



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND  
PUBLIC SERVICE  
MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

**Subject: Discussion with National Service Program Directors**

The following is a record of a meeting with Commission staff and service program managers, which took place on May 11, 2018 at City Year headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts. At the meeting, participants discussed perspectives on national service programs, from the perspective of first- and second-tier managers. The conversation was facilitated by Vice Chair Mark Gearan for the first group of commissioners and Steve Barney for the second; and included all Commission members present for the Boston trip. Some members of the staff were in attendance. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

**Attendees:**

- Commissioners: Chairman Joe Heck, Vice Chair Mark Gearan, Vice Chair Debra Wada, Avril Haines, Steve Barney, Janette James, Tom Kilgannon, Ed Allard, Alan Khaezi, and Shawn Skelly.
- Commission Staff: Annie Rorem, Jud Crane, Sandy Scott
- Representatives from Service programs included:
  - Meagan Cox, City Impact Manager, The Mission Continues Massachusetts
  - Emily Haber, CEO, Massachusetts Service Alliance
  - Colleen Holohan, Director, Massachusetts Promise Fellowship
  - Sherry McClintock, Massachusetts State Director, Corporation for National and Community Service
  - Beth McGuinness, Director of Programs, Massachusetts Service Alliance
  - Kat Roach, Program Coordinator, AmeriCorps Legal Advocates of Massachusetts
  - Daniel Schell, Program Coordinator, AmeriCorps Cape Cod
  - Janeen Smith, Mass Mentoring Partnership
  - Beth Zschau, Massachusetts Program Director, FoodCorps Massachusetts
  - Jonathan Palumbo – Managing director of City Year Boston
  - Erica Pike – Vital Village Center at the Massachusetts Hospital

**Key Takeaways:**

- Program directors spend a lot of their time promoting their participants to future employers – a national-level marketing & awareness plan for employers that communicates the value of employees with service experience would alleviate much of this work.
- Several organizations had partnered with academic institutions to earn degree credit for their participants, which they recommended for Commission consideration.
- On measuring return on investment, program directors generally found their performance was measured primarily by output as reported to CNCS, but more focus could be brought

on measuring the impacts – such as the [Empowered Veteran's Index](#) used by The Mission Continues.

- It takes service members some time to become effective in their work, underscoring the value of a sustained service commitment.

### **Meeting Discussion**

#### **Group 1: Barriers to Service**

*Vice Chair Mark Gearan kicked off the meeting by asking participants if they could commend the Commission to think about propensity and barriers to service.*

One participant identified a common impetus for service, strengthening America and keeping it safe. She posited that the conversation around military, national, and public service could be more intertwined, helping participants not just find their first four-year commitment but a pipeline for continued service. With The Mission Continues, they had found that a lot of veterans had a desire to continue serving but wondered “what’s next?” When prompted on barriers, she said financial barriers were significant for people, particularly in larger cities. Figuring out ways to incentivize the public service award, such as getting more universities to agree to do public service education award matching.

Another said student loans were a big deal for certain participants; he recalled his personal experience with hearing about loan forbearance – only to discover that that was only for federal loans and when they are paid off on the back end they’re taxed. He posited that unless people have personal access to a safety net, service is a large economic gamble.

Another participant recalled her personal experience looking for an opportunity when she started her career in service, and when she gained an opportunity to teach a college class on service it motivated her to stay in school. Her organization sees alums come in to get a lot of experience for another opportunity. As for financial barriers, her organization has a partnership with Northeastern University for free classes while in service programs, which provides more funding for those from low-income backgrounds.

One participant said that all the participants at her organization were involved in capacity building, vice direct program service. She suggested that most want to address problems that they see in their community. Her organization started a partnership to get a youth development certificate. CNCS partnerships make it easier to form those partnerships with educational organizations. Her organization seeks diversity in participants, but most host sites do encourage candidates to have a bachelor’s degree before applying. Janeen claimed a stronger overall message about service would also help market individual sub-programs and helpful to recruit applicants.

One individual said she did not participate in AmeriCorps, but as an employer, now sees the value of the program but there could be more marketing done on the employer side, as lack of awareness is a barrier for participants moving on.

#### **Increasing Awareness for Employers, Higher Education**

*Vice Chair Gearan asked for a little more from the service managers on the idea of an awareness deficit as a barrier – and asked if a unified message would itself become a barrier.*

One participant agreed with the challenge of taking the many disparate forms of service and forming a unified value proposition. She identified forming relationships with higher education institutions, particularly a goal of every AmeriCorps program having a partnership with a college, as a way of promoting that message.

