

# THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL SERVICE ON CRITICAL SOCIAL ISSUES

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# National and Community Service: Service as a Strategy to Promote Rural Development

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## Executive Summary

Poor Americans living in remote rural areas suffer from the dual effects of poverty and inadequate community infrastructures. Rural communities often lack quality, affordable housing. In many locations, industrial development has seriously degraded, if not destroyed, much of the natural environment. Health care, child care, education, and other key services for families are often scarce, if even available, requiring travel to towns or cities that are hours away. Inadequate or nonexistent services are compounded by many rural families' lack of transportation — the majority do not own cars, and 40 percent of rural areas are not serviced by public transportation. One in four poor rural families lives in a house without a phone.

There are no simple explanations for the persistence of poverty in an affluent nation like the United States. In seeking solutions to this continuing situation, experts often cite the following factors:

- The human capital in many rural communities is underdeveloped.
- Businesses with good jobs do not locate in communities that have weak human capital.
- The dominant economic development strategy — capturing the “Big Plant” — is ineffective.
- Rural communities have a long history of environmental exploitation in the name of economic development.
- Individual assistance programs do not build community assets or wealth.

- Many of the poorest rural areas have few or no community institutions that provide their young people with youth development opportunities to foster positive growth and development.
- Many rural communities experience high levels of class, race, economic, and social division.

National and community service programs — from full-time AmeriCorps members to part-time youth or senior volunteers — have played a significant role in responding to these challenges in communities that have made use of them. First, service-based community rebuilding has been a critical component in the survival of rural communities when the private sector market has failed, and traditional jobs have moved away or never existed in the first place. Service programs have helped secure employment and professional opportunities, while at the same time supported economic development solutions that minimized adverse impacts on the environment. Service has engaged young people, including middle and high school students, in reinventing their communities' economies. Service has provided additional opportunities for positive youth development, helping to counter the “brain drain” phenomenon that plagues rural areas. Finally, service has helped rebuild a corps of civically minded citizens, and in the process, created new and expanded leadership opportunities and a high degree of social capital.

Policymakers and programs in both the rural and service fields can do much to develop strong partnerships between the two communities. Much of that work will focus on redesigning and targeting service programs for greater impact in rural areas, and replicating some of the service work that has already proven to be so effective.

## Background

Tucked away in the mountains of Appalachia, on “the other side of the tracks” in the Mississippi Delta, in a *colonia* along the Mexican border, or in the small communities that dot the vast landscape of the Native American reservations, rural poverty remains out of sight and out of mind for most Americans. Many of us would be surprised to learn that of the approximately 65 million people who now live in rural America, 7.5 million live in poverty, with many more living “near poverty.” For many, the term “rural” is synonymous with “agriculture,” but only 6.3 percent of rural Americans live on farms, and only 10 percent of the rural poor are farmers. The rural poor are more likely to be married, working in service-related jobs, and less dependent on welfare than the urban poor. They are also more likely to be chronically or long-term poor than poor populations in urban areas. Child poverty is higher in rural areas than in urban areas — over half of rural children who live in female-headed households live in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

Poor Americans living in remote rural areas suffer from the dual effects of poverty and inadequate community infrastructures. Rural communities often lack quality, affordable housing. In many locations, industrial development has seriously degraded, if not destroyed, much of the natural environment. Health care, child care, education, and other key services for families are often scarce if they are available at all, requiring travel to towns or cities that are hours away. The impact of inadequate or nonexistent services are compounded by many rural families’ lack of transportation — the majority do not own cars, while 40 percent of rural areas are not serviced by public transportation. One in four poor rural families live in a house without a phone.<sup>2</sup>

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- **The human capital in many rural communities is underdeveloped.** Rural communities suffer from

a shortage of politically skilled, well-connected, and empowered leaders who can attract and generate resources, and build partnerships to put the resources to good use. These communities cannot afford or attract skilled professionals to teach their children and keep their families healthy. They lack entrepreneurs who create jobs and goods and services in response to the demands of the marketplace. And they cannot count on a skilled and educated workforce that might enable local businesses to expand or attract new employers to the area.

