

## National service

National service has had several main periods of development in the United States, with the current one structured through the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), with AmeriCorps as its signature program.

Conservation work has been important to national service since the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Today, CNCS funds a wide array of conservation work, including forest and coastal restoration, wildfire prevention and response, land conservation and stewardship, park and trails maintenance, disaster response in face of hurricanes and floods, energy efficiency in homes and low-income housing construction. This work typically occurs through nonprofit conservation corps, other community organizations, and in partnership with various federal agencies, as well as state and local agencies.

The potential of national service to become a central component of sustainable and resilient communities and ecosystems in the face of climate crisis is enormous.

## History

National service has had three main phases of innovation, each with a different mix of program goals, recruitment mechanisms, and institutional features, as well as conceptions of active citizenship that the programs have emphasized. For a comparative scholarly analysis of these features across the three periods, see the book by Melissa Bass, referenced below and reviewed in our Bookshelf. In brief, these three periods are:

### 1933-1942: Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

The CCC was created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) during the Great Depression to provide work relief and conservation jobs to unemployed young men, primarily those without high school degrees. It came to be viewed as a job training program and recruited more than three million over the course of the program. The CCC was discontinued as WWII generated needs for labor in war production, as well as recruits for the military after the U.S. entered WWII in late 1941.

Conservation work took the form of planting trees to restore federal and state forests, preserve land from soil erosion, clear trails, and build parks. In all, the CCC planted two billion trees, slowed soil erosion on forty million acres of farmland, and developed 800 state parks. The latter was part of an emerging mission of building outdoor recreation structures.

In return for assistance, the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) had farmers sign a “cooperative agreement” requiring them to contribute personally to the work of Corps enrollees and to promise to maintain the improvements for at least five years. Those who signed were referred to as “cooperators,” though soil conservation practices also spread to many “non-cooperators.”

SCS also established 175 soil and watershed conservation districts that showcased “demonstrations” and “demonstration areas” for emulation as “best practice” (though not using the contemporary terminology).

Some of the work of the CCC became controversial among prominent conservationists and ecologists of the period, as well as leading groups, such as the National Association of Audubon Societies, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Izaak Walton League. Certain practices, such as draining swamps or using poisons to control rodents, were criticized as inconsistent with ecological science. The building of so many roads and recreation centers threatened wilderness areas. These criticisms had broad resonance among the public.

However, CCC work also set the stage for the postwar wilderness movement and the eventual achievement of the Wilderness Act in 1964. The CCC helped to broaden the debate about conservation and to democratize the movement by including lay and working class conservationists from the public at large alongside professionals from scientific and government institutions.

Thousands from the CCC later became activists in environmental groups and took jobs in conservation agencies. Some had complemented their daily CCC work with formal night classes in forestry and natural resources.

The CCC also publicized its work broadly to the American public through newspapers, radio, and magazines. Other civic groups, such as the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, emulated its tree planting efforts, with the help of the CCC and the U.S. Forest Service. Strong support existed in all regions of the country and across party lines.

Camp life was diverse in some ways – rural, urban, hill country, multi-ethnic and recent immigrants – but exclusively male (except for one camp for women) and segregated by race, with separate camps for Native Americans on Indian reservations.

The CCC was ended in 1942 as the overwhelming majority of those who served joined the military, and it did not leave much of a direct federal institutional legacy. However, various others “corps” were created after the war in a wide variety of programs that replicated the CCC’s conservation work. Atlanta and San Francisco had Corps-like programs, as did some counties, and eventually several states (California, New Hampshire, Arizona, Montana, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan).

In 1957, the Student Conservation Association (SCA) was created to give college students the opportunity to volunteer in national parks and forests. A Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) was created in the 1970s for summer work through the Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service, and a Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) provided year-round conservation work and educational opportunities. YCC and YACC were eliminated by budget cuts in 1981.

The National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, now the Corps Network, was organized in 1985 to represent emerging Corps. Many are now partially funded through AmeriCorps. For more on the Corps Network and various conservation corps, see below.

#### References:

Neil M. Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Benjamin F. Alexander, *The New Deal's Forest Army: How the Civilian Conservation Corps Worked* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

Douglas Brinkley, *Rightful Heritage: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Land of America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

Melissa Bass, *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2013). See the **CivicGreen Bookshelf** for a [full review](#).

Olen Cole Jr., *The African-American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

Richard Melzer, *Coming of Age in the Great Depression: The Civilian Conservation Corps in New Mexico, 1933-1942* (Las Cruces, NM: Yucca Tree Press, 2000).

Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Frank C. Davis, *My C.C.C. Days: Memories of the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Boone, NC: Blair, 2006).

### **1965-present: Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)**

VISTA was established as part of the War on Poverty by President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963-1969) in 1964, modelled partly upon an earlier proposal by President John F. Kennedy, whom LBJ succeeded upon Kennedy's assassination in November 1963.

The program enrolled around 5,000 at its height, who competed for slots. Men and women were eligible, although initially the program favored white, middle-class, and educated volunteers to serve as "outside catalysts" for change. Increasingly, however, 75 percent of slots were reserved for "locally recruited volunteers," thus ensuring greater diversity and the recruitment of women of color already active in their communities.

In line with the civil rights movement's claims for expanded democracy and federal mandates for citizen participation in anti-poverty programs, the Johnson administration favored a view of VISTA volunteers as community organizers addressing structural issues of

poverty. Jimmy Carter, another Democratic president (1977-1981), likewise tended to favor organizing models.

Republican presidents, such as Richard Nixon (1969-1974), Gerald Ford (1974-1977), and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), preferred a service model over an organizing model, and attempted to cutback or eliminate VISTA altogether. President George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) likewise preferred a service model, but did not try to eliminate VISTA.

VISTA was incorporated into AmeriCorps in 1994 as AmeriCorps VISTA.

#### References:

Marvin Schwartz, *In Service to America: A History of VISTA in Arkansas, 1965-1985* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988).

### **1994-present: Corporation for National and Community Service**

In the late 1980s, several influential studies began to reignite debate on national service. Sociologist Charles Moskos published an especially influential book in 1988, as did Don Eberley. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) published its own Blueprint the same year.

Republican president George H.W. Bush, building upon some models in the field in the 1980s, created the Points of Light Foundation in 1990 and signed the national legislation proposed by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) that same year. Kennedy looked to the model of City Year in Boston, developed in 1988 by Michael Brown and Alan Khazei.

Bush also created an Office of National Service at the White House, and he and Bill Clinton (former chair of the DLC and governor of Arkansas) competed in the election of 1992 based partly upon their conceptions of national service.

President Clinton (1993-2001) signed the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1993 as his signature program and created the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) as a wholly owned government entity to administer its various programs. While the legislation had broad bipartisan support, it was subject to some conservative critiques as an unwarranted and corrupting intrusion of the federal government into the sphere of voluntarism.

After Republicans took over the House of Representatives in the 1994 midterm elections and Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA) became speaker, the charged political context made it difficult for CNCS to develop the institutional arrangements to support national service. House Republicans repeatedly refused to approve funding until compelled to do so by Senate action.

Leadership at CNCS during the initial years was spent mostly in a defensive posture, which came to distort measures of program accomplishments, focusing primarily upon a very narrow and instrumental conception of public work and “getting things done” as enumerating

trees planted, kids tutored, and the like. Nonetheless, Eli Segal, the first executive director of CNCS, succeeded in launching and legitimating the agency in its critical first years.

While these output measures helped legitimate the agency, they also made it difficult to evaluate other impacts of national service, such as future civic engagement, social capital, and personal development (see below), or even to develop more complex understandings of public work. The latter term, developed by Harry Boyte and colleagues, was never intended as narrow outputs.

Partisan conflict also drew energy away from working out the managerial and financial framework for such a complex program, which involved many local and state partners in design and implementation. These challenges lasted into the second decade.

CNCS directors and chairs under president George W. Bush (2001-2009) set the program on a much more manageable path, while bipartisan champions, such as Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) provided critical support and renewed authorization. President Barack Obama (2009-2017) and Michele Obama had a profound commitment to national service and further strengthened it.

The complex structure of AmeriCorps responded to the mantra of “reinventing government” and accommodated the array of decentralized nonprofits in its funding and administration, thus insulating national service from some of the conservative critiques of the very idea of national service. Within this complex structure, benefit-cost ratios have proven quite positive.

