



## NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND PUBLIC SERVICE

### MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**Subject:** Colorado Conservation Corps Members Session  
April 20, 2018

The following is a record of a facilitated discussion between the Commissioners and six AmeriCorps members who served in one of Colorado's Conservation Corps associations, which took place on April 20, 2018 at the Community Resource Center in Denver, CO. The Commissioners were divided into two groups and each group spent approximately 40 minutes with the Corps members. Commission staff were present to take notes and observe the engagement. Please note that the following is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

#### **Key Takeaways:**

The discussion included the following topics of interest.

- Most members AmeriCorps alumni members noted that a preexisting commitment to “service” was not the primary reason for joining the conservation program. Most joined for other personal reasons, but were then inspired by the spirit of service and have continued to serve in different ways.
- The Conservation Corps provides members with helpful resources in the form of non-monetary, wrap around services. This includes dedicated staff members who evaluate – and then help meet - the basic needs of each Corps member so they can focus on the service. Wrap around services include, but are not limited to, college preparation, assistance with government benefits, resume workshops, food pantry, etc. One recommendation was to mandate and standardize wrap around services available to all AmeriCorps programs and members.
- In general, the AmeriCorps alums believed that mandatory service is a good idea “in theory” because participants and communities would benefit, but they did not believe the mandate will be equitable to or well received by all. Several commented that a mandatory service requirement would have an adverse effect on their program and could ruin the trust model that has been established by programs by having people serving that don't want to be there. Regarding mandatory service learning in high school, Corps members agreed it should be mandated, particularly in high school where students are already being “told what to do.”
- Corps members discussed a variety of incentives that can be used to attract more people to public service including increasing the living stipend to above the poverty line so that service opportunities can compete with jobs, providing student loan forgiveness options, and making the education award non-taxable.
- Regarding barriers to entry, Corps members mentioned that AmeriCorps members from low-income populations have a variety of domestic problems that prevent them from serving, including the lack of childcare, financial literacy, and transportation options. Alums also noted that the stipend being below a living wage puts service opportunities in competition against minimum wage jobs.

**Meeting Discussion:**

*The Commission's meeting with six Colorado Conservation Corps members occurred in two sessions. The first group of Commissioners to engage with the corps members included Debra Wada, Steve Barney, and Shawn Skelly. The second group consisted of Dr. Joe Heck, Ed Allard, and Janine Davidson. First, corps members were asked to introduce themselves, where they served, and what attracted them to the National Service opportunity. After going around the room, the Commissioners engaged the corps members in questions related to the Commission's research objectives including mandatory service requirement, incentives, and barriers to service. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes.*

**Commissioner prompts:** *What attracted you to National Service?*

- **Response Themes:** Most members admitted "national service" was not the primary reason for joining the conservation program. Most joined for other reasons including a sense of outdoor adventure, trying something that would take them out of their comfort zone, college debt assistance, and to gain credentials and experience that would assist them in finding similar positions in the federal government.

**Member A** is a 23-year-old AmeriCorps member serving with the Energy & Water Conservation Corps where she helps low-income families save money by installing low-energy appliances. She is driven by the opportunity to help people living in poverty as she came from a similar background and understands their struggle. The gratitude she receives from the people she helps is what keeps her interested; she is not serving for the money. She also appreciates the money for college she plans to receive, stating she never imagined herself going to college, but now wants to. Member A happened into the Conservation Corps by accident; she lives in the projects across the street from the Corps office, and walked in one day. Although the pay was not good, she needed a job, and after her initial 300-hour commitment, realized she loved giving back to people just like her. She says the experience has changed her completely.

**Member B** is a two-time AmeriCorps Alum who is now working for the US Forest Service. He heard about AmeriCorps while in college ROTC. The education award is what initially attracted him to the conservation corps. He served two terms with the Student Conservation Association before commissioning into the Army. After leaving the military, Member B returned to conservation work and was involved in piloting the Veterans Fire Corps program. He found the purpose-driven mission to be similar to what he experienced with the military. He noted that the veterans in this program are looking for job skills, which distinguishes the program from other conservation corps programs. Soon after, he moved into a job as a hotshot firefighter with the US Forestry Service. Member B mentioned that the conservation corps' hiring authorities are helpful in expediting the federal government hiring process.

**Member C** is a three-term AmeriCorps Alum who has transitioned to working for the US Forest Service on a timber marking crew. Member C ended up with the Corps by accident: she was looking to be the coolest version of herself she could be, and wanted adventure; it was only through this experience that she came to appreciate the intrinsic value of service and other benefits she never expected to realize. To her, serving in AmeriCorps was a means to an end where she could gain valuable experience working with the environment; AmeriCorps service in two conservation corps associations was a stepping stone for a career in the federal government.

**Member D** is a three-term AmeriCorps alum who now serves as the Program Coordinator at the White Mountain Apache Program. He joined the Arizona Conservation Corps because he wanted to try something that would take him outside of his comfort zone. He was born in Phoenix and grew

up on a Navajo reservation. He was not predisposed to service, but the experience of working for the Conservation Corps and the sense of community and team work that accompanied the service hooked him. Now, he works mainly on 3-6 month projects. He has moved into a leadership role and tries to challenge the members who work on his teams to get them out of their comfort zones. Member D noted that a barrier to serving in AmeriCorps is the age limitation: he joined the Corps when he was 24 years old, just inside the 18-25 year old age eligibility requirement. He senses that other people in circumstances similar to him may be too old to join.

