

# National Service in Rural Communities



Recommendations of the Service Year  
Rural Policy Advisory Council

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## Executive Summary

National service offers a powerful strategy to enable rural areas to enlist local people in solving local challenges in a way that builds their skills and increases their commitment to the community. As public and policymaker support for national service at scale rises, making increased investments in rural communities will ensure equitable participation by rural communities. To inform the development of a rural national service policy agenda, Service Year Alliance, in partnership with Partners for Education at Berea College, convened a Rural Policy Advisory Council and surveyed service year programs regarding their experience with AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA.

Were national service to be more available under the right circumstances, it could provide a base of human capital that could solve important challenges facing rural communities, particularly those experiencing persistent poverty. AmeriCorps, the largest funding stream that supports full-time, full-year national service, incorporates important provisions that enable participation of rural communities. Despite these features, as long as resources for national service programs are limited, rural communities face disadvantages competing with communities with greater resources and population density.

To address these challenges, policy changes are needed, including:

- Creating an awareness and recruitment campaign aimed at rural communities,
- Improving transition opportunities,
- Supporting the development of intermediaries, and
- Incorporating a place focus and ensuring equitable rural representation.

# Introduction

According to the US census, about 60 million people live in rural areas, and about five million of these individuals live in areas that are not close to an urban area.<sup>1</sup> The people living in these areas share many qualities that distinguish them from urban areas: rural Americans are more likely to own their own homes, live in their state of birth, and serve in the military, compared with urban Americans. They are also older, less likely to have obtained a bachelor's degree, and less likely to have been born in other countries.

While many rural places benefit from a strong sense of community, resilience, and natural resources, they also face challenges, many of which are similar to those of urban areas. High rates of poverty, too few jobs, low-education levels, talent retention, and substance abuse problems can be found in urban, suburban, and rural areas. However, the root causes and solutions for these challenges often differ across these types of communities, and too often, the needs of rural areas receive limited attention and investment by both government and philanthropy.

National service offers a powerful strategy to enable rural areas to enlist local people in solving local challenges in a way that builds their skills and increases their commitment to the community. As public and policymaker support for national service at scale rises, making increased investments in rural communities will ensure equitable participation by rural communities.

The mission of Service Year Alliance is to make a year of paid, full-time service – a service year – a common expectation and opportunity for all Americans, including those who live in rural areas. To inform the development of a rural national service policy agenda, Service Year Alliance, in partnership with Partners for Education at Berea College, convened a Rural Policy Advisory Council and surveyed service year programs regarding their experience with AmeriCorps and AmeriCorps VISTA. This paper provides background on national service in rural America and offers specific recommendations to make national service programs more responsible to the rural experience.

## Rural America

While multiple definitions of “rural” exist – most focusing on population density – this paper places a special focus on those rural places that are far from urban centers and struggle with persistent poverty, but the policy solutions we propose would likely benefit rural communities of all types. It is worth noting that 85 percent of persistently poor places are rural, and one in five poor Americans lives in a rural area and they may carry the scars of recent loss of industry.<sup>2, 3</sup>

However, despite their challenges, the assets of rural communities offer a strong base to build on.<sup>4</sup> Rural communities themselves are deeply diverse: more than one in five are persons of color. They may be populated by Americans whose ancestors came to this nation generations ago, or they may be a community of destination for new immigrants. Beyond the scenic beauty, natural resources, and outdoor recreational opportunities that often characterize rural places, the strong sense of community found in many rural places inspires pride, a strong unifying culture, and deep personal connections. The strong social capital found in many rural areas can enable a high degree of cooperation and self-reliance, and fosters leaders who can work across sectors effectively.

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### **What is rural?**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses an “urban-centric” classification with three categories for rural:

- Fringe (5 or fewer miles from an urbanized area)
- Distant (more than five miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area)
- Remote (25 miles from an urbanized area and also more than 10 miles from an urban center)

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Nonetheless, many rural communities face problems that demand greater resources. Inadequate transportation, communications, and physical infrastructure make it hard to operate businesses and social programs, leading to limited job options and services. Education institutions at every level, as well as afterschool and other out-of-school-time program and workforce development options, are often inadequate. Access to health care is often a major challenge, and an aging population and growing number of people with long-term disabilities require services that are often lacking. In recent years, the epidemic of opioid addiction has hit rural communities hard, and contributed to rising crime rates, but too few resources are available to combat

substance abuse of all types in these communities. These challenges are also found in urban and suburban areas, but while the problems are similar, the solutions often differ.

Most government funding is “siloed,” focusing on a single issue.<sup>5</sup> In areas with low-population density, institutions cannot afford to specialize, instead offering a wider range of services, sometimes utilizing remote or roving professionals. To secure the resources needed, agency leaders must interact with dozens of systems and build relationships across a wide range of institutions. It is the rare government or nonprofit agency serving rural communities that has the capacity, knowledge, and relationships necessary to secure all the support needed to meet the needs of local residents.<sup>6</sup>

The funding itself is often structured in ways that hurt rural communities. Programs that rely on a local tax base inherently disadvantage high poverty communities. To address this inequality, organizations look to federal and state programs and philanthropy, which typically are not structured to support rural communities. On a per capita basis, the federal government has traditionally spent far less per person in rural counties compared with urban counties. Philanthropy does no better: there are 60 million rural people in the US, roughly 19 percent of the nation’s population. Yet, only five to seven percent of all philanthropic grantmaking goes to rural communities.<sup>7</sup>

# National Service

A full-time service year gives people the chance to transform their lives, make an impact in their community, and become the active citizens and leaders our nation needs. Service years offer a triple bottom line:

- **Changing Lives.** Service years build workforce skills and connections for participants, as well as a sense of efficacy and purpose.
- **Solving Problems.** Service years provide cost-effective human capital that can be directed at society's biggest challenges, like education equity, disaster response, conservation, and community development.
- **Developing Leaders.** Service years develop diverse, public-spirited, engaged citizens with the skills and commitment to work across divides and do what's right.

Federal funding supports these service year experiences through national service programs, including AmeriCorps, the Peace Corps, YouthBuild, and 21st Century Conservation Corps. The largest of these programs, AmeriCorps, includes a grant program administered through national nonprofit organizations or governor-appointed state commissions, as well as AmeriCorps VISTA and the National Civilian Conservation Corps.

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## **Program Spotlight: Preserve WV AmeriCorps**

The Preserve WV AmeriCorps program is a statewide service initiative where corps members help communities capture their local history and preserve West Virginia landmarks. The purpose of the AmeriCorps program is to increase economic and community development in West Virginia through historic preservation, heritage tourism, and capacity-building projects.

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National service has had a powerful impact in rural communities. For example, in Appalachian Kentucky, AmeriCorps is providing the people power to improve education outcomes as part of a collective impact strategy while building the capacity of nonprofit organizations in the region. And in rural New Hampshire, the Community Resource Corps AmeriCorps project helps individuals affected by substance use and behavioral health disorders identify barriers in their daily lives and helps connect them to community resources they need.

National programs can also provide expertise, brand, and infrastructure to rural areas. For example, as part of the national Conservation Legacy network, Arizona Conservation Corps' Veterans Fire Corps program provides training and on-the-job experience for post 9-11 era veterans interested in entering into careers and gaining experience in natural resource management and wildland fire. Similarly, the national LISC AmeriCorps program includes rural community placements in the Mississippi Delta, where AmeriCorps members serve with local agencies dedicated to increasing incomes and employment, reducing housing cost burdens, and engaging residents to take on community economic challenges.



# The Potential: Problems we could solve at scale in rural America using national service

Were national service to be more available under the right circumstances, it could provide a base of human capital that could solve important challenges facing rural communities, particularly those experiencing persistent poverty. For example:

- **Community Development.** National service programs, particularly AmeriCorps VISTA, have a long history developing the assets of high poverty rural areas to improve their economic base by strengthening local agencies and expanding services for low-income residents.
- **Substance Abuse.** Addressing the opioid crisis and other addictions, demands not only medical treatment, but also comprehensive holistic treatment that includes human supports to help people find the strength and resources they need to recover.
- **Education.** A majority of AmeriCorps members serve in schools and other educational settings, and have a long track record of improving outcomes for students who need additional tutoring and one-on-one time, enrichment, and behavioral supports that caring adults can provide in and outside of the classroom.
- **Transportation.** Lacking the population density to support the kind of transportation infrastructure found in urban areas, rural communities can benefit from transportation alternatives: for example, the Maroon Volunteer Center AmeriCorps VISTA Project at Mississippi State University connects volunteers with opportunities to provide transportation assistance to individuals living in poverty.
- **Aging/Disability Assistance.** Older adults and individuals with disabilities generally prefer to live in their own homes but may need assistance with daily tasks as well as occasional companionship. Time Banks, managed by AmeriCorps VISTAs, enable individuals to provide mutual support on an equal hour-for-an-hour basis – for example, an hour cooking in exchange for an hour of driving.

- **Environment.** Many rural areas face environmental challenges from polluted water and air to desertification. National service corps members can assist low-income residents to make their homes energy efficient, thereby lowering their heating bills; encourage farmers to adopt green practices that diversify and increase their yields; clean up informal dumping sites to improve the beauty of the community; and many other conservation-related activities. For example, Green Iowa AmeriCorps helps lowans with low-impact home weatherization and energy education at seven different sites across the state.
- **Public Safety.** Rural communities often depend on volunteers for public safety functions, especially emergency medical assistance and fire protection, but in some cases, struggle to maintain a strong volunteer base with an aging or transient population of retirees. National service members can offer a way to recruit volunteers and prepare community members to respond to emergencies.

While rural areas benefit from service provided by corps members, they benefit in other ways as well. In some cases, programs draw people from a national talent pool, attracting prospective residents to a place they would not otherwise experience. In most cases, however, programs engage local individuals well versed in the region, providing them the chance to contribute to their own communities and to become more committed, more likely to stay, and better able to assume leadership roles. During their time in a community, corps members build professional connections and personal friendships, become immersed in solving local problems, and develop strong connections to their communities.<sup>8, 9</sup> Research shows that AmeriCorps alumni participate in community meetings and events at higher rates than their peers, and are more likely to continue volunteering in adulthood.<sup>10</sup> They also show higher rates of

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### **Program Spotlight: Kentucky College Coaches**

Kentucky College Coaches are AmeriCorps members who focus on mentoring high school students who might not envision themselves going to college, first generation college students, and/or populations with low rates of college enrollment. Coaches are recent college graduates, who are placed in high schools around the state of Kentucky to work alongside guidance counselors and other faculty and staff supporting students as they transition from high school to college.

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social trust, with 14% more AmeriCorps alumni reporting that other people can be trusted than a comparison group.

In some cases, programs have been designed to foster these community connections. For example, in Fishers Island, Maine, Island Fellows AmeriCorps members are expected to integrate into their host communities, attend town meetings, serve on local committees, and participate in social activities while developing long-term solutions to local problems, such as energy efficiency and distance learning curricula. Of the approximately 100 Fellows who have served, 59 still live and work in Maine, and 34 of those have stayed in Maine's coastal and remote communities.<sup>11</sup> Statewide, one in three AmeriCorps members move to Maine to serve, and 28 percent of these young adults stay after their service term ends.<sup>12</sup> Nationally, about 4 in 10 AmeriCorps alumni stay in the community in which they had served following their service year, in approximately equal percentages for people who serve in their own communities and those who relocate in order to serve.<sup>13</sup>

This is likely due to the fact that following a service year, approximately one quarter of participants (27 percent) obtain a job directly connected to the organization or agency in which they served. In fact, recent research shows that about two-thirds of organizations where AmeriCorps members serve have hired at least one corps member, often into newly created positions.<sup>14</sup> National service operates as a workforce development system for nonprofits by offering individuals a paid opportunity to develop workforce skills through hands-on service.

Research demonstrates that the sense of purpose and direction developed through these experiences can inspire a young adult to pursue further education or advance on a career path, leading to future economic success, often in public service fields that are experiencing talent shortages.<sup>15</sup>

While building skills that can be useful in either the public or private sector – including for-profit businesses – national service opportunities are in fact a common pathway to a set of public service careers for which few dedicated workforce development programs exist. These include a variety of nonprofit careers (50% of VISTA alums work in the nonprofit sector), conservation (12% of park service employees come from the Student Conservation Association), education and youth development (teacher preparation programs recruit heavily from AmeriCorps), and disaster response (more than half of last year's FEMA Corps alums went on to careers in emergency management).

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***Program Spotlight: Community Resource Corps***

The Community Resource Corps is an AmeriCorps program designed to improve the health outcomes for individuals affected by substance use and behavioral health disorders. CRC members serve on health care teams to support the work of primary care clinics, behavioral health centers, and other social service organizations to support increased patient access to community resources they need.

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Studies of AmeriCorps, the largest federal national service program, confirm that corps members build both civic and 21st century job skills (such as problem solving, communication, and project management), and are highly likely to pursue careers in public service.<sup>16, 17</sup> Recent research by Burning Glass, comparing the resumes of individuals who have completed a service year with a matched comparison group, revealed distinct patterns that differentiate service year alumni from their peers, both in the careers they forge and in the skills they develop.<sup>18</sup> For example, service year alums go on to complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than their peers, are more likely than their peers to work in education and community and social services occupations, and are more likely than their peers to advertise skills related to leadership and organization.

In short, if national service were universally available, including at scale in rural areas, not only could pressing problems be solved, but a pipeline of workers and public-spirited leaders developed. In order to achieve this potential, however, several key barriers must be addressed.

# Meeting the Potential

AmeriCorps, the largest funding stream that supports full-time, full-year national service, incorporates important provisions that enable participation of rural communities. These include:

- **Acknowledgement of the triple bottom line.** Programs must articulate measurable objectives relating to the impact of the service performed, and strengthening communities – all important needs of communities of all types, including rural ones.
- **Flexibility of service performed.** Although priorities may be specified by state commissions or the Corporation for National and Community Service, programs may identify local needs and determine the intervention to be performed. This flexibility is important for rural areas that may prefer a more holistic, multi-faceted approach.
- **Program structure options.** Similarly, programs are able to work with a variety of structures, including team-based groups or individual placements at multiple sites. Rural programs are more likely than urban programs to employ a multi-site structure that places individual or small groups of corps members at multiple organizations across a region.
- **Living allowances and benefits.** All full-time AmeriCorps programs must provide a living allowance as well as health care, childcare, and education benefits. These supports are essential for low- to moderate-income individuals to be able to participate.
- **No age limitation.** While AmeriCorps specifies a minimum age of 18 (16 for youth corps programs), it does not include a maximum age for participation. Rural communities often operate intergenerational programs, including individuals changing careers and older adults with extensive knowledge of the local community.
- **National direct and state commissions.** Rural communities may be funded through state commissions, which are required to distribute formula funding equitably between urban and rural areas, state programs submitted by state commissions to CNCS, or national programs operating in more than one state.

All of these methods for local communities to access AmeriCorps resources are allowed under the AmeriCorps grant competition.

Despite these features, as long as resources for national service programs are limited, rural communities face disadvantages competing with communities with greater resources and population density. These include:

- **Awareness.** Awareness of national service as an option is low in general, and likely more so in rural areas outside of major media markets. Low awareness means that programs may not realize they can apply to operate a program and individuals may not be aware that they can serve.
- **Recruitment and Retention.** Programs may also experience difficulty recruiting and retaining corps members due to the low-levels of the living allowance, which is set to track the poverty line but very hard for people to live on if they have no additional resources to subsidize their experience, coupled with shortages of rental housing and high cost of living in remote rural areas.
- **Transition.** Programs are typically limited in the assistance they provide to corps members starting or completing their terms of service. Corps members serving in rural areas are more likely than those in other communities to do a second or even third year of service.
- **Competitive Disadvantage.** Programs that deliver a single intervention find it easier to document their impact, whereas a multi-issue program has a harder time demonstrating impact. Similarly, programs that have randomized control trials evaluating their outcome are favored, but smaller programs and those in smaller communities (typical of rural areas) have a hard time with this evaluation method as the costs are high relative to overall program costs, and it may not be workable or appropriate to randomly assign individuals to receive benefits in order to create a control group.
- **Narrative/Local recruitment.** Individuals from the community being served are often best positioned to serve with local organizations. A common perception among those who are aware of national service is a stereotype that programs are designed for a “gap year” population or for recent college graduates. Rural organizations that might otherwise participate may not find this stereotype appealing, or may prefer local participants to those recruited nationally.