#### References:

Peter Frumkin and JoAnn Jastrzab, *Serving Country and Community: Who Benefits from National Service?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Melissa Bass, *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2013). See the [CivicGreen Bookshelf](#) for a [full review](#).

James L. Perry and Ann Marie Thomson, *Civic Service: What Difference Does It Make?* (Armonk, NY: Routledge, 2004).

E.J. Dionne, Kayla Meltzer Drogosz, and Robert E. Litan, eds., *United We Serve: National Service and The Future of Citizenship* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2003).

Charles C. Moskos, *A Call to Civic Service: National Service for Country and Community* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

Democratic Leadership Council, *Citizenship and National Service: A Blueprint for Civic Enterprise* (Washington, DC: DLC, 1988).

Suzanne Goldsmith, *[A City Year: On the Streets and in the Neighborhoods With Twelve Young Community Service Volunteers](#)* (New York: Norton, 1993).

Steven Waldman, *[The Bill: How Legislation Really Becomes Law: A Case Study of the National Service Bill](#)* (New York: Viking, 1995).

Thomas A. Bryer, ed., *[National Service and Volunteerism: Achieving Impact in Our Communities](#)* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

## AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps is the main program within the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), and AmeriCorps State and National is the main program within this. It funds across a broad range of program areas: conservation, disaster response, public safety, education, human needs, homeland security.

The other two AmeriCorps programs are the National Civilian Community Corps (AmeriCorps NCCC), which is organized as teams of young people who live in camps and travel to assist communities for intensive multi-week projects, and the former VISTA (AmeriCorps VISTA). CNCS also sponsors Senior Corps and several other programs.

### Administrative and funding structure

AmeriCorps State and National has several key organizational features:

- *state service commissions*: public agencies appointed by governors. They are composed of some 1,200 citizens nationwide from philanthropic and service groups, are nonpartisan or bipartisan, and re-grant funding from CNCS, as well as from private philanthropic sources. Their purview is broader than AmeriCorps State and National, and most are members of [America's Service Commissions](#).
- *nonprofit service organizations*: these groups recruit and supervise Corps volunteers and organize projects. They can be stand-alone or part of branded organizations with multi-city affiliates and national scope.
- *funding*: funds are distributed according to several formulas:
  - *population-based*, which go to state service commissions for re-granting to nonprofits and public agencies;
  - *national nonprofits* that operate national service projects in two or more states (e.g. City Year, Teach for America, YouthBuild);
  - *competitive grants to state commissions*, which then re-grant.

## Living allowances and educational grants

AmeriCorps programs have various formulas for living allowances during service, as well as educational grants after service. If you are interested in enrolling, please check for the latest data on the official AmeriCorps website and for the specific program you wish to join.

As of 2020, stipends and awards are the following:

- *living allowances*: these vary, depending on whether a full-time placement with AmeriCorps State and National or VISTA is for nine, ten, or eleven months (in some programs renewable for a second year). They range roughly from \$10,890 to \$12,100, which is paid in monthly installments. These are designed to cover rent, food and other living expenses at modest amounts. Various part-time arrangements are also available.

NCCC members live at regional campuses with full room and board covered, and during field projects they are lodged at community centers, churches, campgrounds, and hotel/motel rooms. Travel expenses are provided. Yearly stipends are approximately \$4,000, with the possibility of a childcare allowance of \$400 per month.

- *educational awards*: a full-time member can choose to receive the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, worth approximately \$6,000, which is usable up to seven years after completing service. It can be used to pay for tuition or to repay student loans. The amount of a full-time Education Award increases every year based on the Pell Grant. Some colleges and universities match these awards.

Members can also opt to receive instead a cash stipend worth approximately \$1,800 at the end of their service term.

## Impacts on future civic engagement

One important set of claims about the value of national service is that it can have an impact on civic engagement over the lifetime of participants.

In outlining the impacts of AmeriCorps on civic engagement, personal growth, social capital, and public work, we largely follow Peter Frumkin and JoAnn Jastrzab, [\*Serving Country and Community: Who Benefits from National Service?\*](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010). This study uses longitudinal survey data gathered over four rounds in a quasi-experimental design that matches AmeriCorps State and National as well as NCCC participants to those who have similar propensity to volunteer and who expressed interest, applied and/or were accepted, but did not enroll. The quantitative data for VISTA were taken from a 40-year retrospective study. See chapter 3 for the methodological discussion.

