

# Staffing with AmeriCorps Members

## Introduction

AmeriCorps can be a wonderful resource for staffing 4-H Science programs. Perhaps one of the most important roles AmeriCorps members can play is the generation of volunteers. Most members serve in local, community-based organizations, expanding organizational capacity to achieve their mission and building community involvement and support. Other ways members help include improving and expanding the quality of services and raising awareness of the organization in the community. Organizations that are awarded AmeriCorps grants are responsible for recruiting the AmeriCorps members to serve in their program. AmeriCorps grants partially cover the expense of operating an AmeriCorps program and do not cover general organizational expenses. A cash and in-kind match is required.

There are three types of AmeriCorps programs:

1. *AmeriCorps VISTA* was designed specifically to fight poverty in low-income communities. AmeriCorps VISTA members are focused on capacity-building; they do not engage in direct service provisions. AmeriCorps VISTA members recruit and manage volunteers, improve and expand the quality of services provided, raise awareness of the sponsoring organization in the community, seek external funding for program, and so forth. A consistent goal for every AmeriCorps VISTA project should be the sustainability of the project by the sponsoring agency and the low-income community after AmeriCorps VISTA project sponsorship ends. AmeriCorps members in this program have either college degrees or a few years of work experience and skills.
2. *AmeriCorps State* and *AmeriCorps National* provide funds to state and national organizations and agencies committed to using national service to address critical community needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. Each of these organizations and agencies, in turn, uses their AmeriCorps funding to recruit, place, and supervise AmeriCorps members. AmeriCorps State/National members are over age 17 and are interested in earning money to pay for college or to pay off student loans.
3. *AmeriCorps NCCC* engages teams of members in service projects in communities across the United States. These projects typically last from six to eight weeks, and address critical needs related to natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, energy conservation, and urban and rural development. Members mentor youth, construct and rehabilitate low-income housing, respond to natural disasters, clean up streams, help communities develop emergency plans, and address countless other local needs. AmeriCorps NCCC members are between 18 and 24 years of age and engage in direct service.

The purpose of this chapter is to help youth science program planners understand how best to work with AmeriCorps members to develop and sustain 4-H Science programs. Two methods for working with AmeriCorps are discussed here. The first involves working with AmeriCorps program partners, partnering with other organiza-





tions that sponsor AmeriCorps members. The sponsoring organization manages the members assigned to the 4-H Science program, and generally handles most of the administrative duties required by AmeriCorps. The 4-H Science program serves as a work site, with a specified number of positions allocated for AmeriCorps members.

The second method is to engage in direct AmeriCorps program management. A 4-H Science program staff person serves as a site supervisor for members, usually through an AmeriCorps State project (see program types above). Program management of an AmeriCorps State Program involves: recruiting members, hosting trainings, compiling monthly and annual reports for grant compliance, program promotion, performance reviews of members, managing program budget, tracking member hours, providing professional development opportunities to members, and obtaining all necessary paperwork from members to ensure safety and compliance (for more information about *AmeriCorps* programs see *Resources* below).

## Promising Practices

The promising practices for *Staffing with AmeriCorps Members* are subdivided into three categories: (a) Recruiting, Training, and Supporting AmeriCorps Members; (b) Working with AmeriCorps Program Partners; and (c) *Direct AmeriCorps Program Management*.

### ***Recruiting, Training, and Supporting AmeriCorps Members***

1. ***Search for the right fit.*** Understand and recruit based on program needs and priorities. If specialized skills are needed to support the program, look for someone with those skills. Alternately, look for someone with the capacity and interest to learn the required skills, and commit to helping the member develop those skills.
  - Look for people who already have a relationship with 4-H, such as former 4-H members, 4-H parents, stakeholders, program partners, advisory board members and so forth.
  - Retiree associations may be a good source for AmeriCorps VISTA members.
  - Target local colleges or institutions, in particular science-related programs. These are hot spots for young professionals who need to build their resumes. They are often willing to donate a year or two of service for the experience they will gain.
  - Post ads in local or even national venues (e.g., newspapers, trade magazines, college campuses, career services, youth groups, faith-based groups, rotary clubs, etc.).
2. ***Use AmeriCorps as an opportunity to grow your own staff.*** Utilize AmeriCorps positions as a way to grow permanent part- or full-time staff. This change in perspective from someone who is “only” serving for a year to someone who could become permanent staff increases how much the 4-H agent or educator is willing to invest in professional development, which ultimately benefits the youth. Also think about long-term progressions, perhaps a teen staff member or volunteer would become an AmeriCorps member, and then go on to become a permanent staff person.
  - Invest time and resources to provide quality professional development opportunities (see also *Training Others to Deliver High Quality Science Programming*).
  - *Offer pre-service training before the service term begins.* This provides AmeriCorps members with a general



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understanding of AmeriCorps programming, as well as specific training on the service they will be performing during the course of the service year.