# Policy Recommendations

To address these challenges, policy changes are needed, including:

- **Create an awareness and recruitment campaign aimed at rural communities.** Most organizations and individuals are unaware of the opportunity to develop or serve in national service programs. An awareness campaign could be targeted at underserved communities, including rural areas. Rural residents are more likely than urban ones to serve in the military, and there is every reason to believe that civilian national service would have similar appeal.
- **Improve transition opportunities.** Because smaller programs may have limited resources to provide transition assistance for corps members, additional resources and other strategies are needed to provide mentorship, career exploration and job placement, and college admissions and other supports at scale. In addition, increasing the AmeriCorps Segal Education Award, making it tax free, and enabling it to be used for a broader range of purposes would also benefit corps members from rural and urban areas alike.
- **Support the development of intermediaries.** Some of the most successful rural programs have involved local intermediary organizations with the capacity to apply for and manage federal grants and regional programming. Supporting the capability of community development corporations, community action agencies, resource hubs, and other regional organizations to serve as intermediaries could not only expand rural programs, but allow collective recruitment and transition efforts, and enhanced corps member and alum support.<sup>19</sup>
- **Incorporate a place focus and ensure equitable rural representation.** Place-based programming offers the opportunity for communities to come together to shape national service at scale to address priority local needs. It also enables cooperative strategies to address barriers such as housing and transportation, create enhanced social opportunities for corps members, and enlist local employers and higher education institutions to increase opportunities for corps members when they complete their terms of service. Local service year alums are a pipeline of local leadership for communities that may not otherwise have one.

## Conclusion

National service builds on the assets of rural communities while providing a solution to many challenges facing rural areas, including isolated high-poverty areas. To take advantage of this solution requires policy changes and increased funding for federal national service programs.

## Additional Information

### About Service Year Alliance

Service Year Alliance is working to make a year of paid, full-time service – a service year – a common expectation and opportunity for all young Americans. A service year before, during, or after college – or as a way to find your path – gives young people the chance to transform their lives, make an impact in their community, and become the active citizens and leaders our nation needs. Expanding service years has the power to revitalize cities, uplift and educate children at risk, and empower communities struggling with poverty. It can unite the most diverse nation in history, binding people of different backgrounds through common cause. Service Year Alliance is asking nonprofits, higher education institutions, cities and states, companies and foundations, policymakers of both parties, and people of all ages to join the movement. Learn more at [serviceyear.org](http://serviceyear.org).

### About Partners for Education at Berea College

Partners for Education at Berea College uses a place based, student focused approach to improve educational outcomes in Appalachian Kentucky. By braiding services and aligning federal, state and private funding streams, Partners for Education works to ensure all Appalachian students succeed at school.



## Members of the Service Year Rural Policy Advisory Council

- Taimarie Adams, Managing Director, Government Relations, Service Year Alliance
- Josh Davis, Vice President of External Affairs, StriveTogether
- Matt Dunne, Founder and Executive Director, Center on Rural Innovation
- Katharine Ferguson, Associate Director, Community Strategies Group, the Aspen Institute
- Shane Garver, Senior Director, U.S. Field Operations, Save the Children US
- Dreama Gentry, Executive Director, Partners for Education at Berea College
- Stephanie Lesperance, State Director, New Hampshire GEAR UP, New Hampshire College & University Council
- Darryl Lester, Director of Service Year NC, Institute of Emerging Issues at North Carolina State University
- Adam Lounsbury, Executive Director, Iowa Commission on Volunteer Service
- Rich Nickel, President and CEO, College Success Arizona
- Kimberly Phinney, Senior Fellow, Center For Rural Strategies
- Shirley Sagawa, former CEO, Service Year Alliance
- Samuel Sokolove, Executive Director, New Mexico Commission for Community Volunteerism
- Adam Strong, Research Impact Fellow, CIRCLE; Member, National Council of Young Leaders
- Cristina Trejo -Vasquez, Associate Vice President of Community Engagement and Economic Development, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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