Overall, national service has been an important catalyst for greater civic engagement, although not consistently on all measures or across all programs.

- *volunteering*: AmeriCorps members reported increases in civic engagement after their service, yet the differences with the comparison group that did not enroll were not large. The major exception was among those that had not volunteered before, where the “gain score” over the comparison group was 25 percent. NCCC female participants also saw significant gains. Prior religious attendance during youth, as well as working in teams, also contributed positively.
- *neighborhood obligations*: AmeriCorps State and National participants showed a small, but positive and statistically significant net effect on their sense of obligation to help solve neighborhood problems and join neighborhood organizations. This was not the case, however, for NCCC participants, likely because they moved from project to project and community to community over the course of their service.
- *community problem identification*: AmeriCorps members were considerably more confident than the comparison group over the short and medium term (eight years out) in their ability to identify problems across various areas of environment, public health, crime, literacy and community engagement.
- *grassroots activity and efficacy*: while there were some differences among the three sets of former AmeriCorps members, they reported significantly greater grassroots engagement, as well as a sense of efficacy and optimism that such engagement can make a difference.
- *political participation*: AmeriCorps members are explicitly precluded from campaigning for a candidate or lobbying on issues during their work hours or in uniforms with AmeriCorps logos. These constraints have been a precondition for bipartisan support and help ensure that the program does not become politicized. Many participants receive in-service training on broad democratic principles.

AmeriCorps State and National, as well as NCCC, does not tend to increase voting over their comparison groups (during the 2000 and 2004 elections), nor does it tend to lead to shifts in political identification from liberal to conservative or vice versa. African Americans and Hispanics were somewhat more likely to increase voting rates than their white counterparts.

VISTA alumni, whose retrospective reports go back over some forty years, report considerably greater levels of participation in local, state, and federal elections, campaigning for candidates, serving on local boards and commissions, collecting signatures for petitions, boycotting products, and attending marches and rallies.

To be sure, citizenship is a multifaceted and contested concept. It means different things to different people and in different contexts. Its various meanings can be complementary, but they can at times also be contradictory.

National service programs can support multiple perspectives simultaneously, but no program can support all equally, and tradeoffs are inevitable. Choices of program design thus matter for how we enable active citizenship across varying contexts and for different goals.

For a discussion of these multiple meanings and potential tradeoffs, see especially Melissa Bass, *The Politics and Civics of National Service: Lessons from the Civilian Conservation Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2013). **CivicGreen Bookshelf** has a [full review](#).

## Impacts on personal growth

Another set of claims about the value of national service is that it can have an impact on personal growth over the lifetime of participants, but especially in early years of developing the skills and confidence that enable healthy and productive lives, including careers of public service. The data show positive or mixed results on four measures, and negative ones relative to their comparison groups on one, namely educational progress.

- *personal growth through community service*: reported personal growth after one year of service was higher than for the comparison group, but tended to fade after eight years. Personal growth was higher for those who did not have previous volunteer experience. It was also higher for those in more diverse work groups in NCCC (where residential living and team projects prevail), but was negative in diverse work settings in State and National. In NCCC, females scored higher on personal growth than males.
- *personal effectiveness of community service*: this generally increased in both State and National and NCCC, though for many in NCCC it took them some time to realize how important the impact had been in their lives (measured at eight years out). Those in programs with planning and teamwork benefitted more, as did Latino members of NCCC. A substantial percentage of VISTA members in a separate survey reported fundamental transformations in their personal and professional lives.
- *educational progress*: a smaller percent of AmeriCorps State and National and NCCC reported completing some college than those in the pertinent comparison groups. Older participants and those who had completed some years of college before their service year were more likely to continue their education.
- *basic work skills*: alumni from AmeriCorps State and National and NCC reported that they their service work increased their skills in a broad array of areas, such as problem solving, team leadership, and conflict resolution, managing time, and collecting and analyzing information. Their gains relative to their comparison groups were small, but positive and statistically significant. Their career choices oriented them more to community and social work.
- *public service employment*: AmeriCorps State and National participants (and especially those with prior volunteer experience) showed a statistically significant but

modest positive gain score over their comparison group in regards to public service employment, both in the short and medium run, while NCCC participants did not.