- **Businesses with good jobs do not locate in communities that have weak human capital.** Rural communities are trapped in a modern Catch-22. Businesses that can offer their employees decent salaries and good benefits are unlikely to locate in communities that have an unskilled workforce and a weak professional service base. Without the wealth created by these businesses, however, rural communities continue to have a weak tax base and few philanthropic resources, and are not be able to offer the many educational, health, and social services needed to build their human capital.
- **The dominant economic development strategy — capturing the “Big Plant” — is ineffective.** In many parts of rural America, large-scale industrial development is seen as an economic panacea. For many distressed areas, however, this is a potentially harmful development strategy that ignores the root causes of unemployment, which may include persistent racial discrimination in hiring and job placement, inequities in public education, environment-related health problems, lack of transportation, and limited investment in other public systems. It also overlooks development approaches that build on local talents and resources.
- **Rural communities have a long history of environmental exploitation in the name of economic development.** Many watershed areas have been damaged by acid mine drainage from abandoned deep mines and waste left by mining operations. The focus on capturing the “Big Plant” often disregards the fact that industrial development may be totally incompatible with an area’s environmental base. Rural areas are often their state’s “sacrifice areas” for corporate livestock operations, landfills, and hazardous waste incinerators.

<sup>1</sup> “Towards a Community-Based Rural Policy: Implications for Rural Health Care,” Charles W. Fluharty, Executive Director, Rural Policy Research Institute, March 27, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> “America’s Forgotten Children: Child Poverty in Rural America,” published by Save The Children, June 2002.

- **Individual assistance programs do not build community assets or wealth.** While government assistance programs do help rural families, they are not designed to build human capital or community infrastructure. Direct help to millions of families through tax credits and public assistance programs is critically important, but by directing assistance to individuals rather than institutions, these funds have not created the systems that will build the skills of low-income rural residents to allow them to become self-sufficient.
- **Many of the poorest rural areas have few or no community institutions that provide their young people with youth development opportunities to influence their positive growth and development.** Young people feel disconnected from their communities, and those who manage to succeed despite the odds leave, creating a “brain drain” that deprives the area of future leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals. Those who stay, often face a future without opportunity.
- **“Social capital” is critical for the long-term health of a community.** Rural communities where “mutual interest” is high and inclusive, integrated networks and institutions promote work effectively across class and race lines, are more successful in reducing poverty than communities experiencing high levels of class and racial division.

In sum, quality jobs will not come to, or stay in, a place where the social, economic, and environmental conditions are not conducive to long-term job retention. Without thoughtful strategies designed to build and strengthen these conditions, rural communities will be unable to break the cycle of poverty that dooms future generations to lives of poverty and desperation.

## The Roles for National Service in Meeting These Challenges

National and community service programs — from full-time AmeriCorps members to part-time youth or senior volunteers — are often referred to as the “spark plugs” that make things happen in rural America, the “yeast agents of transformational change.” Service programs, by design, tend to reject the “one size fits all” rural development strategy. Because they are locally

driven, they respect the cultural and environmental complexities that exist in a place. They are inclined to look creatively and holistically at challenges, bringing with them a range of resources to meet a range of needs. The people serving in these programs may be individuals recruited from outside the community who have specific expertise, or local people who are recruited and offered skills training by the program. They leverage additional resources and partners, engaging the community in their efforts. They also create a sense of hope and empowerment, a “can do” enthusiasm that counters the old sense of despair.

Tyrrell County, North Carolina’s investment in its Youth Corps program provides a case study of the impact service can have on a distressed rural community. North Carolina, like so many other rural states, faces a complex set of challenges: economic (persistent poverty, declines in agriculture, loss of manufacturing jobs); social (racial discrimination, lack of social infrastructure, lack of shared power); and environmental (degraded lands, loss of forest cover, declining water quantity and quality). Tyrrell County is the least populated and poorest county in North Carolina. The poverty rate is 25 percent, almost twice the state average. More than 42 percent of the county’s people of color live in poverty, compared to 15 percent of its white residents. On the other hand, Tyrrell County is ecologically wealthy — its wetlands and swamp forests provide critical habitat for a range of endangered birds and other species. Its Albermarle-Pamlico estuary, almost one-third of North Carolina’s land base, is one of the largest and most ecologically significant in the country.

