles to equitable participation, we should adopt additional policies that:

*Create a new fellowship program for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other people of color who have served with AmeriCorps to help them start new AmeriCorps programs.* Starting an AmeriCorps program is often daunting due to its complexity. People who have served already are well positioned to develop programs to address needs in their own communities through planning grants, training and technical assistance, mentoring from experienced program directors, and other sources.

*Expand use of intermediaries—nonprofits with grants management and program expertise—to enable more small organizations to participate.* AmeriCorps has had success with granting AmeriCorps funds to intermediaries as well as using intermediary organizations to manage large numbers of VISTAs. Such intermediaries handle applications, compliance, and other back-end functions for other organizations, and, in some cases, provide program support such as national trainings, uniforms, data collection, and program design. More intermediary organizations are needed to support communities of color and under-resourced communities, and should be supported through planning grants and technical assistance. In addition, multi-issue intermediaries that work with multiple program sponsors should not be disadvantaged in the competitive process.

*Increase training and technical assistance for programs to understand and develop aligned performance measures.* AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors programs are required to identify and report on performance measures and are offered the option to utilize standardized measures developed at the federal level. While these measures can be helpful to many programs, community organizations may identify alternative needs that require alternative measures. Increased resources for technical assistance can help organizations develop theories of change and related measures.

*Improve and increase the use of the fixed-price grant structure.* The fixed-price grant structure was authorized in 2009 to provide streamlined grant administration and greater flexibility. But the basis for reimbursement of funds has created unintended disincentives for AmeriCorps programs to pursue fixed-price grants. The current system provides funding to AmeriCorps programs based on the number of AmeriCorps members who are actively serving during a given period and who complete a term of service, creating significant financial risk for AmeriCorps programs that endure a reasonable amount of AmeriCorps member attrition during the service term. Continued work is needed to design and recommend improvements to the fixed-price grant structure to reduce financial risk and encourage new grantees to opt into the fixed-price grant structure.

*Engage in a fact-finding and rulemaking process to make AmeriCorps more user-friendly and impactful.* The new administration should engage in an administrative review process, including public comment, to identify changes that would make AmeriCorps easier to administer and more impactful. Such a review should ensure that input from grassroots organizations close to the communities being served is received and given serious consideration.

*Enable service-year programs started outside of AmeriCorps to join AmeriCorps.* Organizations start service-year programs without AmeriCorps resources and later look to AmeriCorps for expansion. In some cases, such programs have been deemed to be ineligible, as previous classes of corps members may be considered “employees” who cannot be displaced. It should be made clear that programs that have operated as service year programs in the past, and have not displaced traditional employees, should not be considered in violation of nondisplacement rules, in order to encourage grassroots organizations to develop programs outside of government, pilot them, and then apply for AmeriCorps funds.

*Eliminate restrictions capping the amount of time AmeriCorps members can spend on fundraising for their organizations.* AmeriCorps members are the most powerful spokespeople for programs. Enabling them to engage in fundraising efforts will increase the sustainability of programs, particularly smaller programs with fewer corps members to draw upon for this function.

### **3. Equitable Access for National Service to Respond to Urgent Community Needs**

COVID-19 has created unprecedented health, economic, education, and other challenges for communities across the country. In the months since the pandemic hit the United States, systemic inequities have deepened, especially in historically under-resourced, underserved communities and communities of color. Leveraging national service as a core component of our recovery efforts allows for rapid adaptation to meet the scale of emergent, ongoing, and future needs. To enable national service to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, we should:

*Deploy national service as part of the national COVID-19 response.* National service programs have a strong history of helping communities and meeting critical local needs across the nation, which was recognized in President Biden’s executive order, issued January 21, 2021, for a [National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness](#), which included AmeriCorps as part of a new U.S. Public Health Job Corps.

To address the profound effects of the COVID-19 public health crisis on our nation, we should identify the programmatic, statutory, and regulatory changes that are needed to make the program nimbler, both today and in the face of future disasters. In addition, we should expand national service programs and deploy them where they are needed most. For example:



- *Community health.* AmeriCorps has a long history of supporting efforts to improve the health of low-income community residents. Now more than ever, low-income communities of color need additional support, including education and access regarding immunizations and primary care services.
- *Nutrition.* Hunger has skyrocketed during the pandemic with more than 50 million Americans experiencing food insecurity. AmeriCorps members can work with food banks, school districts, and other systems to increase their capacity to feed Americans who cannot afford adequate nutrition.
- *Education.* More than half of AmeriCorps members serve in education settings. A corps of young adults focused on identifying students who have not logged on during the pandemic and helping to reconnect them to education is badly needed in most districts. Other education activities, including mentoring, tutoring, student-success coaching, and college advising, are discussed later in this section.