- *Include team building activities in trainings.* This is the first job for many AmeriCorps members, so they are usually overwhelmed. Members usually do not know each other, so it is important to build a team during that first training.
3. *Provide monthly check-ins.* About a month into the service term provide a structured reflection time for the AmeriCorps members.
    - Ask for their insights and early impressions of what is working and where they identify areas for growth and development.
    - Discuss program quality observations and evaluations with team members to provide feedback on what they are doing well and where there are opportunities for growth.
  4. *Set individual program goals for the AmeriCorps members.* Setting goals that each member must reach to earn his/her education award helps them learn self-sufficiency and also helps to meet the overall program deliverables.
  5. *Promote partnerships.* Encourage AmeriCorps members to partner with various groups and organizations. This will increase the opportunities available to them and increase program visibility.
  6. *Capitalize on the newness.* New members have a fresh perspective and are often doing and learning new things at a rapid rate, making them perfect models for the youth they are working with.
    - Encourage AmeriCorps members to be open with the youth they serve about their own feelings as they are exposed to new things that may be outside their comfort zones.
    - Ensure that AmeriCorps members have an opportunity to try things before they lead them and that they know it is okay to make mistakes, provided youth are safe.
  7. *Terminate the AmeriCorp member if not a good fit for the program.* Do not be afraid to let someone go who is not working out. Ultimately the 4-H Science program participants' experiences are the primary method of evaluating the AmeriCorps members. Ongoing communication with the AmeriCorps program leaders is beneficial if there are performance challenges with any of the members. The leader will be much more likely to support termination decisions if she/he is kept up-to-date on any issues or concerns.

### **Working with AmeriCorps Program Partners**

1. *Find a compatible partner. Not all AmeriCorps programs are the same.* Be sure to engage a partner compatible with and excited about 4-H Science. The AmeriCorps program should support and enhance the 4-H Science program and the AmeriCorps member. Some potential program partners may be easier to work with than others or may have needed resources they bring to the table from other partners.
2. *Develop a relationship with the partner's AmeriCorps supervisor.* The AmeriCorps supervisor is critical for the success of the AmeriCorps members, and ultimately the 4-H Science program the members

support. Program leaders should feel comfortable committing to a relationship with that person before a new AmeriCorps member is brought on board.

### **Direct AmeriCorps Program Management**

1. *Allow the program site supervisors to select the AmeriCorps members.* Allowing site supervisors to recruit, interview, and recommend AmeriCorps members establishes a sense of accountability for that member, compatibility with the site, and fosters a positive working relationship. Supervisor involvement can increase success rates (e.g., completing terms of service) of AmeriCorps members.
2. *Host trainings for site supervisors.* All supervisors who monitor AmeriCorps members should go through a training to give them an understanding of what tasks their members can perform, as well as how to best supervise the members.
3. *Station AmeriCorps members in various locations for multisite programs.* This will help increase program impact. Create a sense of “team” among members. They will be able to rely on each other if needs arise, even if they are situated across the state.

## Case Studies

**Arnett - AmeriCorps Program Partners Place Members in Local 4-H Programs.** Adventure Central currently has multiple AmeriCorps positions, all managed by other organizations or institutions. Adventure Central serves as the work site for these AmeriCorps members, and they function as group leaders, facilitating activities for youth. There are currently three AmeriCorps positions through Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps (11 month term) and one through the University of Dayton (semester term). Adventure Central has partnered with Ohio Campus Compact and the University of Dayton as well as the Ohio Community Computing Network to have AmeriCorps VISTA members (12 month term) support our program and develop community capacity.

A strong staff development process ensures AmeriCorps members understand the program’s culture and expectations and that they gain needed skills for their own professional development. AmeriCorps members develop weekly lesson plans that are reviewed by 4-H professionals prior to implementation. The cyclical nature of staffing with AmeriCorps members requires the program to stay focused on key principles and philosophies and to be intentional about the culture and expectations for staff and youth in the program.

Adventure Central utilizes AmeriCorps members because of the benefits to the members and to the organization. AmeriCorps offers significant benefits (living allowance and education award) to its members beyond what Adventure Central could afford. Adventure Central’s financial investment is a fraction of what would be spent on regularly salaried employees. Another benefit to working with an AmeriCorps program partner is that they handle the operational/administrative aspects (human resources and fiscal management) of the program.

–Nate Arnett, The Ohio State University

**Mullens – AmeriCorps Members Staff Statewide Environmental Program.** The America’s WETLAND Conservation Corps (AWCC) AmeriCorps program is the result of a partnership of America’s Wetland Campaign, AmeriCorps, and the LSU AgCenter/4-H. The AWCC is an AmeriCorps program designed to help raise public awareness about the critical importance of upland and coastal wetlands. AWCC AmeriCorps members work with the YWP





to organize local residents as volunteers to participate in wetland restoration and to conduct wetland outreach education programs.

The AWCC AmeriCorps members build community pride and environmental awareness through volunteerism and education. They also support collaborative efforts to organize and engage participants in a variety of activities with the message of responsible stewardship and a call for action to save coastal Louisiana. Exciting hands-on volunteer programs also reach, involve, and educate audiences beyond Louisiana through the work of a diverse group of members who not only take their experience with them when they leave Louisiana, but also leave a physical, virtual, and emotional handprint on the state.

Over the past four years, the program has employed 80 AmeriCorps members (in 11-month terms) at various locations across the state. The YWP provides funds to the members for travel, for supplies related to wetland service projects, and for wetland-related training. Staffing the program with AmeriCorps members allows the program to make a huge impact and get more exposure across the state. —**Ashley Mullens, Louisiana State University**

## Resources

**AmeriCorps Program** – to learn more about the AmeriCorps program, current grantees (potential partners), or to apply, visit [www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov).