



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

### MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**Subject:** Colorado Conservation Corps Program Leaders Session  
April 20, 2018

The following is a record of a facilitated discussion between the Commissioners and nine conservation program directors / land managers. The discussion 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 conservation program leaders, while the other group met with conservation program participants. Commissioner discussion with the program participants is captured in a separate memorandum. Commission staff were present to observe the engagement. Please note that the following is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

The participants came from the following organizations:

- National Park Service Intermountain Regional Office
- Mile High Youth Corps
- Colorado Youth Corps Association
- Conservation Legacy
- Rocky Mountain Youth Corps
- U.S. Forest Service
- The Governor's Commission on Community Service
- Corporation for National and Community Service

#### Key Takeaways:

- Many of the Conservation Corps programs use a fee-for-service model, with a majority of their funding coming from earned income.
- Corps programs rely on word of mouth, street outreach, and even Craigslist to advertise and recruit participants.
- Program leaders identified several key issues and offered recommendations that they felt were most important for the Commission to explore.
  - Increase the monetary stipend allotted to service participants;
  - Expand and streamline hiring authorities for federal agencies;
  - Overhaul USAJOBS to ease access to federal positions;
  - Introduce noncompetitive eligibility for national service programs (similar to what exists for the Peace Corps);
  - Ensure the education award earned by national service members is tax-free;
  - Emphasize the cooperative nature of the service awards (to ensure service does not become viewed through a contractual lens); and
  - Focus outreach efforts to younger participants (ages 11+).

**Meeting Discussion:**

*The Commission's meeting with program leaders occurred in two sessions. The first group of Commissioners to engage with the program leaders included Dr. Joe Heck, Ed Allard, and Janine Davidson. The second group consisted of Debra Wada, Steve Barney, and Shawn Skelly. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes.*

*During the first session, program leaders were asked to introduce themselves and their program. After going around the room, the Commissioners engaged in a discussion and ended with a "lightning round" to share their top one or two recommendations with the Commission. The second group was briefed by staff on the "lightning round" recommendations and then engaged in discussion. The following is a combined summary of the discussions.*

**Commissioner prompts:** *Offer a summary of your program, identify any barriers to service that you see, and highlight issues of concern.*

The Rocky Mountain Youth Corps started under local government in the Steamboat Springs Parks and Recreation Department. It has since turned into a 501(c)(3) non-profit. It began with a focus on 18-23 year olds, but has expanded to younger kids as well. Participants between the ages 11-15 years old work once a week and are simply "local kids on local projects." Older participants work on trail repair, fire crews, chainsaw crews, and historical preservation. They estimate that of the \$3 million needed to fund the program, 60-75% comes from earned income by the participants, 10% is federally funded, and the rest comes from private sector funds. The program has captured about 15-20 years of data on benefits to the members.

The Mile High Youth Corps has 4 career pathways, with approximately 200 youth per year focused on youth development, community impact, earth, and conservation. About 52% of the program is run by fee for service. The rest of the funding comes from a CNCS grant, followed by a Department of Labor grant.

The U.S. Forest Service uses 5000 youth annually to fight fires, manage trails, help with IT, manage fuels, etc. These youth provide an estimated \$4 million value in service. Since many of the youth with the U.S. Forest Service are from rural areas, having the economic means to serve is one of the most significant barriers to service. Being able to arrange and/or afford housing is a notable problem.

Conservation Legacy entered a 5-year agreement with the Bureau of Land Management to execute missions. The federal agencies identify the needs and the Corps provide people and matching dollars. If the organization is not working with public land authorities, the Corps cannot partner with that agency. This precludes organizations such as NOAA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Army Corps of Engineers. They are exploring ways around that.

The National Park Service noted that 60% of its youth hiring is coming through Youth Corps, because they "do great work" and the Corps bring a diversity to the applicant pool that otherwise is not present in the hiring process. The National Park Service representative noted that Corps is a way to engage in community building, and it is essential to see the partnership between the Corps and the agencies as a cooperative agreement. It is not a "contract" that looks at bids and competitive costs, but rather it is service-oriented.

The Colorado Youth Corps Association has many Corps members who want to be in public service but can't get through the federal hiring process. The cumbersome nature of the hiring process acts

as a real barrier. Colorado Youth Corps Association invested time and resources into creating a 100+ page guide for members on how to navigate USAJOBS (available free online with registration). In addition, the Corps have grown significantly from their inception and the law and hiring authorities seem outdated now. The proposals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Service Corps legislation would change these authorities and could address many of these issues.

**Commissioner prompts:** *How does your program recruit young people?*

- **Response themes:** Various Corps programs advertise in different ways, depending on the target demographic. However, very little formal marketing occurs; programs rely on word of mouth, street outreach, and even Craigslist to advertise and recruit.