Tyrrell County community leaders recognized that they had neither the infrastructure nor the large-scale workforce nor the developable land base needed to recruit large industries. A 1990 strategic planning process identified tourism as a potential economic “engine,” given the county seat’s location on Highway 64, the main route to the Outer Banks. At the time, although close to two million vehicles annually passed through Tyrrell County, almost no one ever stopped.

The Tyrrell County Community Development Corporation (CDC) was established in 1992 to build grassroots leadership and to engage both traditional and non-traditional leaders in creating new economies that are tied to protecting, enhancing, and restoring the fragile wetland environment that dominates the county.

In contrast to many of the other CDCs in North Carolina that are focused on affordable housing development or commercial development, the Tyrrell County CDC's founders felt that human development was the first critical step in addressing the issues that had plagued the county for generations. They believed that as human capacity was built, jobs and housing development opportunities would follow. They decided to focus on two primary programs: a small business incubator to enable job creation that did not rely on local government, and a youth conservation corps to enable leadership and entrepreneurial development for young adults in the region. While community members realized that some young people would always leave the area, they wanted to be sure that they at least had the option to stay, live, and work in the county.

The Regional Enterprise Incubator Network was established to encourage small business development as an alternative and supplement to county employment opportunities. The incubator supports African American- and Latino-owned small businesses while providing the administrative and business planning and management services that can make the difference in whether a business survives during the critical first three years. Many of the new businesses are being linked to the county's strategy of eco-tourism development: catering, bed-and-breakfasts, sign-making, guide services, accounting services, and insurance providers. The CDC is working to help local craftspeople establish a cooperative that will enable collective production and marketing of their crafts. Finally, it is partnering with statewide nonprofits and public agencies to strengthen the entrepreneurial training components of the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) program. CDC leaders believe that the county's future economic vitality lies in their young people's "entrepreneurial spirit" and the self-sufficiency that is enabled through locally owned small business development.

The Tyrrell County YCC provides job skills and educational training for young adults. Over the past nine years, it has helped over 120 young adults learn natural resource management skills, job skills, and life skills while completing community service projects and leadership training. Modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps programs of the 1930s, the youth corps members spend 35 hours a week in jobs skills training; five additional hours of the week are devoted

to educational, life skills, leadership, and career development training. Corps members who lack high school diplomas work to complete their GED requirements; those who have graduated from high school work on college entrance-level studies. The program promotes leadership development through rotating crew leader assignments, involvement in decision-making, and community outreach efforts.

The results of this program speak volumes about the investments made. In an area in which only 17 percent of its youth have traditionally gone on to college, 33 percent of the young people who have gone through the program have gone on to higher education, and the other 66 percent have found full-time employment in the area. The YCC program has also effectively met two critical needs for eco-tourism development. The first is the development of the programs and the physical infrastructure to enable the parks and refuges to provide an accessible, enjoyable outdoor experience for an increasing number of visitors, while minimizing their impact on the environment. The second is the building of human capital in the community so that all residents of the region experience the benefits of this carefully planned development through better education, more economic and employment opportunity, and improved quality of life.

One of the keys to the success of the Tyrrell County YCC has been the range of cross-sector partnerships that were developed to support it. The program has been developed, administered, operated, and evaluated by community members and volunteers. Faith leaders, elected officials, educators, farmers, agency staff, foundation leaders, retirees, parents, grandparents and siblings — people of all ages, races and backgrounds — have been core partners. As a result of this process, according to one of the partners, "entrenched biases in the community have been reduced . . . there have been distinct changes in some individuals' openness to working in positive ways with people of color."

These strategies and programs are helping to build the civic capacity and engagement in the overall development plans, while also ensuring that secure employment and professional careers are directly tied to careful and sustainable enjoyment of the area's natural heritage. The cars are now stopping to see the sights, and the young people have a reason to stay home.

What do you do when traditional jobs have moved away, or were never there in the first place? Service-based community rebuilding is critical for the survival of rural communities in which the private sector market has failed.

A key goal of rural development is helping people who are committed to “place,” stay and thrive in that place when the private sector market does not function. Rural CDCs, like the one in Tyrrell County, provide examples of community development agencies that do just that by looking holistically at their challenges and using service as a strategy to redevelop their communities.

Another interesting model is the Quitman County Development Organization (QCDO), located in the Mississippi Delta. In the decades from 1950 to 1990, more than half of its mostly African American residents left Quitman County. Only a little more than 10,000 people live there today, and nearly 32 percent of them live in poverty. For the past 25 years, however, QCDO has provided the residents of Quitman, Panola, and Tallahatchie Counties with the resources they need to help themselves:

- QCDO develops, manages, and rehabilitates affordable housing; offers pre- and post-purchase counseling and follow up services for first-time home buyers; and provides low-interest loans and grants for housing rehabilitation. It recently completed a duplex community providing homes to 24 families. It owns and manages 14 single-family homes, and has rehabilitated more than 140 homes within its three-county service area.
- In 1998, QCDO began its Micro-Enterprise Development and Business Loan Program to stimulate and support business development by women and minorities within its service area. The program provides micro loans, gap financing and training, and technical assistance to support trucking, restaurant, day care, and other local businesses.
- QCDO has operated its Child Day Care Center on the campus of a local high school since 1994. The Center serves up to 49 children between 6 weeks and 4 years old. It also provides jobs to 12 low-income mothers.
- In 1981, QCDO established a credit union to meet

the needs of low-income families and individuals unable to obtain conventional credit. Today, the credit union has 3,500 members, has made over \$12 million available in loans, and has assets of \$5 million. It also operates the Youth Credit Union Program to help young people develop organizational and business skills. The Credit Union also owns a youth-run store that offers Internet services after school. This program has 525 members.

- QCDO provides a host of social services to the community, including financial counseling, a food pantry and homeless shelter, after-school tutoring and homework help, a health monitoring service for isolated elderly people; and notary services.

The AmeriCorps\*VISTA program has provided consistent, long-term support to QCDO. The agency hosts two or three AmeriCorps\*VISTA members each year, all of whom are from the community. They provide the organization with much needed staff support and specialized training. According to Robert Jackson, the head of the agency, AmeriCorps\*VISTA and other AmeriCorps service programs, such as Save the Children and the Delta Service Corps, have made it possible for people from the community to support the good work of the agency through service. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for QCDO to find the resources to add regular employees to its staff to perform the functions now performed by AmeriCorps\*VISTA members. In addition, many of the members have stayed with QCDO as full-time employees or have gone on to other employment opportunities after their service years have ended. One former AmeriCorps\*VISTA member is now the Branch Manager at the Credit Union, another developed the Individual Development Account (IDA) program at the Credit Union, and a third runs another CDC, also in the Delta. They are all committed to the Delta, they have stayed in the Delta, and they are helping make the Delta a better place to live.

Serious problems exist in rural communities where jobs are scarce. One place where the market has functioned poorly is in Indian Territory. The Navajo Nation, for example, covers a geographic area of 25,000 square miles and has approximately 300,000 residents living in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Almost 60 percent of Navajo families live below the poverty level. A critical

subset of the Navajo poor are Navajo Veterans — those who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, from World War I through Desert Storm. The challenges facing Navajo Veterans and their families are complex — they have difficulty acquiring services because of the language and cultural barriers they face when interacting with outside agencies. Families have difficulty obtaining basic services for their children because of the extreme living conditions (sparse telephone service, lack of running water and electricity, isolation, and inadequate housing). A new AmeriCorps program, Strengthening Alliance of Veterans and Families (SAVF), hopes to meet and reduce these challenges.