## Impacts on social capital

Another set of claims about the value of national service is that it can enhance social capital in the form of trust, networks, and reciprocal relationships. Social capital represents a stock of these that can be drawn upon for mutual support and community problem solving, as well as for accomplishing work-related tasks. While the stock exists in communities and individuals, the Frumkin and Jastrzab study was only able to measure individuals through their response to survey questions and retrospective reports.

The quantitative and qualitative data suggest that national service strengthens connections among participants and between them and members of the community. The program is “an imperfect but not implausible tool for social capital construction.”

- *connection to community*: there were positive and statistically significant short- and medium-term effects for both State and National and NCCC participants relative to their comparison groups. For State and National, this was especially true where planning opportunities were available, where participants worked at sites with many other participants, and where programs were run by faith-based organizations. However, there were not significant differences or positive effects for generalized social trust or trust in government.
- *constructive group dynamics*: those who served in State and National as well as NCCC do not show significant positive gains on measures of careful listening in group discussions, considering all points of view before making decisions, or helping to find solutions when problems arose. College attendance before service increased gains, as did working in teams, while prior participation in religious youth activities dampened them.
- *appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity*: AmeriCorps State and National participants do not show significant positive gains here, especially where trainings are frequent and participants do not have opportunities to define their own relationships with other service members in their programs. NCCC participants became less tolerant and less positive toward diversity. This may be related to small teams having less of a critical mass of diverse members, as well as very intense living circumstances in the camps. However, this negative diversity effect disappears in the survey eight years after service.
- *social networks*: data was limited on this issue. AmeriCorps State and National participants developed networks that were more racially heterogeneous than NCCC. VISTA volunteers recount stories of developing friendships and networks that cut across lines of income and racial/ethnic diversity that profoundly affected life and work choices in subsequent years.

## Impacts on public work

Another set of claims about national service is that it can accomplish public work that is visible and valuable in many kinds of community and public settings. In AmeriCorps, “getting things done” has been a core mission from the beginning. Public work is accomplished by State and National, NCCC, and VISTA.

There are four main areas of public work in AmeriCorps: environment, education, public safety, and human needs, with crisscrossing linkages often emerging among them. To be sure, these are often related to other forms of building community capacities, social capital, and personal development.

**CivicGreen** is primarily concerned with those national service programs that enable environmental protection, conservation of forests, watersheds, and other key ecological systems, disaster response and recovery, environmental and health justice collaboration, energy efficiency through home weatherization and public housing improvements, environmental education and conservation career development.

Indeed, **CivicGreen** values the potential development in all professions where civic engagement and professional expertise can be melded fruitfully to enhance overall community and institutional capacities for creating sustainable, resilient, and just communities in an age of climate crisis.

## Voices for National Service

Founded in 2003 as the Save AmeriCorps Coalition, Voices for National Service is a diverse coalition of national and local service programs, state service commissions, and individual champions who work together to protect and expand national service. It led the effort to design, develop, and pass the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act in 2009. It supports AmeriCorps, the Senior Corps, state commissions and other funds designed to support service.

The steering committee of Voices for National Service includes representatives of prominent service groups, such as the Corps Network, City Year, YouthBuild, Teach for America, and America’s Service Commissions, as well as Habitat for Humanity, the United Way, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), the major national community development intermediary in the field. AnnMaura Connolly serves as president.

[Policy Corner](#): provides legislative updates, a list of supporters in the bipartisan National Service Congressional Caucus, and research and reports.

Reports include:

Dominic Modicamore and Alix Naugler, *[AmeriCorps and Senior Corps: Quantifying the Impact](#)* (Fairfax, VA: ICF for Voices for National Service, July 2020). Provides a cost-benefit analysis.

Voices for National Service, [\*I Will Get Things Done for America: Celebrating 20 Years of AmeriCorps\*](#) (2014).

## Conservation corps

These engage in a range of activities: forest and coastal restoration, energy efficiency, wildfire prevention, disaster response and recovery (hurricanes, floods, wildfires, oil spills), urban forest and stream restoration. As noted above, they are an outgrowth of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, but not a direct institutional or policy legacy.

Various federal agencies partner with various Corps, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Forest Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Defense Department, and others. Scores of local and state agencies are likewise partners.

