

**Implementing the Kennedy Serve America Act:
Advice from the
Maine Commission for Community Service
to the
Corporation for National and Community Service**

**Submitted by the Board Members and Staff of
the Maine Commission for Community Service**

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INTRODUCTION:

The recently signed Kennedy Serve America Act will have an enormous impact on all aspects of volunteerism for decades to come.

The Maine Commission for Community Service recognizes the unique opportunity we have to shape fundamental aspects of doing business with our federal partner in the future.

The Board and Staff of the Commission thank the Corporation for National and Community Service for soliciting input before it begins formulating rules, policies, and procedures for implementation of the authorized programs.

The recommendations and comments on following pages were vetted and affirmed in a process involving both the staff and board members of the Maine Commission during early June 2009.

The topics addressed are essentially three types: leadership opportunities for CNCS in the field of community volunteer service, parameters for the state/federal partnership, and technical issues that can be addressed only in this unique time of reformulating business regulations and procedures.

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR CNCS IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER SERVICE

#1. Continue to use the “bully pulpit” on the national scene to foster among nonprofits a respect for the value of volunteers and a commitment to providing resources that will ensure success in volunteer endeavors.

- Advocate for management and acknowledgement of organizational volunteer assets that is equivalent to that of cash donors.
- Educate community agency leadership, donors, and business on the relationship between solid management of volunteers and program sustainability, service outcomes, and volunteer recruitment/retention.
- Continue providing leadership to research focused specifically on the volunteer sector. This brings parity and clarity to the nuanced distinctions between nonprofit issues and volunteer issues.
- Articulate the need for attention to career preparation as well as professional development of managers of volunteers and the impact this education will have on the success of the sector.

#2. Be clearer and stronger in articulating the ties between all volunteer service programs supported by CNCS and implementation by that program of the essential volunteer management practices (22 traits of high quality programs).

- It is not logical for CNCS to be conducting the research that identifies volunteer management practices as the weak link in retention and impact and then have CNCS tolerate poor management practices among its grantees. This is an educational opportunity not to be missed.
- AmeriCorps has been too long tagged as “complicated” when, in fact, it requires a grantee to implement all the essential volunteer management practices from the start.
- RSVP, Foster Grandparents, and Senior Companions do not get the deserved recognition for exemplifying these practices (at least among the Maine programs).

#3. Target the Social Innovation fund at the causes of community problems, not the symptoms.

- Require an element of civic engagement or entrepreneurial volunteering in projects funded.
- Look for applicants (who will be re-granting the funds) familiar with the lessons of the prevention field – Asset-based Community Development, community resiliency, Search Institute.
- Reward creativity, risk, as well as re-invention or re-engineering of programs and, to the extent possible, diminish the proliferation of nonprofits.
- Be vigilant about the need for these grants to address the root causes of problems in new ways rather than sustain organizations who re-package existing operations.
- Use this opportunity as the first true demonstration program for CNCS. Allow grants to be 5-6 years and permit an adequate amount of technical assistance be funded for the community grantees.

PARAMETERS FOR THE STATE/FEDERAL PARTNERSHIP

#4. Conceptually sort the authorized CNCS programs into two categories with two different sets of outcome, application, and reporting expectations.

- Category One: Highest Requirements for Application and Documentation of Performance/Impact
 - Must target critical issues, contribute to either state or national performance measures, and demonstrate impact.
 - The programs would include the more established National Service brands where there is an established level of structure and experience that lead to program impact. The Summer of Service program would also fit here because community-based service learning can provide a wealth of implementation expertise.
 - Programs expected to respond to the assessed needs of a known constituency would be included here.
 - Volunteer Generation Fund, Campuses of Service, and the Nonprofit Capacity-building Fund
- Category Two: Modified Requirements for Application and Documentation of Performance/Impact
 - Candidates for this category would be Service Fellows and Silver Scholars.
 - Requirements tailored to attract smaller and more economically challenged organizations.
 - Primary expected outcomes are to develop an ethic of service among those who serve, generate volunteers for faith-based and community-based programs, and provide resources to community-based groups for very parochial needs.
 - Assess outcomes in pre-set measurements that easily aggregate at program, state, and national level.
 - For example, ethic of service could be measured with a pre-post online survey of each Silver Scholar participant as part of enrollment and exit.
 - The number of volunteers generated for organizations would be a simple count of how many volunteers before the agency added Silver Scholars and how many volunteers were attracted to their volunteer program by the addition of Silver Scholars.
 - Resources could be defined to include the expertise of Service Fellows and a report (like the individual VISTA work plan of 3 years ago) could serve as the assessment of whether the placement was successful.
- Match the thoroughness of the application to the purpose and type of program. As examples:
 - For Silver Scholars, focus on the elements that relate to retention and the quality of a volunteer's experience. Assess these elements by asking agency applicants for Scholar slots how many of the essential volunteer management practices are operational in their program. A simple checklist would accomplish this. Identify the core practices that must be in place and offer incentives to programs that implement additional practices since that would increase their retention and sustainability.