SAVF focuses on ensuring that Navajo Veterans and their families are accessing and being provided quality health care and other social support services. All of the AmeriCorps members in the program are from the Navajo Nation, and are either Veterans, spouses of Veterans, or dependents of Veterans. In addition to the health care and social service outreach that they do, the AmeriCorps members provide home maintenance support that allows older Veterans to remain in their homes more safely and comfortably. The members work with the children of Veterans, ensuring that they are ready for and succeed in school. The AmeriCorps members do not do this all by themselves, but rather recruit other Veterans and community volunteers to help sustain this support network. The SAVF AmeriCorps members have also created partnerships with other service programs (Save the Children, the Foster Grandparent Program, and various service-learning programs) to leverage additional resources for greater impact. Finally, the AmeriCorps members themselves receive specialized professional training “to improve their service to our Navajo Veterans and their families.” Many of the younger Navajo members have now taken jobs in the building trades, jobs that did not exist prior to this service program. The SAVF is working to create a sense of community and a sense of hope for the Navajo Nation.

**It doesn't work to talk about “good education” as a rural development strategy. Young people need to be engaged in redeveloping and reinventing the economies of their communities.**

Rural schools can help revitalize their communities when school studies and activities relate to the needs, resources, and places where they are located. Such is the

case in Lubec, Maine, a town where fishing has always been a way of life. With the collapse of Atlantic commercial fisheries in recent decades, the economy built on catching and processing fish has dwindled. Per capita income is about \$9,000 per year, and the unemployment rate for September 2000 stood at 10.4 percent. However, farming fish and other forms of ocean life is becoming a viable opportunity for those with scientific and technological know-how. Students at Lubec High School are taking advantage of this opportunity, and are working to turn things around in Lubec with an innovative aquaculture program that teaches science and business skills while creating new economic hope for the town.

Students and teachers in Lubec, with considerable help from community volunteers, have built a state of the art aquaculture center for raising several species of fish in a laboratory setting. Students have also devised tanks for raising algae for shellfish experiments, and have helped design and build a 400-foot greenhouse connected by pipes to the fish tanks. This enables nutrient-rich wastewater to be used to grow vegetables hydroponically. Lubec's students are developing entrepreneurial skills by contracting with the local grocery store to sell their lettuce, cabbage, squash, hot peppers, and flowers.

Students involved in the aquaculture activities are noticeably more motivated in school as they discover how their schoolwork addresses local problems. In addition, collaborations between the students and working members of the community have stimulated the students' interest in critical civic issues. They know that their work is making a difference — jobs are being created, resources are coming into the community, and their futures (and their families' futures) are looking brighter. They are assets, not liabilities, to their community, helping to build a new economy, a new life for their community, while at the same time remaining respectful of their past.

**Rural communities must fight “brain drain.” They must demonstrate through their investments and actions that youth are important to their long-term well-being.**

“Community development can't happen without youth development,” according to Francisco Guajardo, a teacher and founder of the Llano Grande Center, which serves the border towns of Edcouch and Elsa,

Texas — the second poorest area in the state. Ninety percent of the homes in Edcouch/Elsa have an income under \$10,000 and 9 out of 10 parents don't have a high school diploma. For years, the community has been isolated geographically and socially. Its history dates back to the early 1920s when real estate and development companies came into the area and created what is still known as the "Magic Valley." Its agriculture-based economy, which was profitable for a few families, was built on the backs of Mexican laborers and neglected the educational development of these workers and their children. The community has been searching for economic, educational, and political reinvestment.

The Llano Grande Center is the product of a group of local youth who grew up in this South Texas community in the early 1980s, left to attend college, and are beginning to "come home." In creating the Center, they were responding to a perceived vacuum in progressive leadership and a youth culture whose talents were latent. Formalized in 1997 with support from the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the Center today focuses on youth development, youth engagement, and youth leadership as the cornerstones of its community building initiatives. Signifying its most celebrated impact, are the 51 local students the Center has helped to attend Ivy League colleges over an eight-year period. Dozens more have gained admission into other very competitive universities across the country. Even more extraordinary are the many students who have returned to the community after graduating.