One leader explained his program had zero dollars for marketing, which meant they relied heavily on word-of-mouth, estimating that to be 50% of their successes. Another program director noted they primarily used Craigslist to advertise. It is free and has been effective, stating they receive 5 or 6 applicants for every position, indicating there are not enough opportunities available to those interested. A program targeting opportunity youth indicated they used ‘street outreach’ [standing on street corners in downtown areas] to advertise. One program leader mentioned career fairs.

Multiple program leaders noted that the stipend is not keeping pace with minimum wage, making recruiting difficult. One indicated that in some counties, the program falls under the jurisdiction/influence of workforce development organizations at the local level. He thought this was useful in that it offered potential participants an alternative to temporary jobs.

One participant noted that there could be more incentives for younger children. Programs to encourage conservation, internships, and other ways to increase awareness in kids even as young as 11 would help get the word out about the Corps programs that might be an option when the children are older. Another referenced the “Learn and Serve” concept, noting that a conceptual stepladder of service is useful for middle school and high school students. On a related note, one program leader felt that when you target middle school, you tend to get “families” given the age of the children and scheduling issues – but when you target high school, you tend to just capture the student. Several program leaders then discussed their personal family situations and how service was often tough to fit in between activities like soccer and cub scouts.

One federal representative noted that internship programs are seen as wildly successful, but more and more internship programs are being ‘professionalized.’ By that he noted intern opportunities which were developed for staff support positions, such as IT, to bring in college grads and link them with federal agencies.

One leader noted that residential programs (for age 15-18 year olds) are very competitive.

One program director mentioned conducting science camps at schools to engage youth. The goal is to ensure the kids have fun while doing service.

**Commissioner prompts:** *In a ‘lightning round,’ please tell us the one or two most important recommendations that the Commission should explore?*

- Program leaders identified several keys issues and offered recommendations that they felt were the most important for the Commission to explore, including:

- Increase the monetary stipend allotted to service participants;
- Expand and streamline hiring authorities for federal agencies;
- Overhaul USAJOBS to ease access to federal positions;
- Introduce noncompetitive eligibility for national service programs (similar to what exists for the Peace Corps);
- Ensure the education award earned by national service members is tax-free;
- Emphasize the cooperative nature of the service awards (to ensure service does not become viewed through a contractual lens); and
- Focus outreach efforts to younger participants (ages 11+).

**Commissioner prompts:** *The Corps members (from the other session) discussed wraparound services and how important they were. Could you help us understand wrap-around services? A short discussion clarifying terminology followed.*

One program leader mentioned that in youth development, the focus is on overcoming adversity. The Corps follows a storming, norming, forming, and performing model. The program is aimed to develop resiliency in general. One part of the program is ATOD, which refers to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. She noted, for example, that one summer program requires members to be free of ATOD for the duration of the session (approximately 12 weeks) and that members tend to respond positively to this program requirement. She said she has heard from participants that it was “great to have a clear head,” and thought these kinds of efforts developing holistic programs were worthwhile.

Another program targeted to opportunity youth described wrap around services as anything from bus pass support to lessons on healthy relationships to career progression. The program leader felt healthy relationship training was amongst the most important services offered to young people.

A different leader expressed frustration regarding the low stipend that helps create the need for wraparound services, noting that her program has to explain how to get food stamps so participants can survive while serving because they cannot afford to live on the stipend.

One leader noted intensive support for case management requires resources. She also felt these services vary by program and therefore felt strongly that there cannot, and should not, be a national answer to what wraparound services to provide.

A federal agency representative noted the importance of ensuring agencies think broadly about engaging young people. He noted there is a cultural push to think the Corps programs are designed to facilitate federal hiring. He thinks hiring is a good side-effect, but that the goal is to develop young people. If you focus too exclusively on hiring, or treat the Corps as “contractors”, then you will miss the point of the engagement. He felt the National Park Service has a general skepticism towards outside entities, particularly the private sector, and he would not want the Corps to be seen as contractors. In his opinion, NPS likes to keep distance between outside entities, and often uses “Friends of” groups (ie, Friends of National Park Service) or Foundations to raise additional funding to offer a degree of separation between the private sector and the federal agency.

**Commissioner prompts:** *How do you feel about mandatory national service?*

One leader responded, “Don’t go national.” She felt they didn’t necessarily need to invent something new, but rather re-market existing opportunities.

Another felt there is a difference between service providing charity, service providing opportunity, and faith-based service. All were valid but in different ways. Service is about wanting to be a part of something.

One leader noted that when they engaged youth under the paradigm of “Answer the call to service” it was not effective, but when they shifted to “Find your Pathway to Service” they were much more effective. He felt choice and a sense of ownership was extremely important.