- For Service Fellows, require organizations seeking to be qualified as hosts to describe the need, the outcome they desire, the support they can give the volunteer, and the resources they will make available to the Fellow. Permit off-site or telecommuting arrangements so that retirees who summer/winter in two different states can still serve through the original agency.

#5. Whatever the appropriation for the Volunteer Generation Fund, maintain the 50% formula to State Commissions and 50% competitive allocation from the beginning.

For years, rural and small State Commissions have been cobbling together bits and pieces of resources to try and help volunteer centers, organize days of service, and promote professional development among volunteer managers.

Setting the precedent of giving states dependable rather than sporadic resources is essential and responds to the hope that has been raised in our partners who have been reading the news closely. This precedent needs to start in the first year, not a subsequent year as proposed.

#6. Extend fixed-price grants into every category possible.

This type of grant brings benefits to everyone:

- Many national service grants that involve enrolling someone to serve and qualify for benefits are done on a cost-share reimbursement basis. Under fixed-price grants, the basis for receiving funds is not expenditures but enrollment of service members.
- Fixed price grants do not require budgeting for or reporting match dollars. The funds to operate the entire project are presumed to exist by the fact the work gets done. While one could argue that teaching nonprofits how to document in-kind and generate match is valuable technical assistance, the accounting staff in grantees find it burdensome due to the generally small size of CNCS grants. Among the typical small nonprofits found in Maine, the accounting systems ability to do this in a manner compliant with general federal accounting standards has been a barrier when it comes to applying directly to MCCA for support.
- These grants should eliminate the “price war” among VISTA cost-share programs, AmeriCorps State, and AmeriCorps National grantees, permitting better alignment between project purpose and the host site.

Community agencies seeking help from AmeriCorps have learned that they need to pay a fee (\$5,000 to \$9,000 in Maine depending on the program) that is generally set as the amount of required match divided by the number of AmeriCorps members. Sometimes the fee is modified to account for the length of time an agency has hosted a member.

Host sites have learned to “shop” for the best bargain in terms of match contribution and then mold their request to the interests of the official grantee. Numerous problems, including inconsistent partners over the life of a grant, have arisen.

- Moving to fixed-price grants will concentrate attention on performance and impact.

#7. Allow State Commissions to use a percentage of their National Service program allocations for Planning Grants for the more complex programs (Category One above) but exempt the amount from the calculation of any cost-per-service-volunteer.

- This approach will foster diversification of the organizations accessing national service resources.
- Award two-year planning grants – the first year for actual planning and the second year for a pilot operation of the plan.
- Develop online, *interactive* courses that guide organizations through development of sound program concepts on a self-paced time table. The current practice of aggregated reading lists is not sufficient and not supportive of those whose first language is not English.

#8. Rework and consistently offer opportunities for State Initiative proposals as a means of expanding organizational involvement and lessening the application burden on community organizations.

- Use this approach to increase the diversity of organizations (size, age, economic resources, geography, and type) with access to national service program resources.
- Exercise the new CNCS authority to assign to State Commissions specific programmatic functions to increase efficiency in the operation and oversight of national service programs to restructure the grant application process for AmeriCorps*State Formula, Education Award, any fixed-price grants for which Commission can be the conduit, and new programs such as Service Fellows and Silver Scholars .
- Model a State Initiative competition so that State Commissions apply to be intermediaries and take on the burden of the full application as well as reporting to CNCS.
- Permit States to re-grant the funds using state competitive procurement or grant processes that meet minimum criteria (peer review, scoring, etc.).
- Give preference to statewide performance measures that relate to State funding priorities or strategic plan objectives.
- Ensure local innovation and opportunity for unique needs by requiring that State Initiatives allow community groups to customize a percentage of work (e.g., 30%).

TECHNICAL ISSUES RELATED TO RULES, ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES, AND PRACTICES

#9. Set the fixed-price grant amount for programs with part-time members at the same full-time equivalent level as programs with full-time members.

- Although programs with part-time volunteers are not likely to pay benefits, the complexity of training, supervising, and supporting a larger number of people actually places greater demands on a volunteer program.
- Fixed-price grants that are based on the total FTEs of part-time volunteers have a unique impact on part-time volunteer programs because the funds can be targeted at quality management or implementation of the volunteer project and, thereby, increase retention and sustainability.
- Fixed-price grants are more “scalable” and, therefore, open participation to a greater number of community-based and faith-based efforts.

#10. Change the formula for determining State Program Development and Training allocations from per-AmeriCorps-Member enrolled to one that accounts for all national service members plus development activities for potential grantees.

- End the system of issuing contracts to technical assistance providers at the national level.
- Increase emphasis on using PDAT funds to coach potential grantees on how to use national service resources for meeting local needs.
- Allocate these funds as a block to cover all national service programs in a state and require needs assessments, integrated plans to meet needs, and that all training/technical assistance activities be accessible to all national service grant personnel.

#11. Likewise, with the change in Disability Funds that makes these available to all national service programs rather than just AmeriCorps*State grantees,

- Allow a percentage of funds to be used to conduct outreach and training for potential host sites or stations on universal design of volunteer service opportunities.
- Set some clear guidelines on use of accommodation funds so it is possible to determine if eyeglasses, hearing aids, or other devices for aging volunteers can be allowable uses.