One participant supported the employer-side marketing, saying employers should see AmeriCorps and veteran experience as a selling point for prospective employees. There is a big difference between how AmeriCorps and veterans are received, but the question is how to amplify both. She suggested home-buying support as an incentive for those who had done either form of service.

*Ed Allard asked those around the table how they learned about AmeriCorps, and then what inspired them to join.*

One participant raised that, as one of the few non-AmeriCorps alums in the room, his personal experience was in working for the Governor of Massachusetts on education policy where they identified an issue with having one of the top education results but also significant gaps. While reviewing school programs to address those gaps, he learned about City Year – a way to support students who were falling behind – and was fascinated by the program. This individual mentioned he has now been working for City Year for seven years and stays, “because the program works.” After 20 years working in public education policy, he still finds the results astonishing.

One participant mentioned she had always been involved in service growing up, as she was taught service was “the price you pay” for having privileges as an American. Now that AmeriCorps has been around over 20 years, they are starting to get participants who joined because they were helped by an AmeriCorps member – who inspired them in turn to join AmeriCorps. ServiceLearn was a way to introduce people to that value – and there could be an opportunity to introduce those concepts even earlier.

*Debra Wada asked what percentage of the AmeriCorps population are also veterans.*

One participant mentioned her organization has a fellowship program for veterans and “service platoons” who are mixed veteran/non-veteran. She raised that some AmeriCorps members are experiencing secondary-trauma and having veterans around to support them is helpful.

Other participants mentioned having veterans in their programs, but not programs designed specifically for veterans. Another mentioned that other states, such as Washington, had a successful VetCorps, but that wasn’t as strong in Massachusetts.

One participant mentioned her program did not have a lot of veteran programs, or members who are veterans themselves – but some younger ones did not want to identify as veterans because of bad experiences or disagreeing with what they were asked to do while in the military. Her program had been able to get access to the National Guard with SeniorCorps, but a lot of the National Guard “did not want to deal with them.” The problems extended to VISTA members, particularly in Maine, not getting access to the military.

### **Group 1: Measuring Service**

*Vice Chair Gearan asked participants how they measure effectiveness or impact. The Commission is going to be called to justify big ideals – and he posited there was a tale to tell on effective service.*

One woman said her organization measures two components: Federal requirements, asked by CNCS, which are national performance measures that all AmeriCorps programs need to respond to;

and the materials the NGOs use to make their case for efficacy in a broader effort of evaluation/performance measurement. She said in terms of national performance, different program areas and output levels are measured - a lot of focus is on output, but over the last 5-6 years an increasing emphasis on what it means to the Corps member. Another participant said her organization uses an excel spread sheet to track metrics, and while she keeps up with her personal clients, it was harder to measure how the program impacted the entire community. Another participant shared that her organization, The Mission Continues, created an [Empowered Veteran's Index](#), which measures 3 points: personal growth, connectedness, and community impact.

*Ed Allard asked the representative from The Mission Continues how that organization measure connectedness.*

Meaghan answered by detailing the methodology, which centers on surveys asking at various points about the veteran participant's transition, integration, and involvement with other programs or agencies.

*Tom Kilgannon asked if participants would share a specific example of an individual whose life they had changed.*

One participant shared a story of a veteran that she met during a baseball game at Fenway, who in turn shared that getting involved in her organization had saved his life from suicide – as the veteran had felt disconnected, struggled with reintegration and finding a sense of purpose. The fellowship with her organization allowed him to serve 20 hours a week with a stipend at a non-profit at his choice – but the veteran also received career coaching. It is now six years after his fellowship, and he is applying to be an executive director with the organization.

One participant shared that she was a Division-1 athlete, and her AmeriCorps service put her over in Jamaica Plain, where a teacher connected her with a young man whom she would take to basketball games to work on math or use comic books to develop reading skills. That young man developed a love of reading, and they met every weekend for 7 years – until he went to high school. The young man is now employed at a local hospital – and Sherry asserted if it was not for AmeriCorps, he would not have been able to “cross the gap.”

*Tom Kilgannon followed up by asking how that made an impact on her.*

She answered that education is her top interest, she worked at Northeastern for a little while but transitioned to CNCS. There's always a new kid like the one she helped, and a lot of them are missed.

*Tom Kilgannon asked participants, to the extent they understood military service, what did they see as the greatest similarity and greatest difference.*

One participant said the similarities were a strong desire and commitment to serve the country and to help people. The differences is in the work on the ground – which inherently attracts different people. A lot of AmeriCorps personnel working with high schoolers hear youth say college is not an option – so their only choice is to join the military.