All of these efforts could benefit from engaging older adults alongside young people, increasing the number who could be served, and enabling both populations to benefit from increased interaction with those of another generation.

*Increase national service resources in hard-hit communities through a new place-based system that ties national service to locally developed plans.* National service could offer a powerful accelerator to communities that have come together to tackle important local challenges, from racial justice to job growth. However, due to the structure of AmeriCorps, it is hard for national service participants to be spread across a group of small organizations, or for individual organizations to receive AmeriCorps grants for fewer than 10 members. Smaller grassroots organizations often do not have the negotiating power, capacity, or scale to develop key partnerships with local governments to obtain transit passes or other benefits; with employers to secure job opportunities for graduating members; or with higher education institutions to arrange for admission, credit, or education award matches. Nor do they benefit from the training, housing arrangements, or business partnerships that larger organizations can develop. A place-based system, developed in partnership with State Commissions, could drive resources to organizations in the community served through an intermediary that could enable national service—both AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps Seniors—to operate with greater impact and efficiency while enabling smaller organizations to participate. In addition to the traditional AmeriCorps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps Seniors support, communities with approved plans should receive planning grants, funding for intermediary organizations, and other supports. These communities could also be ideal places to pilot a fellowship program in which young people from the community served may select or develop their own placements.

*Put a team of AmeriCorps members in every Title I school.* The pandemic has widened existing racial and socioeconomic disparities in education. High-quality community partners are a critical part of the solution for schools, districts, and states that want to maximize impact. A national corps focused on school success

could engage out-of-work young people in service that could launch their careers in education while addressing a critical need for mentors, tutors, student success coaches, postsecondary advising, and other educational supports including:

- Providing attendance supports and improved student engagement and connection to school;
- Tracing students who did not attend school during the pandemic to ensure that they are connected to education and have opportunities to address learning loss;
- Providing one-on-one and small group support to struggling students in any subject;
- Conducting small group sessions to help students build social-emotional skills;
- Providing adult advocates who provide close mentoring to students at risk of dropping out;
- Administering formative assessments and using resulting data to diagnose and better meet students' needs;
- Facilitating family engagement and parental involvement;
- Facilitating improved classroom management;
- Conducting aligned after-school activities, including homework assistance and enrichment activities;
- Organizing service-learning experiences;
- Supporting English language learners;
- Conducting anti-bullying and positive behavioral interventions and supports;
- Providing technology assistance;
- Recruiting teachers of color; and
- Delivering career and college access supports, including career awareness, test preparation, application preparation, FAFSA support, and postsecondary selection.

Toward this end, the federal government should incentivize service partnerships and increase funding for ESEA programs, including:

- Title I-A, for schoolwide school improvement programs;
- Title I Section 1003-A, for school improvement and direct student support;
- Title I-H, for school dropout prevention;
- Title II, for teacher support and retention;
- Title III-A, to support English language learners;
- Title IV-A, for a well-rounded education, safe and healthy schools, and improved use of technology; and
- Title IV-B, for community learning centers supporting out-of-school time learning opportunities.

*Expand national service programs to support higher education completion.* A growing number of AmeriCorps programs have begun to not only focus on higher education access, but also support persistence to degree attainment. Such supports may include tutoring and helping students access supportive services, peer networks, and other assistance to enable postsecondary success.

*Focus Foster Grandparents and other AmeriCorps Senior resources on preventing learning loss and improving education outcomes.* AmeriCorps Seniors programs have struggled during COVID-19 because many seniors are unable to participate in the community due to health concerns. As programs are rebuilt post-COVID-19, older adults can be a key resource to tutor, mentor, and support our most vulnerable students who are experiencing learning loss.

*Increase funding for AmeriCorps VISTA.* AmeriCorps VISTA members build capacity in nonprofit organizations and public agencies to help them more effectively generate the commitment of private-sector resources, encourage volunteer service at the local level, and empower individuals and communities. Because AmeriCorps VISTA is targeted at reducing poverty and allows for the placement of individuals or small groups, it is generally easier for local sponsors to administer, making it well suited for smaller nonprofits.

*Provide fellowships to young adults to enable them to identify and address community needs.* National service programs have traditionally called for organizations to select corps members from among those people who apply for positions. Young people may have a different perspective about problems and solutions in high-need communities. Providing fellowships to young people to choose their own service projects would increase innovation while developing young leaders with the initiative and commitment to make a difference in their communities.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the policy proposals outlined above could be adopted without legislation and should be prioritized in the first 100 days. Others could be addressed through stimulus legislation, reauthorization bills, or appropriations. All are necessary to fulfill the promise of national service to address racial and other forms of social injustice, advance equity, and help the nation build back better under the new administration.

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