In addition to its pre-college advising programs which include student visits to elite colleges, the Center: sponsors an institute to build young people's media skills; organizes a seminar series through which students, teachers, and community members discuss issues such as education, economy, and sustainable development; and publishes a dual language journal dedicated to sharing the stories of community members. It has supported student production of a documentary film about their community, offered space and student support to the local chamber of commerce, and designed an innovative Spanish immersion institute for students from outside the community to hone their language skills by spending three weeks with a local family — and bringing much-needed dollars into the local economy.

Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia is another isolated, persistently poor community that has invested heavily in its children. The residents of Big Ugly Creek live an hour's bus drive from local schools, one to two hours from the nearest major city, a half hour from any store, gas station, library or public building, in a county without a movie theatre, public swimming pool, or public recreation center. Less than half of the adults in the county have high school diplomas, 43 percent of the children live in poverty, and unemployment hasn't dropped below double digits in years.

When the local elementary school was forced to close in 1993, the community was devastated. Parents, however, organized to get control of the school building. After a two-year fight, they won the battle to lease and then purchase the old school building for one dollar, and the Big Ugly Community Center was established.

Children who come to the Center participate in structured activities sponsored by the nonprofit, Step by Step, including West Virginia Dreamers, an innovative after-school and summer program that awards students with a \$50 scholarship for exploring their dreams. Each year, the young people declare one dream that they want to pursue and program coordinators work with each child to help turn this dream into reality. Whether their goal is to make the world's biggest pancake, take fiddle lessons, go white water rafting or act in a play, children stretch themselves and their families.

The program design is based upon a few core principles. First, children stay in the program until they graduate from high school. This continuity ensures that skills and behaviors are reinforced over time. Second, a core group of adults make a long-term commitment to work with the children. Some of these adults have gone on to join AmeriCorps and are taking leadership roles designing new programs and activities. Third, the value of hope and the ability to go after dreams is central to all parts of the program.

The synergy created by the community's investment in its children has infused a full continuum of community education programs, including playgrounds, GED classes, a teen jobs program, and family reunions that attracts as many as 200. Step by Step's nonprofit status has served as a vehicle for the community to win national competitions for arts, service-learning, and after-school grants. In addition, through its partnership

with Save the Children, AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps\*VISTA members have provided over 25,000 hours of service to Dreamers' communities, tutoring children, making home visits, supporting after-school programs, and creating computer labs to help bridge the digital divide.

### **Rural communities need to support an entrepreneurial spirit, to create and strengthen internally grown small business enterprises.**

Rural Action, located in the Appalachia region of Ohio, envisions a region of clean streams, healthy forests, thriving family farms, meaningful jobs for everyone, effective, well-funded schools, and lively towns that remember local history and celebrate their stories. This vision is becoming a reality largely because of a long-term investment in Rural Action's *Strategy for Rural Renewal* by the Corporation for National and Community Service. In 1994, the Corporation placed 18 AmeriCorps\*VISTA members with Rural Action to help implement its Strategy for Rural Renewal. At that time, Rural Action had two staff members, a small attic office, one computer, a very modest budget of \$16,000, and 13 citizen-based committees working on some aspect of sustainable development. Today, Rural Action has 30 paid staff (13 of whom are former AmeriCorps\*VISTA members) working out of six offices, with a budget of \$1.6 million.

At the core of Rural Action's programs are its AmeriCorps\*VISTA members, many of whom are selected from the communities in which they were raised. Working in communities, they develop citizen-based "action teams" that are tasked with "visioning" a new reality for their communities. Once the visioning process has taken place, additional AmeriCorps\*VISTA members who have some specialized training in subjects such as hydro-geology, cultural geography, journalism, photography, fund-raising and membership development, and forestry, work with the community members to help make their visions real. By sharing their skills with community members, the AmeriCorps\*VISTA members allow the communities to bypass the expensive route of highly paid consultants who come in to "fix their communities." By putting the skills in the hands of local people, the stewardship of the region is then owned by the people of the region.

With the help of its AmeriCorps\*VISTA members, Rural Action has developed an approach to economic development that centers on four principles: keep local dollars local, use resources sustainably, build on unique local assets, and expand local ownership and options. Given the lack of an industrial base in this part of Ohio, small business and microbusiness development and expansion provide the most likely opportunity for economic development. Since 1995, Rural Action has been working with agricultural and forest-based enterprises, a sector that is often overlooked by business development programs. One of its most promising projects is *Good Food Direct!*, a guide to ordering fresh foods in season from local producers. Its Sustainable Forestry program has advanced the local capacity for herb and mushroom cultivation through workshops on cultivation, site visits to identify the best places to grow herbs and mushrooms, and research on different growing techniques. Another Rural Action program, Roots of Appalachia Growers Association (RAGA), is a support network for growers of ginseng and other woodland medicinals. The many RAGA members gather monthly to discuss any number of topics, including agricultural tax issues, recent legislation that may impact their business, and value-added products.

### **Rural communities must commit to rebuilding a corps of civically minded citizens, and, in the process, create expanded leadership opportunities and a high degree of social capital.**

For years, Western Maryland has suffered from high rates of unemployment, poverty, teenage pregnancy, child abuse, neglect, binge drinking among young people, and academically low-scoring students. As a collaboration of over 20 service sites and other community organizations, **A STAR!** In Western Maryland (**A STAR!**) is helping to address those challenges.

For eight years, **A STAR!** has been a catalyst for change in Western Maryland. It has recruited and graduated 244 AmeriCorps members, almost all of whom are from the local area. These members have: served in the public schools to increase the one-on-one attention given to students; provided after-school and other support services to adjudicated, abused, abandoned, and other at-risk youth; helped to ensure that people needing access to food, clothing, shelter and independent living assistance receive the necessary

services; and promoted safe, healthy, and sustainable forms of land use, including alternative agriculture and outdoor recreation programs. Finally, the AmeriCorps members, working out of their home site at Frostburg State University, have recruited and trained hundreds of additional local volunteers for their programs.

**A STAR!** is committed to working with the community and building the capacity of its partners to meet the needs of the community. For example, through its eight years as **A STAR!** service site, the Western Maryland Food Bank has expanded its food distribution network from approximately 65 participating agencies to 130 organizations that distribute nearly 2 million pounds of food each year to local families. It has relocated its warehouse to a newer, more modern facility, and is now generating enough revenue and to sustain a full staff without needing federal assistance. Another service site, Turning Point of Washington County, was able to launch its Transitional Age Youth Program with the help of an **A STAR!** AmeriCorps member. This program serves young people, ages 17 to 21, who are in need of vocational and other life skills, and who have been diagnosed with mental illness. After just one year as an **A STAR!** service site, the program is able to operate without the assistance of AmeriCorps funding.

One of the main goals of **A STAR!** is to develop its AmeriCorps members into effective leaders who will continue to be engaged in their communities beyond their year of service. During their time in the program, they receive specialized training to help them perform their service activities as efficiently and effectively as possible. They also attend workshops that cover a variety of topics, including conflict resolution, cultural awareness, facilitation skills, service-learning, and volunteer management. Additional training includes a citizenship curriculum that helps members build an ethic of civic responsibility and community leadership. In their communities, **A STAR!** AmeriCorps members continue supporting the efforts of organizations to meet their volunteer needs by encouraging others to volunteer, assisting with volunteer training, and advocating for people in the communities who rely on their service. The program is designed to provide members with a network of peers who can assist organizations and communities in accessing much needed resources.

### Rural communities must protect and restore the environment.

The community's relationship to nature is one of the key determinants of what is rural. Rural communities are not artificial constructs that can be laid upon the landscape. They require a symbiotic relationship with "place"; otherwise, they are not rural. When rural development destroys or seriously degrades the natural environment, it destroys the core basis for "ruralness."

Southwestern Pennsylvania, for example, is a place of great beauty, often missed because of the region's overshadowing problems. Acid mine drainage (AMD) is the most devastating and widespread environmental problem, as well as a significant economic and social constraint. AMD&ART, a nonprofit organization located in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is trying to address this problem through a holistic, collaborative, and interdisciplinary approach that integrates AMD remediation with economic development and community renewal.