Some examples today are:

- [Corps Network](#)

The National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, now the Corps Network, was organized in 1985 and includes 133 Corps working in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. Territories. Many of these Corps were partially funded through the 1990 American Conservation and Youth Service Corps Act and are now more substantially funded through AmeriCorps. Tens of thousands of corps members are currently funded annually through AmeriCorps.

President Obama launched an initiative in 2010 to create a [21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps](#), with the collaboration of eight federal departments and agencies, as well as the support of the Corps Network. The 21CSC is a national initiative to increase the capacity of the Corps movement through expanded public-private partnerships. The vision is to annually engage 100,000 young people and veterans in service on public lands.

The 21CSC is a bipartisan idea supported by the past five Secretaries of Interior, as well as private businesses and nonprofits. The bipartisan 21CSC Act was introduced in the U.S. Senate (S.1403) and House of Representatives (H.R. 2987) in June 2017. Among other provisions, the bill would give relevant federal agencies and departments enhanced, and less burdensome, ability to engage Corps in completing priority projects.

- [Student Conservation Association](#) (SCA)

Created in 1957, SCA aims to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of the environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land.

SCA began slowly with several projects in national parks. With the blossoming of the environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, it expanded its range, including to inner-city projects in Washington, DC, Denver, and San Francisco. In the 1980s, more cities were added and new partnerships with several federal agencies were forged. These are managed through “cooperative agreements.”

In 1994, SCA partnered with AmeriCorps. In the 2000s, it added disaster response to its land conservation work. SCA has been involved in eco-recovery work after forest fires, hurricanes, floods, and oil spills. It also partners with The Nature Conservancy, as well as with corporations to provide conservation opportunities for employees and in communities. Local and state government agencies have also increasingly become partners.

SCA recruits through a national network of more than 10,000 schools, colleges, and universities. Internships range from 12 weeks to one year. Summer crews enlist youth 15-19 years old. National crews serve on projects around the country and community crews are urban-based and enlist under-served teenagers. SCA also has had a Green Cities Corps for professionals and a Veterans Fire Corps for young vets.

In 2019, SCA engaged 2,444 regular members and almost 2,000 others in one-day volunteer events. Profiles of projects can be found in SCA’s [annual reports](#).

- [Maryland Conservation Corps \(MCC\)](#):

This corps was created by the governor in 1984 after the Chesapeake Bay Agreement was signed by three states and the District of Columbia. This agreement was designed to elicit collaboration among state and local agencies, civic associations, schools and universities, as well as private farmers inland whose agricultural practices had a major impact on the 64,000 square miles that are part of the Bay’s watershed, including hundreds of rivers and streams. The state’s Department of Natural Resources and its Park Service manages corps programs, in collaboration with other local, state, and federal agencies.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also developed a Chesapeake Bay Program that has provided funds for restoration work, and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation has provided robust advocacy, as well as opportunities for environmental education and hands-on restoration. The Corps added an important ingredient to this institutional ecology.

Begun as a summer residential program, MCC became a year-round non-residential program in 1992 and became eligible for AmeriCorps funding in 1994. Crews receive environmental education, including specialized knowledge for projects in disease and pest control in forests, soil erosion, and fish habitat. They, in turn, provide environmental education to some 10,000 students per year, as well as interpretation at state parks.

See also [2018-2019 Annual Report](#) and [YouTube video](#) on MCC (5:27 minutes).

- [California Conservation Corps \(CCC\)](#)

Created in 1976 by Governor Jerry Brown, the CCC became a permanent state department in 1983. It has emergency response teams across a broad range of flood, wildfire, earthquake and other crises, as well as statewide trails and invasive species work. It also has a variety of “targeted conservation programs,” among which are:

- *watershed stewards*: this partnership of state agencies and AmeriCorps engages corps members in stream, riparian, and upslope surveys, watershed restoration projects, environmental education, and enlisting students and community members in hands-on restoration projects. Stewards work with scientists, who serve as mentors.

The Wonders of Watersheds (WOW) program brings watershed education into K-8 schools, with a special emphasis on Title 1 low-income schools. Such education includes classrooms, field trips, service learning, after-school clubs, and games.