### **Group 1: Mandatory or Voluntary Service**

*Ed Allard asked the group's opinion on mandatory or volunteer service.*

One participant said he supported voluntary service. He continued that having an engaged group of individuals who are motivated to serve makes a difference, as contrasted with his experience in

NCCC – where participants sometimes did not want to be there and viewed the program as a “last-ditch option.”

Another participant said she also supported voluntary over mandatory service, recalling her experience with parents who were worried about their child continuing to college.

*Vice Chair Gearan asked if the answer would change if the circumstances were flipped: if service was possible with universal access to some incentivized structures.*

One participant opined that there was a lot of value in being pushed out of your comfort zone – and a lot of opportunities would follow.

### **Group 1: How long should service be?**

*Ed Allard asked if they had any sense of how much time it took for participants to get immersed in the experience, and how long before the benefits emerged.*

One individual said that experiences varied person to person. Janeen continued the benefit is in immersing yourself in the community – and a year is not long enough to do so.

### **Group 2:**

[Commissioners switched, participants stayed. **Annie Rorem** recapped the conversation from the first group discussion].

*Steve Barney teed off the discussion asking how the Commission should understand the obstacles others have identified. He continued that one barrier is to work on the reputation of the programs, suggesting that if we could just increase the perception of the prestige of the people who take on these challenging jobs, that would be helpful – both for communities and for employers. He mentioned that he’s heard this kind of service is a privilege with many individuals explaining they had to have a second job to have the privilege to serve. Mr. Barney said he understands the stipend is not a living wage, and that if participants could not fall back on family they could not have pursued the opportunity to serve.*

One participant mentioned that the performance of different City Year programs is not known outside of the region. There had been a lot of focus around veteran employment, and companies are starting to realize the benefits – a similar campaign around the skills of AmeriCorps would be useful. Understanding not only what people did, but also what they gained from their experiences could help employers understand what value former service participants would bring as employees.

Another participant added his organization sees that when members apply for federal jobs – veteran and VISTA get hiring preference, but that is not the case across the board. He mentioned it would help if there was a federal hiring preference

One individual said her organization is working to ensure everyone who wants to can graduate with a certificate in social justice.

Another individual added when she was working with City Year Boston, if you go through a year you can elect to take a teacher pathway, and work on a degree during the second year of service and earn an automatic interview with Boston Public Schools. Working on a corporate analogue would be helpful.

One woman said for her organization, scaling up the awareness of the programs and their value would also free up manager resources, implying that the managers spend a lot of time trying to promote their participants to potential employers.

One participant proposed a research idea to examine the performance of former service participants against similarly experienced or entry level employees.

One participant claimed to need to make a “sales” pitch to explain to her peers why she participated in AmeriCorps and asked rhetorically how the network of service would elevate the discussion beyond the stipend received by AmeriCorps participants.

***Jeanette James** prompted the group on the notion of prestige, asking how people view a service year verses making a lot of money. She mentioned that one question the last discussion covered was how many did service in high school. To establish the ethos of service – one idea is to require some form of service while students are in high school or junior high. She asked the group, what they would think of not requiring or mandating, but creating an expectation of service.*

One participant responded by describing the importance of conveying how meaningful the service is. She gave the example of spending an hour making boxes for something without understanding the idea behind it—that is not going to create a culture of service.

One participant said in her experience working with mentoring programs, relationships are happening in a lot of different ways, but if it is not performing service in previously identified forms, people often do not acknowledge it as service. The Commission should be conscious of what service means in different communities and that all forms of service are valued.

One participant said service can become “checking a box,” but there is value in creating meaningful opportunities to allow for reflective moments and discussing the context. This helps avoid making service feel like a thing one just must do, but instead a formal way of conveying the educational experience.

One participant added economic constraints on potential participants can complicate creating a service culture, highlighting that experiences range from parents who create a non-profit for their kid to run verses the kid who must save through high school to afford going to college.

***Avril Haines** asked if there were additional thoughts on how long it takes for participants to gain the service experience, but also if they had seen an impact from civic education courses.*

One participant responded that his organization’s program is 10 months by design, as it takes 3-4 months to get new participants up to speed, by winter break they are hitting their stride, and then from January to June they are working with students to makes sure that they hit their targets. It takes some time to get incorporated into a school or community.

Another added it takes 4 months to have a programmatic impact, which is why her organization’s program is 11 months long.