AMD&ART's pilot project in Vintondale, Pennsylvania, was conceived as a large-scale artful and educational public place that would draw attention to the problem of AMD, while at the same time bringing new life to abandoned mine lands. A professional team consisting of a scientist, a historian, a landscape designer, and a sculptor worked with AmeriCorps members, AmeriCorps\*VISTA members, and community members to design and build the site on 35 acres of reclaimed mine land. This approach has provided an arena large enough to support the interests and concerns of the community. It has turned aerators into fountains, limestone ditches into waterways, settlement cells into ponds and wetlands, and industrial sites into historical "ghosts" that invite reflection.

Alan Comp, the founder of AMD&ART, describes AmeriCorps as a model for "low cost and highly effective project support for deep community engagement, and for fresh insights and perspective as each new generation of AmeriCorps finds its feet and brings its special skills to AMD&ART." This year AMD&ART is hosting a 28-member AmeriCorps\*VISTA team, with each member working with individual watershed groups across five state lines. The members working with this program also bring specialized training. For example, one of this year's AmeriCorps\*VISTA

members is a biologist, specializing in plant diversity. Another has a degree in fine arts/painting, and will put his skills to work as the project's Education Coordinator. A third member has a degree in history, and will provide on-site historical information about the town and project to all who visit the site.

The full economic impact of AMD&ART's projects is difficult to determine, but some of the more tangible results of the remediation projects, such as restored fish habitats, bring measurable gains. In the Appalachian region, the average recreational fisherman spends between \$20 and \$31 each day. More opportunities for hiking, bicycling, boating, and other recreational sports will bring additional benefits. In addition, the AMD&ART sites will contribute to the area's tourism economy, thereby generating demands for new service-oriented businesses. Clean water, recreational opportunities, and imaginatively designed public places will make communities more attractive to businesses and employees. Local residents will enjoy the immediate benefits of clean water and reclaimed land, as well as the secondary economic benefits that will follow community improvements.

## Recommendations

Policymakers and programs in both the rural and service fields can do much to develop strong partnerships between the two communities. For example,

- Service programs, particularly those of the Corporation for National and Community Service, can be targeted to ensure that more rural youth have the opportunity to engage in service activities that further their academic learning, help them attend college, develop their job skills, and connect them to their communities.
- More specifically, state and federal policy makers can increase funding and support for rural youth corps programs that provide young people with job skills, education, life skills, leadership, and career development training.
- Policy makers can provide exemptions to the current limitations in the AmeriCorps program — specifically, those relating to costs-per-member caps and program size — which limit the scope and impact of the program in rural areas.

- Full-time service opportunities that include a living allowance and benefits must continue to be available to enable more members of the community to participate in community-building work.
- Service learning programs that successfully connect school studies and activities to the needs and resources of their rural communities can be replicated in other rural communities. Best practices can be collected and shared with rural schools that are ready to implement programming.
- More rural CDCs can partner with AmeriCorps\*VISTA for capacity-building and staff support, enabling them to offer more critical services to more people in their communities.
- AmeriCorps\*VISTA's successes in microenterprise development, community asset building, and youth entrepreneurship programs can be replicated in rural communities across the country.
- The “professional corps” model can be expanded to supply a skilled workforce to rural areas. These hard-to-fill positions would be designated for AmeriCorps members who are paid regular salaries and receive education awards as added incentives.

## Conclusion

National and community service can be an effective strategy for rebuilding human capital and community wealth assets in distressed rural areas. Among other things, service helps create “youth-supportive” communities, viewing young people as resources and providing them with the skills and training they need for positive growth and development. Service supports an entrepreneurial spirit through small business development and support for unique local assets. Service often brings together members of a community in pursuit of a common goal or vision — creating partnerships with and bridges among people of different races, ages, and backgrounds who may have never worked together before. In sum, service-based community rebuilding allows people who are committed to “place” stay and thrive in that place, even if the private sector market has failed.

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