- *veterans corps fisheries program*: partnership with the NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Forest Service, and California Department of Fish and Wildlife; it engages veterans in habitat restoration for salmon and steelhead recovery, with goal of skill and career development.
- *backcountry trails program*: an intensive five-month program of trail maintenance and construction where members live and work in the wilderness.
- *forest health*: created in July 2019, specially trained crew members remove overgrown and dead vegetation posing a fire risk. Forestry Corps members reduce the risk of wildfire by removing hazardous fire fuels, plant trees and seedlings, collect cones and seeds, fell hazard and dying trees, receive arborist training and certifications.

- [YouthBuild](#)

YouthBuild began as a grassroots effort led by Dorothy Stoneman to rebuild local housing units in East Harlem in 1978 and then across other neighborhoods in New York City. See her account in [The YouthBuild Story of Thanks](#).

In 1990, [YouthBuild USA](#) was formed to spread the model. Several major foundations backed the effort, especially the Ford and Charles Stewart Mott foundations, and in 1994 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) developed a competitive program for local initiatives. Many other corporations and foundations have since joined in support.

YouthBuild programs engage low-income young people to learn construction skills through building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people in their neighborhoods and other community assets such as schools, playgrounds, community centers, water systems, and other infrastructure. In some cases, they also help rebuilding in response to disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy.

Increasingly such training includes environmental leadership and green building certification through partnerships with the [U.S. Green Building Council](#) (USGBC), as well as with other business and labor institutes. YouthBuild's Green Initiative provides affiliates with green building, weatherization, green business, and green collar career development. YouthBuild USA is a member of the USGBC.

YouthBuild places emphasis on empowering youth and liberating their positive energy for long-term community engagement to help rebuild communities and develop their assets. Leadership development is central to its mission, as is a strong work ethic and teamwork.

[YouthBuild USA](#) has built a network of 252 urban and rural YouthBuild programs in 46 states. They are sponsored and managed by local nonprofits, community colleges, and public agencies. It provides training and technical assistance, leadership development, funding for innovative program enhancements, and advocacy for these programs.

The primary funding source for local programs since 2006 has been the US Department of Labor (DOL) through the authorized federal YouthBuild program administered by the Employment and Training Administration at DOL. AmeriCorps also provides funding.

## Future

National service has become institutionalized far more soundly in the period since 1994 than it had in previous periods of innovation. It has managed to work effectively with a broad range of nonprofit and public agencies in a more complex institutional environment, mainly through partnerships.

AmeriCorps has yielded positive gains across an array of important measures of civic engagement, personal growth, social capital, and public work, though not consistently on all of them. Studies of benefit-cost ratios, even on narrowly monetized value of work products, are generally very positive.

Areas for improvement and growth include the following:

- *expansion of AmeriCorps*: minimally, this should include meeting the targets of 250,000 members per year, as included in the [Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009](#). Given many unmet social challenges, this number could be raised significantly without veering into proposals of universal service, which are politically untenable and present various civic, administrative, and other challenges.

- *climate and conservation corps*: far more emphasis should be placed on Corps programs that enhance capacities for sustainable, resilient, and just communities in the face of climate threats over the coming decades. Many models already exist and can be leveraged much more systemically across states and communities, in frontline communities grappling with environmental and climate justice, in partnership with public agencies and other institutions, and with linkages to environmental education and career development that broadens and deepens “democratic professionalism” in all areas of work relevant to climate resilience.

To complement these initiatives, all federal, state, and local agencies with direct relevance to managing sustainability and climate challenges should be expected to develop strategic frameworks for utilizing conservation Corps more fully and effectively.

See Carmen Sirianni, “The Civics of Federal Climate Policy: Designing and Investing in Community Empowerment and Public Participation,” August 2020, in [CivicGreen Policy](#).

- *recruitment, training, retention*: enhance recruitment and retention strategies that generate greater diversity, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, without prior volunteer experience, and among young men who volunteer at considerably lower rates than women. Frontline communities should get special attention. Skill levels should be better matched to placements.
- *administrative streamlining*: needed to reduce the confusion and overlap of various programs. On this and other proposals, see Peter Frumkin and JoAnn Jastrzab, [Serving Country and Community: Who Benefits from National Service?](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), chapter 9.

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We welcome suggestions and comments to help improve this entry: [civicgreen@tufts.edu](mailto:civicgreen@tufts.edu).