**Member E** is an AmeriCorps Alum who now works for the National Park Service's Intermountain Regional Office as a Youth Program Assistant. Her first encounter to conservation service was in high school with the Student Conservation Association, an experience that "changed her life." She knew she wanted to share this opportunity with others. After college she knew she wanted to do another tour with the conservation corps, particularly to earn an education award to help with her college debt. She has found the development outcome approach of the Corps to have had a notable impact on her and helped her to develop job skills and experience.

**Member F** is a two-term AmeriCorps Alum who served as an AmeriCorps Leadership and Conservation Corps member and Alumni mentor at Mile High Youth Corps. He joined after college and has now worked for 8 years with the Conservation Corps and manages a staff of 170 working on various stewardship projects. He grew up playing in the woods of Indiana with his brother; he was also a Boy Scout growing up and earned the rank of Eagle Scout. Originally wanting to serve in the Peace Corps, he decided to serve in a conservation corps after college because he was dating someone and thought moving abroad would limit his relationship. The Corps gave him a sense of purpose and direction. In his experience, beyond the direct impact of Corps service, the Corps also helps members who are trying to change their lives and provides a career pathway to federal government service. He noted that the National Park Service and U.S. Forestry Service have aging employee populations and the Corps provides the certifications and skills needed for those jobs.

***Commissioner prompts:** Can you talk a bit more about "wrap-around services"?*

**Member F** explained that Mile High Conservation Corps has three full-time counselors onsite to provide support and assist to Corps members during their service year. The services include meeting with Corps members to determine what basic needs the members require so they can focus on their work. The Corps provides assistance in connecting members to food assistance programs and child care. Other "wrap-around" services required include a food pantry, employment and education curriculum to prepare members to enter jobs or college, resume assistance, interview practice, and assistance with applying for federal benefits such as the SNAP program or the FAFSA for student loans.

***Commissioner prompts:** Should service be mandatory?*

**Member C** drew from her personal experience. She said she joined the Corps for selfish reasons – not because of the ethic of service - but noted that over time, the ethic of service became a part of her. She liked the idea of mandatory service but had concerns about how it would be received and was leery about how one would implement a program without seeming too "shovey."

**Member E** also liked the philosophy of mandatory service. She had concerns about equity. Not everyone is able to serve, and some people have significant financial needs to make money for their families or pay off loans.

**Member D** does not endorse mandatory service. He believes this does not square with the trust model that he has been engaged with during his years with the Corps.

**Member A** commented that her son was tasked to do service hours in his school and they did them together which provided a valuable bonding experience. She thinks mandatory community service at high schools should be required in all high schools.

***Commissioner prompts:** How could service be incentivized so more people would serve?*

**Member A** suggested advertising AmeriCorps more frequently on TV, internet, and social media, noting that AmeriCorps is nowhere on the internet or TV. She recommended going into lower-income communities and speaking about the programs to people from different backgrounds. She does not think that service should be mandatory – it sounds “horrible.”

**Member C** estimated that 85% of members and leaders are upper-middle class and white. She endorses efforts to remove the barriers to entry. She thinks the membership would skyrocket if AmeriCorps were able to provide more of the wrap-around services that Mr. Roehm discussed.

**Member D** mentioned that he deals with issues of need on a daily basis. There is a high poverty level on the Apache reservation where he does most of his work. It is difficult to get his members to communicate with him about their problems; this is a cultural issue. He said most of the AmeriCorps members have “domestic problems” such as no babysitter and lack of transportation. He identified several barriers to service. These include the onboarding paperwork to join AmeriCorps; basic financial literacy; filling out tax forms; and transportation (a “huge issue” in rural communities). He has seen people quit when transportation becomes too difficult. Mr. Trujillo also endorsed more public school investment in service.

**Member C** recommended making wrap-around service mandatory and standardized throughout all AmeriCorps programs to assist members. Increasing the AmeriCorps living stipend to above poverty-level so that AmeriCorps opportunities can compete with jobs would also help attract participants.

**Member F** noted that AmeriCorps programs are exempt from the minimum wage laws. They pay a living stipend, but not a living wage. While he loves the idea of a mandatory service requirement, he thinks that would be viable only if the programs paid a true living stipend and provided sufficient wrap-around services. He noted that it is hard to convince someone with a \$15/hour opportunity with the City of Denver to choose instead to work for AmeriCorps at \$9/hour.

**Member E** said she knows a lot of people who did AmeriCorps after college. Some were incentivized by the educational award, but the state of student loans today makes it difficult for people to serve. She recommended anything that would help people with their loans. If that were addressed, she expects many people would elect to join an AmeriCorps program. She reiterated that many do not start with a desire to serve but all (in her experience) leave with this desire.

**Member B** expressed further thoughts on the educational award. He noted that there are more options for using the award—not everyone wants to go to college, for example, but they can still apply the award. He felt AmeriCorps does not do a good job in advertising the ways in which the award can be used. Mr. Sovocool also mentioned allowing special hiring authorities for national service alums like veterans’ preference. He said for him, the ROTC scholarship was a big factor motivating him to enter military service, and suggested a similar program for non-military service.